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"Vote yes to stay in Europe" – mobilization of the concept of the West in Hungary

"Do you want the European Union to be able to mandate the obligatory resettlement of non-Hungarian citizens into Hungary even without the approval of the Parliament?" The outcome of this October 2016 Hungarian referendum on EU-coordinated refugee resettlement scheme was celebrated throughout the country. The nationalist-conservative Prime Minister Viktor Orbán considered the three million citizens who rejected the refugee resettlement scheme to form a new "unity" in Hungary, mandating his Fidesz government to take action and protect the country against Western liberal migration policy, allegedly engineered by Brussels. At the same time, also opposition parties and civil society groups that had campaigned for invalidation of the referendum had reasons to celebrate. The colossal government-ordered propaganda campaign that had permeated public space and media outlets from television to newspapers and radio, emphasizing causality between migration and terrorism and foreboding the erosion of "authentic" Hungarian culture, had failed: the absolute majority of Hungarians was not drawn to the voting booths, and voter turnout clearly failed to reach the required 50%, rendering the result of the referendum legally inconsequential.

During the referendum campaign, the concepts of "West" and "Europe" were instrumentalized in relation to the so-called refugee crisis. These debates presented a continuity to the numerous debates on Hungary's moral and political location in Europe in recent decades in relation to the persistent east/west divide of the European space (Wéber 2014; Gille 2016). In this paper, I unpack the ways in which the West comes to embody different meanings, values and norms, depending on the context, viewpoint and the speaker (Green 2013). Before the referendum, a fraction of liberal campaigners portrayed the West as desirable, and asked people to vote in favor of the quota system in order to "stay" in Europe. A much larger assemblage of parties, civil society representatives and intellectuals called for invalidation of the referendum in protest of what they termed as inaccurate and manipulative question-setting. They also framed their opposition to the referendum by drawing comparisons to Hungarian migrant workers in western Europe, as well as the experience of Hungarian refugees after the 1956 revolution. The largest, loudest and most visible of the campaigns, waged mostly by Fidesz and its

extreme-right rival Jobbik, pleaded with the people to reject the EU relocation scheme, mobilizing images of West as normatively tainted, undemocratic region that has not listened to its people, and has consequently lost is cultural identity and heritage as a result of immigration. In the rhetoric of the no-campaign, the West, Brussels and the European Union were conflated as a singular power that colonizes Hungary with values and norms of liberalism and multiculturalism. This discourse portrays Hungary to be under attack from two sides: from the mass of migrants advancing towards Hungary from the orientalised Balkans (Bakić-Hayden 1995) on one hand, and from Brussels and eurocrats in the West who are oblivious to the upcoming clash of civilizations, on the other. This strategic positioning between the Balkans and the West allows the Hungarian government to position itself as a challenger to the West. The rhetoric of Hungary standing in the frontier of Europe is central in subverting the east/west hierarchy that places East-Central Europe in the periphery of Europe. Crucially, however, this frontier-positioning does not stand for protecting western, liberal values, but rather posits the emergence of the Hungarian government as a novel, proud and democratic eastern European leader that catapults itself to the front rows of international politics from the backyard and "waiting room of history" of Europe (Wolff 1994; Chakrabarty 2007) In this context, the space is diminishing for voices that are critical of both European Union economic and social policy as well as Viktor Orbán's project of illiberal democracy, with the former often considered a lesser evil than the latter.

I my paper, I explore how Europe's east/west hierarchy has been at times challenged and questioned, but also reproduced and confirmed, by different actors in Hungarian society in relation to the debates on migration. I do this by way of unpacking the conflictual trajectories of the concept of the "west" in the Hungarian public discourse during campaigns for the October 2016 referendum. Following József Böröcz (2000; 2006), I propose that the West emerges as relational concept that embodies a process, a set of ideas and values in addition to a geopolitical location. These imaginations of West hinge on Hungarian society's reception of hegemonic discourse, in particular the hostile anti-Brussels message of the Hungarian government.

My contribution is based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork on questions of migration, citizenship and community in Hungary, as well as my PhD research which investigates the ways in which the refugee crisis is reconfiguring the relationship of the Hungarian government and society with European spatial and moral hierarchies along the east/west axis.

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