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Racist Extremism in Central and Eastern Europe

Cas Mudde

Based in part on the results of a unique, comparative research project, the aim of this article is threefold: (1) to provide a comparative summary of racist extremism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE); (2) to compare the situation of racist extremism in CEE to that in Western Europe; and (3) to come to some further insights about racist extremism in the region. It concludes, in contrast to many of the alarming statements on the topic, that CEE is neither a hotbed of racist extremism nor a safe haven for racist extremists. In fact, if one compares the state of racist extremism in CEE to that in Western Europe, the differences seem less striking than is often assumed. Yet while the impact of racist extremism in CEE might not be as great as is often assumed, a lot remains to be done, particularly now that these countries are or will soon be members of the European Union.

Keywords: racism; extremism; Central and Eastern Europe; ethnic violence; ethnic minorities; political organizations

Given the substantial attention paid to the topic of racist extremism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and the often bold assertions made in the (Western) media and academic literature, one would expect the topic to be at the forefront of academic and journalistic interest. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Indeed, as one of the few academic scholars in the field, Michael Minkenberg, has noted, "Studying the radical right in transformation countries in Central and Eastern Europe not only resembles shooting at a moving target but also shooting with clouded vision."¹ There is a poignant lack of reliable information on racist extremism in the region, both academic and nonacademic, and I

1. Michael Minkenberg, "The Radical Right in Postsocialist Central and Eastern Europe: Comparative Observations and Interpretations," *East European Politics and Societies* 16:2(2002): 361.

hope that this article, and the volume upon which it is partly based,² will not be the last attempt to fill this void.

Obviously, the two key terms in this article are not without problems. The definition of racist extremism that is employed in this study is “organized discrimination or violence against persons belonging to another national/ethnic, religious or linguistic group in society and/or speech that incites or condones such behavior.”³ The geographical description CEE here refers to the post-communist states that either joined the European Union in 2004 or will do so in (probably) 2007: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

The aim of this article is threefold: (1) to provide a comparative summary of racist extremism in CEE,⁴ (2) to compare the situation of racist extremism in CEE to that in Western Europe, and (3) to come to some further insights about racist extremism in the region.

A map of extremist groups

Although racist extremist groups have been able to operate more or (increasingly) less freely in CEE for only fifteen years now, some clear developments are already noticeable within much of the region. First and foremost, in organizational terms, racist extremists are increasingly mobilizing independently, instead of as parts of larger (right-wing or anti-communist) umbrella organizations. Second, the vast majority are truly post-communist phenomena, addressing post-communist issues (cor-

2. This article is a revised version of my concluding chapter in Cas Mudde, ed., *Racist Extremism in Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2005). This book is the collective end result of a unique, comparative research project, generously sponsored by the Open Society Institute, and directed by Nils Muižnieks.

3. See Nils Muižnieks, “Preface,” in Mudde, *Racist Extremism*, iv.

4. If not indicated otherwise, this chapter draws upon the data and insights from the country chapters in Mudde, *Racist Extremism*.

ruption, minorities, EU enlargement) rather than harking back to a communist or pre-communist past.⁵

Political parties

In various CEE countries, racist extremists were (a small) part of the broad anti-communist movement. After the fall of the communist regimes, they have mobilized in two different ways: some founded their own racist extremist organizations, while others chose to continue to work as part of large anti-communist umbrella parties. However, after the founding elections, that is, the first elections in post-communist times, the developments of these umbrella parties, and their relationship to the extreme right, started to diverge significantly.

In some countries, such as former Czechoslovakia, the umbrella parties imploded almost directly after the founding elections, leading to the formation of a plethora of new political parties, including racist extremist ones. In other countries, the umbrella party survived for a longer time, but lost its dominant role within the right-wing of the political specter. This has been the case, for example, with the Hungarian Democratic Forum (Magyar Demokrata Fórum [MDF]), which was weakened by splits—notably from the racist extremist faction under the leadership of István Csurka—and by the increasing competition from the transformed Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Movement (Fidesz-Magyar Polgári Szövetség [Fidesz-MPS]). Finally, in one or two countries, the umbrella party was able to consolidate its leading role for a longer time, thereby limiting the electoral space on the extreme right. This was the case in Poland, for example, with the Solidarity Electoral Action (Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność [AWS]), which explains to a large extent why it took until 2001 before a

5. On the distinction between pre-communist, communist, and post-communist extreme right parties, see Cas Mudde, "Extreme Right Parties in Eastern Europe," *Patterns of Prejudice* 34:1(2000): 5-27. For a similar typology, if somewhat different assessment, see Michael Shafir, "Marginalization or Mainstream? The Extreme Right in Post-Communist Romania," in Paul Hainsworth, ed., *The Politics of the Extreme Right: From the Margins to the Mainstream* (London: Pinter, 2000), 247-67.

racist extremist party was able to enter the Parliament on the basis of its own electoral result.

In sum, fifteen years of racist extremist mobilization have shown an amazing diversity in developments, and clear regional trends are difficult to discern. With regard to racist extremist political parties, although each CEE country has at least one, their electoral results and organizational patterns are far more different than similar.

In a first group of countries, racist extremist parties have never been electorally successful. This is the case in Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia,⁶ and, though to a somewhat lesser extent, Lithuania. True, racist extremists have at times been in Parliament, but they were elected as a member of a nonracist extremist party (list), such as in Bulgaria, or individually in small-member districts, not through party lists, such as in Lithuania.

