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East–west inequalities and the ambiguous racialisation of ‘Eastern Europeans’

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ABSTRACT
A growing scholarly literature describes people who moved from Europe’s East to its West as racialised. Others speak of ‘migratization’ or ‘xenophobia’. Many of these contributions have in common that they conceive of discrimination as occurring after migration. What is more, they focus on the attitudinal dimension of ‘prejudice’, as expressed in the media or the narratives of East–West movers themselves. What thereby slips from view is that racism has geopolitical-economic and legal dimensions, and structures life opportunities. This article explores how categories such as ‘Eastern European’ are invoked, deployed and how they are put to work – via policy or the law. The analysis shows that neoliberal policies have attributed a distinctive positionality to ‘Eastern Europeans’ in West European racial hierarchies. I argue that people from Europe’s East are distinctively, yet ambiguously racialised, and discuss facets of this ambiguity. Most notably, they are inferiorised within Europe, but often positioned within global racialised categories of ‘Europeanness’. This racialisation is not a product of twenty-first century mobilities but reflects and reproduces the peripheralisation of Europe’s East. Of course, racialisation shapes everyday lives after migration; yet, it also channels the life opportunities of those born in the East over the course of generations.

KEYWORDS
East-West inequalities; Europe’s East; intra-European mobility; post-colonial and postsocialist studies; race; racism; racialisation

1. Introduction

East–West mobilities within Europe have become a significant and well-researched phenomenon. Initially, research mainly focused on movement, settlement and circulation between Europe’s East and West, but scholars have recently turned to studying inequality and discrimination. Contention emerged as to how to conceptualise the latter. Some authors suggest that people who moved from Europe’s East to its West have been racialised in pre- and post-Brexit Britain (Fox, Moroșanu, and Szilassy 2012; Myslinska 2016; Rzepnikowska 2019). Despite drawing on varying conceptual frameworks, these studies share a focus on media representations of and/or interviews with East–West movers. This focus invites – implicitly or explicitly – an understanding of
racism as expressed in social attitudes, everyday encounters or hate crime at a particular juncture in British history. Racism, furthermore, is understood as a form of discrimination occurring after migration.

Highlighting the phenotypical ‘whiteness’ of this group, another group of scholars has described their positionality as ‘migratized’ (Tudor 2022) or subjected to ‘xenophobia’ (Sime et al. 2022). Despite diverging conceptual standpoints, these works also focus on media representations or individual incidents. And they also understand discrimination as resulting from East–West migration – notably from being perceived a ‘stranger’, ‘foreign national’ or ‘migrant’. Calling discrimination of East Europeans racism, Tudor (2022), suggests, overgeneralises the term and conflates migration-based exclusion from the nation-state with postcolonial racialisation.

In this article, I suggest that we will not be able to satisfactorily answer the question of whether people from Europe’s East are subjected to racism by solely looking at the present juncture or by documenting attitudes expressed in the media or in personal encounters. And as important as it is to theorise racism from lived experience, the dominant focus on East–West movers’ own narratives directs analytical attention to the interpersonal level and invites problematic comparisons to experiences of differently racialised groups. What slips from view is racism’s wider geopolitical-economic dimension and how it structures life opportunities. Finally, we need to carefully consider how and on which grounds people are othered (e.g. on the basis of categorisations such as ‘foreigner’, ‘migrant’, etc.).

In this article, I unpack these processes of categorisation further. Rather than studying their ‘receiving end’, I explore how categorisations of belonging are invoked and deployed. How are people from Europe’s East represented in West European political discourse? How do these representations travel via policies and the law?

Britain and Germany have been selected as case studies as both countries are home to sizeable communities from Europe’s East. The empirical investigation draws on data collected in 2020/21. Research activities included the gathering of public statements by political office holders, qualitative interviews with people who publicly voice opposition to immigration, and a mapping of the demographic profile of communities from Europe’s East in Britain and Germany.

People from Europe’s East, the analysis shows, are commonly referred to as ‘Eastern Europeans’, whereby various nationalities operate as signifiers for this regional designation. This categorisation draws on historic tropes – including the positioning of ‘Eastern Europe’ as a reservoir of cheap labour in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. More recently, neoliberal policies implemented in Europe’s West and East shaped the terms of the enlargement of the European Union and facilitated new labour mobilities. My analysis disentangles the legal and political conditioning of these mobilities, and the ideas about ‘Eastern Europeans’ that they – implicitly or explicitly – reflect and reproduce. Specifically, I show how neoliberal policies – including the precarisation of labour, the politics of austerity and the fortification of borders – have attributed a distinctive positionality to ‘Eastern Europeans’ in West European racial hierarchies.

Thus, I suggest that concepts such as race and racism add analytical value to our understanding of these dynamics. Specifically, a perspective that centres the political economy of race allows us (1) to trace how difference is politically crafted, (2) account
for its geopolitical and structural dimensions, and (3) document the complex hierarchies of belonging created by its means.