In the second and largest group of countries, racist extremist parties have had some electoral success but have been unable to consolidate their organization and support. This has been the case, most notably, in the Czech Republic, where the Association for the Republic—Republican Party of Czechoslovakia (Sdružení pro republiku—Republikánská strana Československa [SPR-RS Č]) has been in Parliament for two consecutive terms (1992-96 and 1996-98) but has since gone bankrupt and has not been succeeded by any credible heir. In Hungary and Slovakia, racist extremist parties are currently out of Parliament but might be able to come back (though probably as a relatively marginal electoral factor). In Slovenia, the Slovenian National Party (Slovenska nacionalna stranka) has been in Parliament since 1992 but has been unable to expand on its electoral or political power (and has moderated ideologically). Finally, in Poland, the electoral success of racist extremist parties is still fresh, and it remains to be seen whether the two parties are able to consolidate their posi-

6. With the possible exception of the People's Movement for Latvia (Tautas kustība Latvijai [TKL]), which gained 15 percent of the vote in the 1995 parliamentary elections, only to disappear into political oblivion after falling back to a mere 1.7 percent in 1998. More important, while the party was the creation of a German-Latvian right-wing extremist, Joachim Siegerist, the racist extremist content of the party is disputed.

tion—given the volatility of Andrzej Lepper, the leader of Self-Defence (Samoobrona) and the lack of organizational strength of the League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin [LPR]), the chances for successful long-term consolidation seem rather small.

In the third “group” of countries, racist extremist parties have established themselves as important political actors. At the moment, this is only the case in Romania, where the Greater Romania Party (Partidul România Mare [PRM]) is the largest and most stable opposition party. Until the split in the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana [SNS]) in 2001, Slovakia also belonged to this group—the SNS has been twice in government, but it remains to be seen whether the party will be able to reunite not just its elites, but also its voters.

In short, then, racist extremist parties are not really a major political force in CEE. Indeed, if compared to their “brethren” in Western Europe, they look somewhat pathetic: (far) more extremist, but (far) less successful. While currently two governments in Western Europe include racist extremist parties, the Austrian Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs [FPÖ]) in Austria and the Northern League (Lega Nord [LN]) in Italy,⁷ no government in CEE does.⁸ Moreover, only one of the ten new and future Eastern EU countries has a strong racist extremist party (Romania), compared to five of the fifteen old Western EU member states (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, and Italy).

7. One might include also the National Alliance (Alleanza nazionale [AN]) in the Italian government, or the Swiss People's Party (Schweizerische Volkspartei [SVP]) in the Swiss government, but their racist extremist status is debated in the public and scientific arena. See, inter alia, Marcho Tarchi, “The Political Culture of the Alleanza Nazionale: An Analysis of the Party's Programmatic Documents (1995-2002),” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 8:2(2003): 135-81; and Christopher T. Husbards, “Switzerland: Right-Wing and Xenophobic Parties, From Margin to Mainstream?” *Parliamentary Affairs* 53:3(2000): 501-16.

8. Admittedly, this situation has been different in the past: the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národná strana [SNS]) has been a coalition partner in two Slovak governments (1993-94 and 1994-98), while the Greater Romania Party (Partidul România Mare [PRM]) and the Party of Romanian National Unity (Partidul Unitatii Nationale Române [PUNR]) have been part of the Romanian government (1992-96).

Organizations

Compared to political parties, the importance and strength of racist extremist organizations are far more difficult to assess and compare. First of all, they mobilize in very different ways; for example, some might (try to) organize mass demonstrations, while others will lobby political parties or even individual ministers. Which of these will be more influential might be impossible to establish, if only because processes like lobbying are not very transparent.

Second, only very little truly comparative data are available on racist extremist organizations. Incidentally, this is not just a problem with regard to CEE but also to the Western part of the continent. Most comparative scholars of the extreme right focus on (successful) political parties, while nonparty organizations tend to feature only in single-country studies, which often tend to be fairly idiosyncratic and difficult to use in cross-national comparisons.⁹

Again, roughly three groups of countries can be distinguished with respect to the strength and importance of racist extremist organizations. In the first group, these organizations are either virtually absent or hardly relevant. This is actually the case in the majority of the ten countries, namely, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia.

A second group of countries counts some relevant racist extremist organizations, but they operate more or less isolated from the political mainstream. This group includes only one country at this moment.¹⁰ In Hungary, a few relatively strong organizations exist around the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja [MIÉP]), most notably the Circles of Hungarian Way and the Hungarian Forum (Magyar Fórum) weekly magazine. While these organizations are important, most

9. One notable exception is the work of Michael Minkenberg; see most notably "Radical Right"; with T. Beichelt, "Rechtsradikalismus in Transformationsgesellschaften. Entstehungsbedingungen und Erklärungsmodell," *Osteuropa* 52:3(2002): 247-62; and *Die neue radikale Rechte im Vergleich. USA, Frankreich, Deutschland* (Opladen, Germany: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998).

10. With the increasing marginalization of racist extremist parties and organizations in Slovakia, that country might also fall in this category soon.

notably to keep MIÉP alive in the current extraparliamentary period, their influence does not go much beyond the racist extremist scene.