Specifically, I suggest that people from Europe’s East are distinctively, yet ambiguously racialised. In some ways, the category ‘Eastern European’ works similarly to other racialised categories of belonging, such as ‘Oriental’, ‘Black’, ‘Roma’, ‘Jew’ or ‘Muslim’, in that it generalises across a variety of ethnicities, cultures and nationalities by ascribing essentialising characteristics. Kalmar (2023) has, in analogy to Orientalism, hence coined the term ‘Eastern Europeanism’. Various racisms, of course, do not simply exist alongside each other; they are entangled with one another and find expression in complex and shifting hierarchies of belonging. Within these, the category ‘Eastern European’ also signifies privilege. Despite being positioned as inferior within Europe, the East is often included in global racialised categories of ‘Europeanness’. This article discusses how race operates in an ambiguous and contradictory mode here: it produces hierarchies of Europeanness (see also Safuta 2018; Krivonos 2023) but also slots into and reinforces other repertoires of racism.

The racialisation of ‘Eastern Europeans’, my analysis shows, is not a product of twenty-first century mobilities – rather, it reflects and reproduces the longstanding peripheralisation of the region. Notably, it is the peripheralisation of Europe’s East that has channelled East–West mobilities in the first place; the political-legal conditioning of these mobilities, in turn, further contributes to peripheralising the region. People from the EU’s East face structural disadvantages after migration – however, normalised precarious labour mobility also has longer term political-economic effects on Europe’s East. Thus, racialisation shapes everyday lives after migration; yet, it also channels the life opportunities of those born in East European countries over generations.

Let me unpack this argument: My analysis shows that ‘Eastern Europeans’, on the one hand, are imagined a lesser breed, carriers of disease, specifically skilled manual workers, a strain on public services, and criminal tricksters in Britain and Germany. On the other, however, they are also considered as of ‘Europe’, and capable of ‘progression’ into West European standards. The circulation of these tropes aligns with the passing of policies, such as the precarisation of labour, the rolling back of welfare provisions and the fortification of borders in Europe’s West. These policies have a cumulative effect on biographies in Europe’s East: many young people born in CEE countries feel their best option is to move West; if they do, they are overrepresented in precarious jobs, for which they are often overqualified. In comparison to West European citizens, their social rights are limited, and they face a higher risk of being deported. These structural disadvantages can be overcome by future generations after migration. Yet, these mobility conditions also have an impact on CEE countries: many highly skilled young professionals leave, others work in the West but access welfare services in the East, and yet others are forced to return once they have become ‘too costly’. These trends reinforce the peripheralisation of the region: they render Europe’s East a reservoir of cheap labour, relocate the cost of this labour conducted in the West to Europe’s East and generate a perpetually mobile disposable workforce. The ‘stickiness’ of racialisation, in this instance, does not result from the post-migration status (which fades over generations), but emerges from the political-economic peripheralisation of the region that renders precarious mobility a key means of making a living for generations to come.
2. Race and racism

Let’s begin by sketching the understanding of race and racism that informs this analysis. Categories of belonging, including those based on nationality, ethnicity or regional designations, can acquire racial meaning or a racial quality. Rather than depicting a group as fluid, evolving, and responsive to social circumstances, its representations harden and become suggestive of essential differences along cultural, phenotypical or religious lines (Lentin 2020). This categorising as different, Virdee (2019) suggests, becomes racism when characteristics are understood as immutable and groups are ordered hierarchically in relation to one another. For the purposes of this analysis, it is useful to unpack these two features of race further:

A hierarchical ordering usually involves the elevating of one or some groups as superior and entitled, while others are positioned as inferior and less deserving. Within Europe, such racial orders have not evolved in a binary logic. Rather, as Parvulescu (2015, 36) put it, ‘multiple hierarchies’ are at work, ‘operating along multiple axes and producing complex modes of racialisation’. Different repertoires of racism, as Lentin (2020, 149) suggests, hence need to be theorised as entangled with and mutually reinforcing one another.

Accordingly, a positionality attributed to racialised groups in West European hierarchies of belonging is not fixed but can shift or play out ambiguously: for instance, the same group can be positioned as racially superior in one context and inferiorised in another. Ambiguity can also involve liminality – a positioning between privilege and disadvantage (Sojka 2019). Ambiguity further arises from invisibility, from projections of positive qualities or of ‘sameness’, which carry possibilities of passing. These can also enable people to mimic Whiteness (Kalmar 2023) or position them as victim or perpetrator of racism (Parvulescu 2015; Narkowicz 2023). Furthermore, ambiguity can involve what has been described as ‘inbetweeness’ (Parvulescu 2015; Narkowicz 2023; Boatcă 2006), and include shifting attributions of insider and outsider status in the same context (which play out differently for different groups). These ascriptions doubtlessly constitute privileges; however, they can also mask a denial of equal standing.

As to the second defining feature of race, the attribution of immutable characteristics: Murji and Solomos (2004, 14) discuss how race-making involves the naturalisation of specific characteristics, which become seen as inheritable and as passed on from generation to generation – biologically, culturally or economically. Racialisation is more than the stereotyping of a group at a particular juncture in time – rather, ideas of ‘difference’ acquire a ‘stickiness’ over generations. However, as I have argued in relation to anti-Muslim racism, characteristics do not have to be inescapable to constitute racialisation (Lewicki 2021a). Expectations to undertake efforts of assimilation and ‘catching up’ also are part of a racialisation as inferior, rather than simply a ‘way out’ of being othered (Lewicki 2021a). Of course, there is no doubt that phenotypical markers make ascriptions of racial difference stick over generations in distinctive and particularly immutable ways – most notably for people racialised as ‘Black’. However, the ‘stickiness’ of racialisation can also be generated by continuing projections of inferiority upon a geographic region. Even if personal markers of difference fade over generations after migration, the region continues to be imagined as backward, which channels precarious
labour mobility and extractivism over generations. Thereby, asymmetrical economic relations cement racialisation over time.