The third group includes countries where racist extremist organizations are either very strong by themselves or provide a bridge between racist extremist parties or subcultures and the political mainstream. Currently, this group includes Poland, Slovakia, and Romania. In Poland, Radio Marya (Maria) and the Family of Radio Maria (Rodzina Radia Maryja [RRM]) are the organizational arms of a huge Catholic-nationalist subculture. Although officially independent from any political party, Radio Maria and its leader Father Tadeusz Rydzyk have been instrumental in the success of racist extremist politicians and parties, most recently the LPR. In Slovakia, the “Slovak National Movement,” with the (at times) highly influential Slovak Motherland (Matica Slovenská) organization at its core, has played a crucial role in the integration of the racist extremist SNS into (mainstream) Slovak politics.¹¹ In Romania, finally, the PRM is supported by a wide range of racist extremist organizations, including the Marshal Antonescu League (Liga Mareșal Antonescu [LMA]), which reach deeply into mainstream politics.¹²

As said, it is difficult to compare the situation in CEE with that in Western Europe, because of a lack of reliable comparative data. If one compares the region to the United States, racist extremist organizations in CEE are relatively weak. However, this is mainly because the U.S. party system provides little chances for racist extremists, who are consequently forced to mobilize almost exclusively through nonparty organizations.¹³ In most Western European countries, with the notable exception of Great Britain, the party political situation is more similar to that in CEE

11. See Darina Malová, “The Slovak National Movement: A Case of Successful Contention,” in Petr Kopecký and Cas Mudde, eds., *Uncivil Society? Contentious Politics in Post-Communist Europe* (London: Routledge, 2003), 55-73.

12. Michael Shafir, “Marshal Antonescu’s Postcommunist Rehabilitation: *Cui Bono?*” in Randolph L. Braham, ed., *The Destruction of Romanian and Ukrainian Jews during the Antonescu Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 349-410; and Mark Temple, “The Politicization of History: Marshall Antonescu and Romania,” *East European Politics and Societies* 10:3(1996): 457-503.

13. See Minkenberg, *neue radikale Rechte*.

countries. However, it seems that racist extremist organizations tend to be somewhat weaker and more isolated from mainstream politics in Western Europe—there are important exceptions though, such as the Carinthian Homeland Service (Kärtner Heimatdienst) in Austria.¹⁴

Subcultures

The distinction between a network of organizations and a subculture is not always easy to make. Here, the term *subculture* is used first and foremost for a group of people whose common identity is based on a similar culture (including ideas and symbols), rather than on an institutional affiliation. In practice, I mainly focus on the most radical subcultures, namely, that of skinheads and/or hooligans.

While skinhead (and football) “gangs” exist in all CEE countries, they are not relevant everywhere. In Latvia and Romania, skinheads are such an isolated phenomenon that one cannot speak of a true subculture. In Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, and Slovenia, skinheads have reached a level of mobilization, and sometimes (noninstitutional) organization, that one can speak of a weakly developed subculture. In the case of Slovenia, the recent foundation of a Slovenian division of the international National Socialist organization Blood & Honour (B&H) might lead to an increased importance of the skinhead subculture. That said, in many countries the cooperation between B&H and the skinhead movement has not been without its problems.

This leaves a third group of countries, in which skinheads constitute a strong, and often violent, subculture. This is the case in

14. In the 1980s, the Group for the Study of European Civilization (Groupement de recherches et d'études pour la civilisation européenne), the main organization of the New Right (*nouvelle droite*) in France, seemed to be able to establish itself within the mainstream right-wing, but in recent years they seem to have become more isolated from parties such as the Rally for the Republic (Rassemblement pour la République). In other countries, such as Belgium or Germany, the influence of the New Right has always remained fairly marginal. See, for example, in Germany, Armin Pfahl-Traughber, “Brücken zwischen Rechtsextremismus und Konservatismus,” in Wolfgang Kowalsky and Wolfgang Schroeder, eds., *Rechtsextremismus. Einführung und Forschungsbilanz* (Opladen, Germany: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994), 160-82.

the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia.¹⁵ While in all three countries various organizations and parties mobilize individual skinheads, the skinhead movement (subculture) is much larger and transcends the borders of these organizations. Moreover, the significance of the skinheads lies not as much in the actions of their organizations as in the threat and violence of its members. In fact, the skinhead subculture in these countries has become recognized nationally and internationally as a problem, most notably because of its high level of violence.

Again, comparison with the West is difficult, given the lack of reliable data on skinhead subcultures in the various countries. However, one can make the rough assertion that in most Western European countries, racist extremist skinheads had their heydays in the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹⁶ Today, strong skinhead subcultures can be found in only a few Western European countries, most notably Germany. In the United States, a skinhead subculture does exist, but it lacks a strong enough infrastructure to span the whole country.

A global study by the Anti-Defamation League seems to support the strength of the skinhead subculture in Central and Eastern Europe: "The countries where Skinheads are found in the greatest numbers are Germany (5,000), Hungary and the Czech Republic (more than 4,000 each), the United States (3,500), Poland (2,000), the United Kingdom and Brazil (1,500 each), Italy (1,000 to 1,500), and Sweden (over 1,000)."¹⁷ This study is already somewhat dated and overestimates the numbers in some Western countries somewhat (most notably Sweden and the United Kingdom), while it underestimates the numbers in some Eastern countries (most notably Russia and Serbia, but also Slovakia).

15. For some additional literature on skinheads in these countries, see László Kúrti, "The Uncivility of a Civil Society: Skinhead Youth in Hungary," in Kopecký and Mudde, *Uncivil Society?*, 37-54; European Roma Rights Center (ERRC), *Time of the Skinheads. Denial and Exclusion of Roma in Slovakia* (Budapest, Hungary: ERRC, 1997).

16. In the cradle of the skinhead movement, Great Britain, the racist extremist skinhead subculture has even been decreasing since the early 1980s.

17. Anti-Defamation League, *The Skinhead International: A Worldwide Survey of Neo-Nazi Skinheads* (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 1995), 1.