However, racialised hierarchies of belonging also have tangible effects after migration. Yet, they do not ‘only’ find expression in hate crime or prejudicial attitudes but manifest themselves structurally – for instance qua differential access to resources, rights and possibilities of mobility. Belonging or being perceived to belong to a group racialised as Other has a bearing on life opportunities in areas such as employment, housing or access to welfare in Europe’s West – which, as this analysis will illustrate, can further reinforce political-economic peripheralisation. These features of race apply in varying ways to different repertoires of racism and play out distinctively in different cases and contexts.

3. The ambiguous position of ‘Eastern Europe’

Europe’s history illustrates that its ‘East’ has occupied an ambiguous position within racial thought.

First and foremost, Europe’s East has played no small part in crafting associations of Whiteness and Europeanness with modernity, enlightenment and civilisational progress; in various contexts, its elites have located their countries within a racially imagined European centre (Böröcz and Sarkar 2017; Mark et al. 2019; Imre 2023). The East of Europe has also contributed to and benefited from Europe’s imperial aspirations and colonial violence (Dzenovska 2013; Balogun 2017).

Yet, Europe’s West has approached these assertions and aspirations more ambiguously. While ‘Eastern Whiteness’ tended to be recognised as global marker of superiority, it also signalled inferiority within hierarchies of Europeanness. Various regions (with their diverse histories and languages), including the Baltic states, Central East Europe or the Balkans have thereby been folded into the category ‘Eastern Europe’ and imagined as a barbarian, backward, irrational, or underdeveloped (semi-) periphery (Boatcă 2006). Baker (2018) describes these spatialised hierarchies of civilisation as key ‘ingredients of ‘race’. Various modes of racialisation have thereby operated alongside each other – including the Orientalisation of regions with Ottoman influences (Boatcă 2006), but also projections of ‘Easternness’ or ‘Slavicness’, etc.

Key features of this discursive production of ‘Eastern Europe’ were economic extractivism and precarious labour mobility. Boatcă (2013, 289) observes structural similarities between how slavery was deployed to satisfy West European demand for sugar, coffee, and cotton, while serfdom in Europe’s East was introduced in response to West Europe’s demand for cereal. In the nineteenth century, German estates recruited ‘cost efficient’ seasonal workers from countries to their East (Boatcă 2020). This positioning of Europe’s East as reservoir of cheap labour has shaped biographies of its inhabitants over generations.

In the twentieth century, Polish and Russian territories were objectified as a ‘Lebensraum’ for the taking (Müller 2010). The racialisation of their population as ‘Slavic subhumans’, here too, justified their exploitation for forced labour, but also expulsion or extinction (Müller 2010). Anti-Slavic racism was thereby entangled with Antisemitism: the planned resettlement of five million Germans was justified with invocations of a ‘Jewish Bolshevik domination’. In the British context, the first British Aliens Act of 1905 illegalised entry for Jews fleeing from Europe’s East (Anderson 2013, 37).
This brief historical excursion is not suggestive of direct lines of continuity to the present – rather, my cursory overview illustrates the stickiness of ‘Eastern Europe’s’ racialisation and its geopolitical and economic dimensions.

4. The EU’s enlargement to the East

Racialised representations of the ‘East’ and ‘West’ of Europe also travelled distinctively through Cold War binaries and underpinned the postsocialist transition to a capitalist market economy.

In the 1980s and 1990s, political elites in Britain, France and Germany, but also in Poland, Hungary and the Baltic states advocated the East’s ‘return to Europe’, often with reference to racialised tropes of shared ‘civilisational values’ (Boatcă 2006; Mark et al. 2019). At the same time, Europe’s East was commonly framed as undemocratic and underdeveloped and in need of ‘catching up’ with the West (Samaluk 2016).

In the 1990s, social democratic governments more explicitly embraced the neoliberal orthodoxy of liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation. In Britain and Germany, legislation was passed that precarised labour, privatised welfare services and tightened asylum laws. In this context, the fall of the Iron Curtain was seen as opportunity to expand West European economies via trade and investment and offered access to a highly skilled labour force at low cost. Accordingly, the terms of the Eastern enlargement of the European Union were framed by the same neoliberal orthodoxy.

The transformation initiated, via EU accession incentives, the privatisation of state-owned companies, the marketisation of welfare services and the deregulation of the banking sector (Ther 2019). This ‘tabula rasa’ was beneficial for West European companies who ventured into new markets or relocated their production to Europe’s East. Britain, for example, became the biggest foreign investor in Poland, with companies such as Tesco, Imperial Tobacco and GlaxoSmithKline taking a leading position in their sectors. Beyond creating jobs and stimulating consumption in the region, these companies also generate a significant return of revenue to their base in Europe’s West. Dictated by the gains and terms of Europe’s West, the transition stimulated economic growth in the region, but also led to a rapid decline in industrial production, the precarisation of labour, stagnating wages, and burgeoning unemployment. These developments, in turn, channelled novel East-West mobilities. While Germany imposed a seven-year transitionary embargo, Britain instantaneously opened its labour market to the new EU members. In both contexts, providers of hospitality, agriculture, construction, and care services keenly recruited, often via intermediary agencies, the newly available workforce from Europe’s East.