Legal framework

International framework and international involvement

It might have taken more time in some cases, and less pushing in others, but all ten CEE countries have signed and ratified most if not all of the important international conventions in the field of human rights, including the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.¹⁸

Most of the CEE countries have been the subject of serious international pressure with regard to minority rights, notably in the (early) 1990s. In Estonia and Latvia, the situation and the rights of the large Russophone minority was criticized, particularly the creation of a significant group of stateless people. The fate of the Hungarian-speaking minorities in Romania and Slovakia has been the topic of much international debate as well, not least because of the vocal advocacy of the first post-communist government in Hungary. Although there are still some tensions and complaints, most international actors nowadays consider this issue more or less resolved. The same applies to the treatment of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria and of the ex-Yugoslav minority in Slovenia.

The most important contemporary minority issue in the region is the position of the Roma minority. Particularly in countries with sizeable Roma populations, like the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Romania, Roma are not only the victims of much state and societal discrimination, they are also the prime targets of racist extremist incidents (see below). Western states and NGOs have been criticizing the lack of protection of Roma from racist attacks harshly. In various cases, they even accused the local police of allowing the attacks or even instigating them. Given the complexity and extent of the discrimination of the Roma population, and the deep-seated anti-Roma sentiments in the region, this

18. See appendix 1 in Mudde, *Racist Extremism*.

issue will undoubtedly remain on the international agenda for some time. The question is whether EU membership will lead to a more or to a less critical position of the EU in this respect.

Most critiques and recommendations have merely addressed broader issues of minority discrimination (housing, jobs, education, etc.). Still, the rather high levels of racist extremist violence in some CEE countries have been the subject of critique of foreign states and international organizations, including the United States, the Council of Europe, and the European Union. This has been the case particularly with regard to racist violence by state officials, generally local police officers, such as in Bulgaria and Romania. Racist violence by nonstate actors, for example, racist skinheads, has generally been addressed by NGOs.

In contrast, nonviolent racist extremism in CEE has been largely ignored by the international community. Only occasionally have reports addressed the electoral success of racist extremist political parties or the (mobilization) actions of similar organizations and then generally using only vague formulations. For example, the first European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) report on Latvia stated, "Instances of aggressive nationalism, racism and anti-Semitism have been observed in Latvia."¹⁹ However, in 1999, the same organization did address "the infiltration of the extreme right into mainstream politics" in Poland.²⁰

The domestic legal framework and practice

Initially, most post-communist states were quite reluctant to introduce legal restrictions that would limit freedom of speech. This is not surprising, given that the first governments were often made up of former dissidents who had been fighting for the freedom of expression and other democratic rights for decades under the communist regimes.²¹ Just more than a decade later, not much

19. European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), *Report on Latvia* (Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe, 13 March 1999), 7.

20. See <http://www.coe.int/ecri>.

21. For an interesting account of the Hungarian situation in this respect, see László Szócs, "A Tale of the Unexpected: The Extreme Right *vis-à-vis* Democracy in Post-Communist Hungary," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21:6(1998): 1096-1115.

of this reluctance remained, and most CEE countries now have a comprehensive legal instrument to combat racial intolerance and extremism at their disposal.²²

All constitutions stipulate the equality of all citizens regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, religion, and so on, albeit in various different formulations. Still, some constitutions at the same time include controversial ethnic statements: for example, in Slovakia, the preamble starts with the phrase, “We, the Slovak nation”; while in Romania, article 4.1 states that “the foundation of the State is based on the unity of the Romanian people.” All countries also have a comprehensive legal framework to combat discrimination on a variety of grounds, including ethnicity and race, quite often in part as a consequence of pressure from international and domestic actors.

With specific regard to racist extremism, a variety of legal measures are available in the region. First, countries require political organizations, notably political parties, to be registered officially. In most cases, registration can be withheld from organizations that are considered extremist or racist by the responsible ministry. This decision can be appealed in court. Indeed, in many countries racist extremist organizations, including would-be parties, have been denied registration.²³

In all CEE countries, extremist (i.e., antidemocratic) and racist organizations can be banned.²⁴ However, there exists a wide variety of formulations. Some countries use a collection of narrowly defined reasons to ban political organizations (e.g. the Czech Republic and Poland), yet others employ (also) fairly broad definitions. In Bulgaria, political parties “based on ethnic, racial or religious grounds” are prohibited; while in Romania, parties and organizations that “militate against political pluralism” are illegal. This notwithstanding, in all countries the (ultimate) decision is in the hands of legal actors, ranging from the Supreme Court in

22. See also ECRI, *Legal Measures to Combat Racism and Intolerance in the Member States of the Council of Europe* (Strasbourg, France: Council of Europe, 1998).

23. E.g., the National Socialist Block (Národně sociální blok [NSB]) in the Czech Republic, the Russian National Unity (Russkoe natsional'noe edinstvo [RNE]) in Latvia, or the National Social Union of Slovenia (Nacional-socialna zveza Slovenije [NSZS]) in Slovenia.

24. See on this also Venice Commission, “Venice Commission: Guidelines on Prohibition and Dissolution of Political Parties and Analogous Measures” (Adopted by the Venice Commission at its 41st plenary session, Venice, Italy, 10-11 December 1999).

most countries (e.g., Slovakia and Slovenia) to district courts in Lithuania.