Thus, the advancement of neoliberal policies in Europe’s East and West distinctively contributed to the peripheralisation of Europe’s East; it also channelled precarious labour mobilities that now shape many biographies in the region.

5. Methodological considerations

Against this background, Britain and Germany have become home to sizeable communities from Europe’s East. In 2020, about three million people with citizenship from one
of the EU’s Eastern member states lived in Germany, and nearly two million in Britain (Statista 2021; ONS 2021a). While a significant literature has documented their lived experiences, this article focuses on the legal and political conditioning of their circulation and settlement. Specifically, I gathered data on representations of people from Europe’s East in political discourse and policy frameworks that structure their access to resources and rights.

The dataset was produced during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020/21. Research activities involved: (1) the mapping of the demographic profile of these communities – this generated an overview of public statistics on the labour market, welfare state and border enforcement; (2) the gathering of statements by politicians in liberal centre-left outlets such as ‘The Guardian’ in Britain and ‘Die ZEIT’ in Germany which provided insight into political decision-makers’ representations; (3) interview data collected as part of the research project ‘Reaching out to close the border: The transnationalisation of anti-immigration movements in Europe’, which offered insight into how those who mobilise opposition to immigration frame intra-European mobilities. While this was not explicitly a key focus of this wider research, references to ‘Eastern Europeans’ surfaced as a significant theme in this data.

Data analysis for this article incorporated the first 30 interviews that were conducted in Britain and Germany; these involved online and in-person conversations with public intellectuals, activists, members of grassroot organisations and political parties from across the political spectrum.

All interviews were transcribed and, together with the data gathered from news sources, analysed with the aid of NVIVO. This involved the selection of passages that mentioned key words such as ‘Central East Europe’, ‘Eastern Europe’ and regional or ethnic designations associated with these categories. Asked about immigration, respondents in both contexts often spoke about Syrian or Afghan refugees; however, a significant proportion, most notably in Britain, also brought up ‘Eastern Europeans’, which, as they clarified, stood for ‘Polish’, ‘Bulgarian’, ‘Romanian’ or ‘Lithuanian’ and ‘Albanian’, etc. In Germany, some respondents were prompted to share their views on intra-European mobilities.

In the following, I introduce three common tropes – these feature as vignettes here but are indicative of wider trends in the data. These representations of ‘Eastern Europeans’, my analysis highlights, have distinctive legal trajectories and reflect a wider structural positioning of CEE communities in Europe’s West.

6. Europe’s division of labour

The first trope discursively links mobilities to the spread of COVID-19. The idea that certain diseases are ‘of a place’ emerged in the context of Europe’s colonial expansion and paved the way for the proliferation of racial categorisations in the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries (Seth 2018). As disease became (counter-factually) linked to physical characteristics, it also became ‘transmittable’ via border crossings. Various racialised groups have thereby become distinctively positioned as carriers of disease. In the pandemic, ‘Asians’ or ‘Muslims’ were often singled out (Poole and Williamson 2021) – in Poland also ‘refugees’ (see Majewska 2021, 14). Notably, several countries in the EU’s East refused to receive Syrians but lifted visa requirements for Ukrainians displaced
after Russia’s invasion in 2022. Europe’s East has thus doubtlessly contributed to reinforcing global racial hierarchies. In Europe’s West, however, ‘Eastern Europeans’ are among those blamed for the spread of COVID-19.

For instance, the Social-democratic Minister of Social Affairs and Social Cohesion of Saxony, Petra Köpping (SPD) noted:

During the first wave, we were largely spared. But I suppose that had a lot to do with luck. (…) Now we have been run over. A key causal factor which certainly has a role to play here is one that we share with Bavaria: the long border to Czech Republic and Poland. Coming from the South-East, from Czech Republic and Poland, the Virus eats its way further and further into the country. (Machowecz 2020)

To the Minister, initial low infection rates were a matter of luck; their later increase, however, has a more specific geographical origin – the regions to the East of Saxony. She invoked images of a violent takeover by an anthropomorphic virus eating its way into German lands. Asked why her government had not closed the border, Köpping replied:

There was a European consensus that we did not want to do that again. What is more, we are reliant on Czech and Polish carers and doctors, especially in the provision of health care. (Machowecz 2020)

Thus, East–West commuters keep the health care system running at a time of crisis. Anyone crossing the border at this time had to provide daily COVID-19 tests. Yet, a centre-left politician chose to refer to this workforce as an invasive virus-carrying species. Minister President of North Rhine-Westphalia Armin Laschet explained a COVID-19 outbreak in a meat processing plant with the ‘inflow of Romanians and Bulgarians, where the virus is coming from’. Health Minister Jens Spahn held ‘family visits’ in Turkey and the Balkans responsible for rising infection rates (Heigl 2021). Notable is the absence of evidence for these claims, while scholarly analyses have linked the first COVID-19 outbreak to winter holiday travel between Austria and Germany (Wachtler 2020). Public debates, of course, did not draw attention to the ethnicity of those taking skiing vacations. The attribution of collective responsibility remains focused on racialised mobilities. Similar invocations were notable in Britain (e.g. Anthony 2020).