Finally, all countries have legal provisions against “hate speech” and incitement to racial and ethnic hatred. That said, the level of punishment differs from country to country: for example, in Estonia and Slovenia, incitement is punishable to up to two years in prison; while in Lithuania, it can go up to ten years (if the incitement has caused severe consequences). Holocaust denial is illegal in some countries (e.g., Poland, Romania, or Slovakia), but not in others (e.g., Czech Republic and Latvia). In only a few countries is racist motivation a circumstance that can lead to an increase in penalty: for example, in the Czech Republic, racially motivated crimes can be punished with up to two years more than similar crimes with other motivations.

So at least on paper, CEE countries are quite well protected against racist extremism. However, despite the well-established legal frameworks, there are important shortcomings in the implementations. Very few organizations have been banned, and the relatively few cases of racist extremist incidents that have been taken to court involved racist extremist violence, in which often the violence was punished, not the racist extremist content of it. In this respect, the region seems to lag behind (some) Western European countries.

Racist extremist incidents

Comparing the number of racist extremist incidents cross-nationally is a notoriously hazardous operation.²⁵ Not every country has an official organization that collects information on such incidents. In fact, this is only the case in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In both countries, the state started to register racist extremist incidents only after some years of high levels of violence and as a consequence of significant national and international pressure, not least from local antiracist NGOs.

25. This is also the Achilles heel of most cross-national comparative studies on racist violence in Western Europe. See, most notably, Ruud Koopmans, “Explaining the Rise of Racist and Extreme Right Violence in Western Europe: Grievances or Opportunities?” *European Journal of Political Research* 30 (1996): 185-216; and Jaap Van Donselaar, *De staat paraat? De bestrijding van extreem-rechts in West-Europa* (Amsterdam: Babylon-De Geus, 1995).

In some countries, nonstate actors have filled the void and have started registering racist extremist incidents. Most often these are human rights and antiracist NGOs with only limited means. Obviously, the variety in organizations responsible for the registration leads to a variety in definitions, facilities, and counting methods that are employed. At the very least, an antiracist organization will generally be more open to register an incident as racist extremist than a state institution that depends on registration by local police (who are sometimes more sympathetic to the culprits than to the victims).

That said, if we compare the CEE countries with regard to the occurrence of racist extremist incidents, and focus first and foremost on violent acts against persons and property, we can distinguish again three groups of countries. In the first group, racist extremist violence is absent or highly incidental. This group of countries include the three Baltic states.

The second group includes countries where racist extremist violence does occur regularly but the level is not (yet) severe. Here we think of Slovenia, where there are short waves of “moderate” levels of racist violence; and Romania, where serious outbreaks of racist extremist violence have occurred at a few occasions, but overall the level is not that high and, importantly, is decreasing.²⁶

In the third and last group of CEE countries, high levels of racist extremist violence are a structural and long-term problem. This is the case in half of the countries, namely, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia; although Hungary might be moving toward the second group. In all these countries, Roma are the main victims of racist extremist violence, but the main culprits differ somewhat. While in most of the countries, the skinhead movement is the main perpetrator of racist attacks, in Bulgaria, attacks are mainly the work of communal groups and, though decreasingly, police officers.

In some countries, recent immigrants and asylum seekers have become targets of racist extremists (e.g., Poland and Slovenia).

26. The only exception to this “moderate” level of racist extremist violence was the attempted coup d’état in Romania.

This is a worrying development, particularly given the fact that so far, most CEE countries have been confronted with only limited numbers of these two groups. But with EU membership, most CEE countries will no longer be mere transition countries for immigrants and refugees, and their numbers are bound to rise. Given the dramatic experiences with racist extremist violence toward these groups in the former communist part of Germany, this is a serious source of concern. There is no reason to assume that (parts of) the populations of the post-communist countries will deal with these newcomers in a more tolerant manner than in the West, as the example of the “illegal immigrant crisis” of 2001 in Slovenia attests.²⁷

While a comparison of the level of racist extremist violence within a region is already very problematic, comparisons between regions are almost impossible. This notwithstanding, it seems justified to postulate that the level of racist extremist violence in CEE is *on average* higher than in Western Europe. Only in Germany is a similarly violent racist extremist subculture active as in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia.²⁸

State and civic responses

State institutions

In all countries, the key state institutions to deal with all forms of political extremism are the national security service and the police. In some countries, a special unit is charged exclusively with monitoring political extremism. Sometimes the Ministries of

27. See Vlasta Jalušič, “Xenophobia or Self-Protection? On the Establishing of the New Slovene Civic/Citizenship Identity,” in Monica Pajnik, ed., *Xenophobia and Post-Socialism* (Ljubljana, Slovenia: Mirovni Inštitut, 2002), 45-72. According to some research, East Europeans already hold less tolerant views towards immigrants; see Endre Sik, “The Level and Social Basis of Xenophobia in Contemporary Hungary,” In Zsolt Enyedi and Ferenc Erős, eds., *Authoritarianism and Prejudice. Central European Perspectives* (Budapest, Hungary: Osiris, 1999), 196.

28. And even in Germany, the level of racist extremist violence is disproportionately high in the former communist part in the east. On racist extremist violence in Germany, and the role of the neo-Nazi and skinhead subcultures in it, see, inter alia, Thomas Grumke and Bernd Wagner, eds., *Handbuch Rechtsradikalismus. Personen—Organisationen—Netzwerke vom Neonazismus bis in die Mitte der Gesellschaft* (Opladen, Germany: Leske + Budrich, 2002); and Koopmans, “Racist and Extreme Right Violence.”

Interior and Justice are also actively involved in the monitoring of, and sometimes reporting on, racist extremism. This is generally only the case in countries where severe racist extremist incidents are a common phenomenon and where (national and international) NGOs or foreign countries have been pushing for a more vigilant state reaction (e.g., Czech Republic and Slovakia).

In practice, much comes down to the local police, and it is here that there are significant differences in the way the issue is dealt with, both *between* and *within* countries. It would be only a slight exaggeration to state that in general, police in urban areas are more professional in their dealing with racist extremists than their colleagues in rural areas. Police personnel in local communities have closer ties to the local population, which can lead to more sympathy toward local racist extremists.

Particularly in the first decade of post-communism, sections of the state apparatus were quite sympathetic toward racist extremists, which hindered their effective repression. Even worse was the situation in countries like Bulgaria, where state officials were actively involved in racist extremist activities, or Romania, where the security service (Serviciul Român de Informații [SRI]) has been involved in extremist incidents.²⁹ Nowadays police officers will be less often involved in racist extremist actions, although it remains a problem in some countries (e.g., Bulgaria and Slovakia), and the likelihood of punishment is much higher. That said, attitudes will hardly have changed, and prejudices against minorities (most notably the Roma) and sympathy for racist extremists (“just local boys”) remain widespread.

In recent years, it has become more common for high-ranking state officials to speak out against racist extremism. In most cases, the speeches have been reactions to particularly severe physical attacks on minorities or highly publicized demonstrations of anti-Semitism and neo-Nazism; cases of “everyday racism” have generally been ignored or even marginalized. In some instances, it seemed that the main audience was the international rather than the national community.

29. Even today, the security service (Serviciul Român de Informații [SRI]) still cooperates with nationalist and chauvinist groups and expresses some of their ideas.

Political parties and civil society

Racist extremism is not considered to be a major issue in the public and political arenas of CEE. Mainstream political parties are particularly passive in this regard and seem to become active only when their political position is threatened by racist extremist parties. The Czech Republic is the only country where a parliamentary racist extremist party was consistently kept outside of mainstream politics. Romania and Slovakia have been the other extreme; here, racist extremist parties were taken into the government. In most other countries, racist extremist parliamentary parties have been treated as fairly normal by most parties, although too close and open cooperation has been shunned (e.g., Hungary, Poland, Slovenia).

In virtually all countries, elements of the racist extremist discourse can be found in the discourse of mainstream parties, most notably (though not exclusively!) in moderate nationalist and conservative liberal parties. Particularly in the first years of post-communism, ethnic issues featured prominently on the political agendas of the region, and the borders between racist extremists and mainstream politicians were at times hard to establish. In recent years, mainstream parties have generally moderated their discourse and distanced themselves more clearly from racist extremist actors.

In some countries, the issue of racist extremism has become integrated into the broader political struggle. This is particularly the case in the Baltic countries, where the Estonian/Latvian political parties, civil groups, and media focus mainly on racist extremism by Russophone groups, while the "Russians" condemn predominantly Estonian/Latvian racist extremism; this is to a lesser extent the case with the "Hungarian" parties in Romania and Slovakia. In Hungary, the political scene has become increasingly polarized on political grounds in the past years. Here, socialist and liberal politicians have used the struggle against racist extremism as part of their campaign against the right-wing Fidesz-MPS, arguing that they would bring the racist extremist MIÉP into the government (which Fidesz-MPS has always denied).

As could be expected, civil society is heavily divided on this issue (too). Each country has various human rights and antiracist groups that actively campaign against racist extremism. Their influence is difficult to ascertain, and probably also depends on who is in government, but overall it seems fair to state that they have been influential in only a few countries (most notably Poland and Slovakia). Some successful antiracist campaigns have been “Be kind to your local Nazi,” by the Czech People in Need Foundation (Nadace Člověk Tísni), and the Anti-Fascist Happening (Antifašistický happening) by the Slovak People against Racism (Ľudia proti rasizmu) organization.

There have been only a few large-scale antiracist demonstrations in the region, despite the fact that most countries have experienced at least some brutal attacks by racist extremists. For example, in 1997, some ten thousand people demonstrated in reaction to the murder of a Sudanese student in Prague. Significantly, very few demonstrations have followed racist extremist attacks on the most common victims, the Roma, despite the often gruesome character of the attacks.

In a few countries, antifascist groups have emerged, which try to fight the racist extremists “in the streets.” The militant anarchistic Anti-Fascist Action (AFA), which has “chapters” in many Western countries, is active in some CEE countries (e.g., the Czech Republic and Slovenia); in Poland, the main antifascist organization is the Anti-Nazi Group (Grupa Anty-Nazistowska). The success of these militant antifascist groups is questionable, both in terms of physically preventing racist extremists from mobilizing and in terms of raising public awareness about the dangers of racist extremism.

On the other side, various “uncivil” groups operate within the civil societies of post-communist CEE. These include both the racist extremist organizations themselves and various groups that sympathize with them. In general, the latter fall into one of two groups: moderate nationalists and orthodox religious. High-ranking representatives of virtually all major religions, with the notable exception of Judaism, have at times given credibility to racist extremist organizations or issues (see below). However, more important have been (moderate) nationalist groups, who

have at times built bridges between the racist extremists and the mainstream.

Overall, the mainstream media have kept their distance from racist extremists and their organizations. Few if any provide space for racist extremist organizations. While initial reporting on racist extremists and their organizations was quite positive and ill informed, nowadays the mainstream media report (strongly) negative on most events and organizations, particularly if involving neo-Nazis or skinheads. In some countries, particular media will also cooperate with antiracist activists and NGOs when writing on the topic (e.g., Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia). That said, some of the coverage of racist extremist incidents, and much of the reporting on ethnic (and religious) minorities (particularly the Roma), has been highly ambiguous at best and inciting at worst.