McDowell et al. (2009) show that these groups typically occupy distinctive positionalities within West European labour markets. In Britain’s service sector, the precarisation of labour has been underway for decades. This process relies on the assumption that even if employment standards decline below thresholds local employees can navigate, foreign workers will step in. Many precarious jobs in health care, agriculture or the food industry do not provide sufficient income to cover minimum living costs throughout the year but require commuting or sharing temporary accommodation. In the British hospitality sector, for instance, clerical and management positions typically are occupied by West Europeans, the housekeeping and cleaning division is dominated by workers from Central-East Europe, while catering staff originates from the Indian subcontinent (McDowell et al. 2009). These professional designations are institutionalised in as far as intermediary agencies recruit from specific communities into these positions.

The ambiguity of their racialisation thereby reinforces the positioning of people from Europe’s East within this hierarchical division of labour. One feature of this ambiguity is
the positive stereotyping of ‘Eastern Europeans’ as hard-working manual labourers. Gendered representations such as the ‘Polish Pearl’ in Germany or the ‘Polish plumber’ in the UK (see also Böröcz and Sarkar 2017) thereby naturalise suitability for the respective job shortages.

Labour market statistics from Britain and Germany indeed indicate that a significant range of sectors systematically rely on employees from CEE countries, including circular movers.

In the UK, workers born in EU8/2 countries represent 3.2% of the overall working population in 2021 (1,037,698 people, ONS 2021b). They are over-represented in low and medium-skilled jobs, and work mainly in warehouses, cleaning and hospitality (Fernandez-Reino and Rienzo 2021, 9–10). They also are more likely to be employed on precarious contracts. Fifty per cent of this group are highly educated and overqualified for these jobs (Fernandez-Reino and Rienzo 2021, 14).

German labour market statistics show similar trends. In 2020, 4.3% of the overall working population (1,627,000 people) were from the East of the EU, mainly Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria (Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2021). Workers born in EU8/2 countries, here too, are overqualified for the jobs they do and significantly overrepresented in warehouses, delivery, transport, food production, construction and cleaning jobs (Gallegos Torres, Sommerfeld, and Bartel 2022). Compared to other foreign-born populations, this group is more likely to be in employment; Romanians and Bulgarians are more likely to be employed precariously (Gallegos Torres, Sommerfeld, and Bartel 2022; Wagner 2020).

Work in these sectors involves higher health risks. Analyses by Public Health England (2020) linked hospitalisation and death from COVID-19 to jobs such as nursing, social care, security, transport, meat processing and construction. While data is scarce, indicators point to similar trends in Germany (Lewicki 2021b). These are sectors in which precarious contracts are most common. Working on insecure contracts, however, also significantly raises the risk of dying from COVID-19 (Trade Union Congress 2021).

In summary – racialised representations of ‘Eastern Europeans’ as carriers of disease feature regularly in public discourse in Germany and also in Britain. Attributions of collective responsibility to ‘Eastern Europeans’ for the spread of COVID-19 foreground border crossings for work or leisure and disguise the structural positioning of these communities in West European labour markets. Statistical evidence demonstrates that people from the East of the EU are overrepresented in precarious jobs in Britain and Germany, for which they are frequently overqualified. The types of jobs and contracts offered to them pose a greater risk to their health. This structural disadvantaging after migration also has a geopolitical dimension: the precarisation of labour in Europe’s West allows the cutting of labour costs and institutionalises a reliance on the supply of cheap labour from Europe’s East for the foreseeable future. As a result, specific career trajectories are designated to people from Europe’s East, who occupy a distinctive positionality within the racialised hierarchies of West European labour markets.

7. The stratification and relocation of welfare

Another common trope is the invocation of a demographic invasion. In the context of the EU’s enlargement to the East, British media framed East–West movers as ‘swarms’,
'streams', 'hordes', 'waves' and 'floods' (Fox, Moroșanu, and Szilassy 2012). Beyond scandalising a 'loss of control', however, these tropes also reflect biological 'take-over' scenarios; in this section, I discuss their structural and geopolitical trajectories – notably, how they contribute to stratifying rights to welfare and to relocating the social costs of labour to Europe's East.

A spokesperson for a British far-right party elaborates:

Say you had a small town of about ten thousand people and over 100 years it has 50 new babies a year. So, you know how many kindergarten spaces you need. (...) Then suddenly someone comes along and says, oh, you've got to take another hundred babies a year from now. (...) And this is borne out in waiting lists in the NHS. A prime example is when we decided that the, to completely open the borders, the Polish, do you remember? And the Bulgarians, lovely people that they are. They came across in numbers which were totally unforeseen. (...) It was in the millions, well over a million. And suddenly you find your NHS has to cater for them, although we haven't got the doctors. (...) [The NHS] would have to be twice as big as it is today in order to soak up sudden influxes of people. (P2 UK)

The speaker links reproduction to the burdening of public services. Significant as it was in numbers, post-enlargement mobility never reached a scale of local effects as described by the speaker. Over the past decades, British public service expenditure was subjected to substantial cuts. The frustration about their resulting limited availability, however, is being redirected at 'Eastern Europeans' – also commonly referred to as 'welfare tourists' or 'benefit scroungers' (Fox, Moroșanu, and Szilassy 2012; Samaluk 2016). Their 'whiteness', as a centre-left public intellectual suggests, thereby helps to make this point:

Parts of the country felt really pissed off. (...) it was not expressed, I think, in hostility to individual Poles or Slovenians or Lithuanians. It was expressed in, you know, irritation with the government that suddenly primary schools seem to be overflowing the, queues in A&E in certain places (...) And in some ways it was it was it was good that these people were overwhelmingly white and Christian. I think it did make it easier to talk about the separate issues of race and immigration. (P5 UK)

The quote shows that this trope is well-established across the political spectrum. In this logic, the take-over scenario cannot be racist because of this group’s appearance. The failure to see race as anything else than a descriptor of phenotype, as Lentin (2020, 72) notes, thereby enables a ‘legitimate grievance’ framing. This illustrates an aspect of what I call the ambiguity of racialisation; here, the attribution of an insider status serves to legitimise the take-over narrative. The trope operates similarly in Germany, where respondents invoke ‘poverty migration’ ('Armutsmigration') in conjunction with concerns about ‘public service abuse’ by ‘Eastern Europeans’ (and Roma in particular, see Langemann 2021).

These quotes illustrate how the invasion scenario contributes to masking the politics of austerity and is linked to the abrogation of welfare deservingness. These tropes, however, do not merely linger in public discourse, their logics also inform public policy. Opening their labour markets to new member states, West European governments simultaneously initiated legal reforms to restrict access to social security.

With the lifting of mobility barriers in 2004, the EU passed its 'Citizens Directive' and rendered access to social rights conditional upon economic activity. Accordingly, the UK introduced a series of interlinked tests, which, as Barbulescu and Favell put it ‘clearly target CEE migrants’ (2019, 156). To qualify for welfare, claimants are required to
have lived for a specified period in the UK, earned a salary above the threshold at which National Insurance is deducted and prove that their employment is 'genuine and effective', which excludes precariously employed people.

In 2007, the German legislator implemented the same directive. EU residents in Germany must have a 'genuine and effective' job, be self-employed or prove their financial independence. Access to benefits such child or jobseekers allowance requires proof of this status and evidence of having lived and worked in Germany for five years (2019, 159).

Beyond facing structural barriers to welfare rights, people from Europe’s East experience discrimination from public service professionals. Internal documents issued to job centre staff in Germany, for instance, provide guidance on how to combat ‘organised service abuse in the context of free EU movement’ (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Freien Wohlfahrtspflege 2021, 17). On this basis, eligible applicants – for instance from Bulgaria or Romania – have been turned away at reception or asked to supply additional evidence (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Freien Wohlfahrtspflege 2021, 7, 10, 14).

Similar trends have been documented in the British context: The NHS, national and local authorities, homelessness services, or soup kitchens have been found to refuse access or mistakenly assume that EU citizens are ineligible to use their services (Morgan 2021); settled status holders, for instance, have been denied benefit applications, housing assistance, or charged for NHS care (Morgan 2021, 17, 23, 28).

Thus, representations of 'Eastern Europeans' as 'strain on public services' resonated with policy initiatives that limited social rights for people from Europe’s East and contributed to institutionalising differential treatment within public sector organisations. These patterns of structural discrimination also have a geopolitical dimension – they reduce the social costs of labour in Britain and Germany, and effectively relocate these to the East of the EU.

Cross-border working arrangements illustrate this: Sectors such as social care, agriculture or the food industry rely heavily on East–West circulation. In both countries, they are notoriously underregulated. Jobs in these fields often involve precarious or no contracts, excessive hours, pay below the minimum wage, salary deductions for travel or accommodation, or limited access to health and social insurance (Birke 2021; Weisskircher 2021). Intermediary placement agencies often navigate legal loopholes or operate from the country of origin. For instance, circular movers who provide live-in care in Germany are often insured in their country of residence, not where they work. The British government’s new seasonal work scheme and measures to attract care workers, for instance, indicate a continuation of these arrangements beyond Brexit.

In summary, representations of 'Eastern Europeans' as 'welfare tourists' or 'poverty migrants' coincided with the passing of legal restrictions to social rights at EU level (Barbulescu and Favell 2019, 153). And although access to public services was limited from the outset, biological take-over scenarios continue to thrive in Germany and Britain – even after Brexit. In the public sector, the 'strained public services' trope institutionalises discrimination. On a macro-scale, the trope conceals the politics of austerity and legitimates under-regulation and the erosion of social security standards. These trends structurally facilitate discrimination and have a geopolitical dimension: West European
countries relocate the social costs of care or food provision to countries in the East of Europe.

8. Fortress Europe

A third common trope is the attribution of criminality to ‘Eastern Europeans’. Previous studies have traced the framing of Poles as ‘tricksters’ (Weaver and Ozieranski 2016) and discussed depictions, especially of Romanians and/or Roma, as involved in ‘criminal activity’ (Fox, Moroșanu, and Szilassy 2012). These representations, as I discuss in this section, also have structural and geopolitical dimensions – notably, they underpin and contribute to the fortification of Europe’s borders and restrict the mobility of racialised Others.