The Internet has been a very important source of information and recruitment for racist extremists everywhere. In some CEE countries, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have been very cooperative, and even proactive, in closing racist extremist Web sites (e.g., Czech Republic and Hungary), while in others they have been rather obstructive (e.g., Poland). Still, whenever ISPs in one country become too vigilant, racist extremists will simply move to ISPs in another country (mostly Russia and the United States).

Religious organizations in CEE countries play a far less visible role in the struggle against racist extremism than in the West. While in many West European countries, high-ranking religious leaders are at the forefront of antiracist actions and campaigns, in the East, most of them remain silent on the issue. The general exception are the Jewish organizations, although they often focus first and foremost on the anti-Semitic aspects of the racist extremists.

And while religious groups rarely play a role within the racist extremist milieu in the West,³⁰ this is not the case in some Eastern countries. Most notably, the Orthodox Churches in Bulgaria and

30. A notable exception is the Lefebvre-group around Bernard Antony in the French National Front (Front national [FN]). See, inter alia, Jean-Yves Camus, *Le Front national* (Paris: Laurens, 1997).

Romania harbor various influential extremist factions, which target mainly, but not exclusively, religious minorities. In certain other countries, including Slovakia, orthodox factions within the Catholic Church perform important support and even organizational functions for racist extremist organizations. This is most extremely the case in Poland, where the Catholic-nationalist Radio Maria, which can make or break racist extremist political parties, is supported by the nationalist wing of the Catholic Church.

Finally, academics have been almost absent in the debate over, as well as the struggle against, racist extremism in CEE. This is in itself not that surprising, given that racist extremism is hardly studied by academics in the region.³¹ Yet it is in sharp contrast to the situation in Western Europe. In countries like Germany and France, racist extremism is a highly popular topic of academic research, and various academics are at the forefront of the antiracist struggle.

The education system and public opinion

Most CEE countries have put increased emphasis on issues like minorities, multiculturalism, and racism within the curricula of their educational system. In some cases, special courses were developed to provide a deeper understanding of specific issues, such as civics, ethics, and tolerance. In addition to the special programs by the national governments, NGOs in many countries have been actively involved in the development of courses or the pressuring of governments to introduce courses to foster tolerance and mutual understanding.

In recent years, virtually all countries in the region have put special emphasis on Holocaust education. Various interesting initiatives were developed with regard to this topic. For example, in 2003, the Czech minister of education organized an essay contest (“Daniel 2003”) for the students of secondary schools on the topic “Holocaust and Today.” Tellingly, of the current sixteen

31. Notable exceptions include the groups of researchers at the Faculty of Social Studies of Masaryk University in Brno or at the Peace Institute (Mirovni Inštitut) of the University of Ljubljana.

member states of the Task Force, one of the prime purposes of which is to enhance the importance of Holocaust education, four are from the region: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, and Poland.³²

This notwithstanding, the educational systems still contain a strong national or ethnic bias and continue to transmit stereotypical images with regard to some minorities. In Estonia, for example, history textbooks regard “Russians” as oppressors and Estonians as the main victims of Stalinist repressions. In Romania, largely as a consequence of the influence of the Romanian Orthodox Church (Biserica Ortodoxă Română [BOR]), religious education fosters an intolerant and suspicious attitude toward non-Orthodox beliefs and non-Romanian identities.

Regarding public opinion, surveys show consistently that prejudices toward ethnic minorities are widely spread within the region. Of all ethnic out-groups, the Roma are far and away the most disliked. Other ethnic minorities that are the subject of extensive prejudices, though far less than Roma, are groups that are associated with the former “occupier”: Muslims and Turks in Bulgaria, Russians in the Baltics (excluding Lithuania), Hungarians in Romania and Slovakia, and “ex-Yugoslavs” in Slovenia. Particularly since the horrific attacks in the United States on 9/11, prejudices against Muslim minorities (mostly refugees, such as Chechens and Afghans) are sharply on the rise. Finally, anti-immigrant sentiments are increasing in CEE countries, equaling if not overtaking the situation in the West.³³

Anti-Semitic prejudices are no longer predominant in the region, even though the levels in some countries are still far higher than in most Western countries.³⁴ For example, in Poland some 50 percent declared negative feelings toward Jews and/or Israelis.³⁵ In Lithuania and Slovenia, 23 percent of the population would not like to live in a neighborhood with Jews, compared to

32. See <http://taskforce.ushmm.org/>.

33. See, for example, chart 1 in Sik, “Social Basis of Xenophobia,” 196.

34. Although certain surveys have found disturbing levels of anti-Semitism in Western Europe as well. See, for example, <http://www.jewishsf.com/bk021101/us48.shtml>.

35. *Tolerancja, przeciwdziałanie rasizmowi i ksenofobii. Wyzwania jednoczącej się Europy 1* (2001).