Participants in British vigilantism, a milieu that engages in recording and sharing footage on social media of English Channel crossings via inflatable boats, for instance, refer frequently to ‘Eastern Europeans’. To these self-appointed defenders of the British shore, ‘Eastern Europeans’ are facilitators of ‘the great replacement’ – the scenario at the heart of anti-Muslim racist ideology. Their narratives position refugees, on the one hand, as potential terrorists, and on the other as objects of humanitarian concern. Their ‘illegal entry’, an activist explained, is facilitated by ‘Eastern European’ smugglers:

He was absolutely the most vile human being I’ve ever seen (…) and there he was (…) coming across the channel … there were drugs, weapons, guns, he showed us three of them. (…). Well, these guns come from Eastern Europe. (…). The important thing to understand is that our little Albanian friend, and he could have been anybody, there are lots of, there are lots of traffickers in this country. (…) It’s just a business to him. So that’s a real problem. (P3 UK)

Elsewhere in the conversation, it becomes apparent that ‘Eastern European’ stands for Albanian, but also Romanian and Lithuanian. This reflects common tropes about ‘Eastern European’ organised crime in public culture. For instance, the German TV series ‘4 Blocks’ blames the emergence of ‘Arabic clans’ on ‘failed integration policy’, while the ‘Chechen gangs’ feature as the ‘real’ embodiment of evil. The ‘Arab gang leader’ in this series dates a Polish woman, who mostly walks around in sexy underwear in her home. The ‘Arab’ man and the ‘Eastern European’ woman assume distinctive but entangled roles as Germany’s Others. In a critical take on racist reporting on ‘Arabic clans’, a journalist argued that ‘Chechen clans and Albanian criminals’ dwarfed ‘Middle-Eastern clans’ anyhow (Musharbash 2021). Similar dynamics are notable in British TV productions, e.g. the BBC’s ‘Informer’. The series was widely praised for its depiction of British Muslim characters in their complexity. The real ‘baddies’ here, however, were the ‘Eastern European mafia’, men with long beards holding heavy weaponry against the Albanian flag.

Yet, the narratives of the vigilante milieu are also indicative of the ambiguity of this racialisation. One day, activists frame ‘Eastern Europeans’ as vile traffickers; another, they celebrate the Polish government’s legalisation of pushback practices at the border to Belarus as a way of ‘saving Europe’. ‘Eastern Europe’ and its people, thus, can be inferiorised in one breath, and elevated in another.

Outsourcing the responsibility for border violence to ‘Eastern European’ villains (or heroes for that matter) allows vigilantes to position themselves as humanitarians.
These representations also resonate with wider border politics. West European governments, for instance, craft their self-image by narrating the EU’s border violence as peculiar to Europe’s East (Stierl 2020). The British government’s recent immigration policies (the ‘Nationality and Borders Act’ and ‘New Plan for Immigration’) follow a related logic in legalising the ‘returning of vessels intercepted’ at sea and criminalising the facilitation of ‘illegal entry’.

These external fortifications often are accompanied by what Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy (2019) call internal ‘bordering’ policies which turn ordinary citizens into border guards – and structurally reverberate with the experiences of people racialised as Other. In the UK, health practitioners, educators or employers are required to ascertain a person’s legal status and detect illegalised border crossers. These ‘hostile environment’ policies have increased the deportability of postcolonial immigrant populations; indeed, people from countries such as Brazil or India are among those most frequently deported (Home Office 2021). However, people from the East of the EU also report difficulties accessing bank accounts, national insurance numbers or rental properties (Burrell and Schweyher 2019; Manolova 2022; Morgan 2021, 6). Settled or pre-settled status can be revoked if its holder engages in ‘rough sleeping’ or is involved in a ‘serious criminal offense’. Radziwinowiczówna and Galasinska (2021) show how representations of ‘Eastern Europeans’ as criminals in British tabloid media often correspond with calls for enforced returns.

Indeed, the proportion of Albanians and EU-citizens among those who experience immigration detention and deportation has steadily risen over recent years. In 2017, for instance, thousands of Albanians (1519), Romanians (1640), Poles (1192) and Lithuanians (633) were deported (Home Office 2021). And while overall deportation numbers declined in 2020/21, the proportion of deportees from the EU’s East has increased.

Similar trends can be detected in Germany. Since the right to residence has been linked to income, EU citizens need to leave a few months after losing their financial independence (Wagner 2020). They can be removed from German state territory if they constitute a threat to national security, public safety or health – which does not have to involve a criminal conviction. The law is open to interpretation here and applied inconsistently in court: deportations occur on grounds of criminal activity but also ‘legally undefined factors that can deem a person “undesirable” or a threat’ (Klajn 2021, 7).

Indeed, deportations from Germany have doubled over the last decade (Deutscher Bundestag 2012–2021). The nationalities most affected by this rise are people from Europe’s East. Between 2011 and 2020, for instance, Serbians, Albanians, and Kosovans have been most frequently deported (under 20,000), followed by Macedonians, Russians, and Georgians (under 10,000 each), and Afghans, Nigerians, Iraqis, Turks and Syrians (under 4000 each). The proportion of EU citizens among those deported has also steadily risen, notably among Romanians (3246) and Poles (2161). Here too, deportations declined during the pandemic, but the proportion of deportees from the EU’s East continued to grow.

In summary, racialised representations of ‘Eastern Europeans’ as organised criminals are entangled with other racist repertoires, including anti-Muslim racism. And while these tropes prominently circulate in the media and popular culture, their logic also underpins recent border management policies. A complex web of recent laws has enhanced reporting duties and the interpretative power of street-level bureaucrats in
Britain and Germany. These external and internal fortifications of European borders increase the disposability and deportability of people racialised as Other, including people from Europe’s East. While these policies structure experiences after migration, they also have a geopolitical dimension – they relocate people who have lost their jobs or accommodation to their former home countries.