5 percent in Latvia and Germany, or 2 percent in Sweden.³⁶ However, while the levels at mass level might not be alarming (in general), anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial are far more widespread among the elites of CEE countries than of the West.³⁷

Interestingly, the highest levels of prejudice are most often directed against religious and social out-groups rather than ethnic ones (with the possible exception of the Roma). For example, the percentages of Romanians who believed Romania should *not* be inhabited by a certain group were the following: gays and lesbians (both 40 percent), Jehovah's Witnesses (25 percent), Muslims (19 percent), Roma (13 percent), Hungarians (7 percent), and Jews (4 percent). Similar results were found in the Czech Republic, where the following groups were most disliked as neighbors: drug addicts (85 percent), Roma (79 percent), alcoholics (78 percent), people with a criminal past (78 percent), homosexuals (42 percent), aliens (33 percent), people with a dark complexion (25 percent), and Jews (10 percent).³⁸ In Latvia, the least trusted group are the homosexuals.³⁹

There are some optimistic trends, too. Prejudices against most minorities are declining, though not always very fast or significantly. Moreover, while some minorities remain excluded and rejected (most notably the Roma), others are increasingly accepted (e.g., Germans in Poland).

Conclusion

If one compares the state of racist extremism in CEE to that in Western Europe, the differences seem less striking than is often assumed. CEE is neither a hotbed of racist extremism nor a safe

36. Based on the European Values Studies of 1999; see *Europa ir mes* (Vilnius, Lithuania: n.p., 2001), 236-38.

37. See, for example, Michael Shafir, "Between Denial and 'Comparative Trivialization.' Holocaust Negationism in Post-Communist East Central Europe," *Analysis of Current Trends in Antisemitism* 19 (2002); and Leon Volovici, "Antisemitism in Post-Communist Eastern Europe: A Marginal or Central Issue?" *Analysis of Current Trends in Antisemitism*, 5 (1994).

38. CVVM (Public Opinion Research Center) press release by Miluše Rezková on 24 March 2003, available at <http://www.cvvm.cz>.

39. Baltijas Datu nams, *Pētījumu un rīcības programma "Cēla uz pilsonisku sabiedrību" Atskaite* (Riga, Latvia: Baltijas Datu nams, 1998), 89-90.

haven for racist extremists. Indeed, in terms of political parties, the CEE countries face a less serious challenge than the West, with the notable exception of Romania (and possibly Poland). And with regard to racist extremist organizations and subcultures, the situation in some countries is worrying, but so it is in some West European countries.

Still, István Gyarmati, senior vice president of the East-West Institute and a former Hungarian deputy defense minister, expressed a common concern, when he said,

There is a general trend in Europe which is the re-emergence of the extreme right, as various radical elements look for solutions outside the system. . . . But in Central Europe, this is more dangerous than in Western Europe, because in Central Europe, democratic thinking and the democratic public are not quite so stable.⁴⁰

Though sympathetic to the claim, I am not sure whether it is still valid for all ten countries addressed in this article. Obviously, the two regions, Central and Western Europe, are not as homogeneous as is often assumed. The quality of democracy in Western Europe varies quite significantly: for example, a country like Sweden has a very different political culture than, say, Italy or Greece. Similarly, it is debatable whether in terms of “democratic thinking,” Estonia or Slovenia have more in common with Bulgaria or Romania than with Finland or Austria.⁴¹

That said, mainstream political parties in CEE are less willing to speak out against racist extremism than in the West. They are also more reluctant to distance themselves clearly from racist extremist actors. This can be seen not only in the formal coalitions that have existed between mainstream and extremist parties but also

40. *New York Times*, 12 May 2002.

41. On the political culture of Central and Eastern European countries, see, inter alia, Detlef Pollack, Jörg Jacobs, Olaf Müller, and Gert Pickel, eds., *Political Culture in Post-Communist Europe: Attitudes in New Democracies* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003); and Franz Plasser, Peter A. Ullram, and Harald Waldrauch, *Democratic Consolidation in East-Central Europe* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1998).

in various other forms of cooperations between them.⁴² And most worrying, mainstream political parties in the region are more often sources of (moderate) nationalism than in Western Europe. This is, for example, the case with parties as varied as the right-wing Fidesz-MPS in Hungary and the left-wing HZDS in Slovakia.⁴³

In addition, within the civil societies of CEE, the racist extremists are far from isolated. In various countries, influential NGOs are either racist extremist themselves or are willing to cooperate with racist extremist organizations: for example, Slovak Motherland in Slovakia or elements within the respective Orthodox Churches in Bulgaria and Romania. Even the potentially violent skinhead subcultures are not always shunned by others, as can be seen in the warm ties between skinheads and “metalists” in Lithuania, for instance. At the same time, antiracist and promulticultural groups remain rare and on average powerless, relying heavily on funding and support from foreign states and organizations.

So while the impact of racist extremism in CEE might not be as great as is often assumed, a lot remains to be done. This is even more important now that these countries are or will soon be members of the European Union, which will bring new sources of resentment and tensions. At least two of these, Euroscepticism and mass immigration, have already proved profitable for racist extremism organizations in the “old” EU member states.

42. Recently, this was the case with the relationship between the Fidesz-Hungarian Civic Movement (Fidesz-Magyar Polgári Szövetség [Fidesz-MPS]) and the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (Magyar Igazság és Élet Pártja [MIÉP]), despite considerable national and international pressure on Fidesz-MPS and its leader, then-Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, to disassociate themselves from MIÉP and its ideology. See, for example, Thomas Land, “Frustrated Hungary Flirts with Far-Right Politics,” *Contemporary Review* 278:1620(2001): 1-5.

43. See, respectively, Csilla Kiss, “From Liberalism to Conservatism: The Federation of Young Democrats in Post-Communist Hungary,” *East European Politics and Societies* 16:3(2002): 739-63; and Tim Haughton, “HZDS: The Ideology, Organisation and Support Base of Slovakia’s Most Successful Party,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 53:5(2001): 745-69.