9. East–West inequalities and life opportunities

My analysis has traced the material consequences of representations of ‘Eastern Europeans’. I have shown how Europe’s East has been inferiorised in British, and even more so in German history, which justified the extraction of resources and precarious labour. The transition to neoliberal capitalism re-invoked tropes of backwardness and channelled new East–West mobilities. Drawing on their ideas of ‘Eastern Europe’, British and German governments institutionalised East–West labour mobility as precarious and disposable.

Thus, I have argued that the racialisation of ‘Eastern Europeans’ is co-constitutive of the political-economic peripheralisation of the region. It has enabled and institutionalised precarious East–West mobilities, which in turn reinforce processes of peripheralisation.

This argument offers a challenge to scholarly accounts that reduce the racialisation of ‘Eastern Europeans’ to stereotyping after migration (Fox, Moroșanu, and Szilassy 2012; Rzepnikowska 2019) and to those who argue that East–West movers’ experiences are fully grasped via concepts such as ‘xenophobia’ or ‘migratization’ (Sime et al. 2022; Tudor 2022).

This is not to suggest that these concepts have nothing to offer. Of course, people who move from Europe’s East to its West are perceived as ‘strangers’, ‘migrants’ or ‘foreign nationals’ and their experiences are shaped by their immigration status. Yet, I argue that they are also categorised as ‘Eastern European’ – a homogenising label that carries ambiguous racial connotations. People from Europe’s East are often classified as white, privileged, and ‘of Europe’, which some channel into white supremacy. Yet, they are also structurally and geopolitically positioned as inferior Others within hierarchies of Europeanness.

Notably, ‘Eastern Europeans’ are blamed for spreading COVID-19; this narrative conceals the systematic reliance on cheap labour from Europe’s East. ‘Eastern Europeans’ are also framed as undeserving poor who ‘strain public services’; this narrative authorises limitations to their social rights and assists in externalising the costs of their labour. Thirdly, representations of ‘Eastern Europeans’ as traffickers and organised criminals justify a stricter regulation of borders and enhance the deportability of people on the move, including from Europe’s East.

Neoliberal policies, thus, have attributed a distinctive positionality to East–West movers within West European racial hierarchies. For instance, employment profiles are being designated based on racialised ascriptions; postcolonial and intra-European mobilities fill different niches in this regard. The fortification of borders increases the deportability of people from Europe’s East, but even more so targets people from the Global South. The erosion of welfare limits the rights of those positioned as undeserving poor, including East–West movers, but most notably people of colour and those
racialised as ‘Muslim’. Thereby, entangled racism(s) contribute to eroding overall democratic standards and the quality of life of those subjected to racialisation.

On this basis, I suggest that critical race scholarship provides an important additional lens for our understanding of these entangled phenomena. My analysis illustrates that race is productive of social orders that put populations into hierarchies of belonging relative to one another. A critical race perspective also reminds us that there is nothing inherent or natural to race; populations racialised as Other have been made different through the ‘stickiness’ of ideas of difference across time and space. This does not mean that race positions different bodies in the same way or generates comparable experiences. Quite to the contrary, it operates through distinction and division, and sets racialised groups on different biographical trajectories. Here, I have highlighted how the political economy of race channels life opportunities. Race, of course, also continues to be reified in public discourse, whereby racial difference is explicitly attributed to people of colour or Roma, and more ambiguously to Muslims or Jews. This doubtlessly creates privileges for people who can pass as ‘white’, or mimic or assert Whiteness.

This brings us back to the experiential aspects of racism. Denigrating everyday encounters and various forms of violence are a well-documented aspect of East–West movers’ experiences. Yet, as I have argued in this article, racism also manifests in structural disadvantages – which resonate biographically. In some biographies, this can be cumulative – it can mean that a person sees limited possibilities of sustaining their family in Poland or Romania, seeks recruitment via an agency, takes up a precarious position in a West European country, is laid off in the pandemic, cannot access benefits, becomes homeless, and is subsequently deported. Others will experience singular features of this trajectory, and yet others none. However, commuting to another country to provide professional live-in care at the age of 60, cutting meat in a processing plant abroad without sick-leave, building houses far from home and sleeping in shifts in a shared rental, or picking fruit for 18 hours a day without the prospect of a pension are experiences that currently are regionally designated: a person from the West of the EU is significantly less likely to face such ‘choices’. This, in turn, is not inevitable, but the outcome of ongoing legal developments, including the precarisation of labour, the erosion of welfare, and the fortification of borders.

These trends generate an opposite set of experiences: they institutionalise a systematic reliance on cheap labour from Europe’s East, externalise its social costs, and enable the removal of those who become ‘costly’; they normalise the extraction of precarious labour and institutionalise the relocation of its costs to Europe’s East – and thereby reinforce the peripheralisation of the region.

The ‘stickiness’ of racialisation, in this case, does not result from post-migration status – in fact audio-visual markers of difference disappear over generations after migration. Rather, it emerges from the cumulative effects of normalised precarious and disposable labour mobility on East European countries, which render migration a key means of making a living for generations to come.

Note

1. Lapina and Vertelytė (2020) nicely grasp this via an autoethnography in Denmark. Here, I explore how this ambiguity is made (rather than experienced).
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