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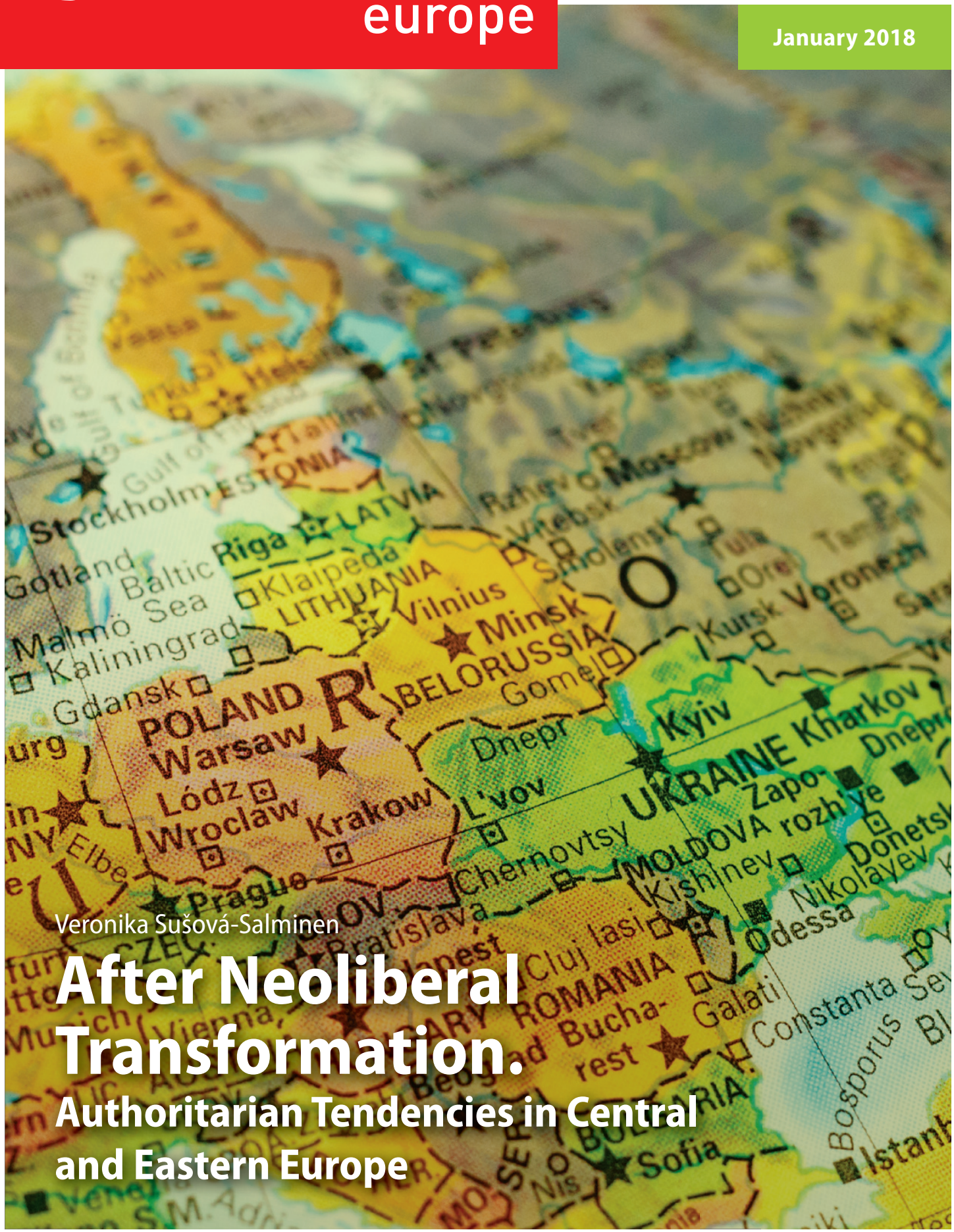

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After Neoliberal Transformation. Authoritarian Tendencies in Central and Eastern Europe[1]

Veronika Sušová-Salminen

Every conceptualisation and comparison is to some extent a question of generalisation. In this generally conceived paper, I am going to focus on general trends of political and social development in the region of Central and Eastern Europe (and not only) in the last 25 years or so. The aim is to help to understand the main roots of recent authoritarian tendencies in their historical contexts with an emphasis on systemic analysis.

Firstly, it is important to mention that there is a huge internal diversity in this region or macro-region, composed of different regions in the geographical space between Germany and Russia in the north, and Austria and Turkey in the south. We can refer to Central Europe or the Visegrad Four (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland), Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), new Eastern Europe (Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Moldova) and the Balkans (Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, FYR of Macedonia and Kosovo). Geographically and historically, there are some exceptions – a composite part of Central Europe is also Austria; Finland in the northeast belongs at least partly to the Baltic region (if not to Eastern Europe) and Greece is a geographical part of the Balkans. Due to geopolitical circumstances, these countries were "moved" to Western Europe, or Southern Europe, and could keep their capitalist systemic continuity during the Cold War.

In the context of the modern capitalist world-system's history, Central and Eastern Europe had become a composite part of the capitalist system, as its periphery since the 16th century. Peripheral capitalism has got its own internal nuances, but in general it helped to create a unique and *dependent* division of labour, belated industrialisation/urbanisation, and lengthy dominance of agrarian production, unequal exchange and subaltern subjectivity.

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The key common characteristics of this diverse peripheral region are what I refer to as a *post-imperial* condition. It is not without political consequences, influencing political culture but also local types of nationalism. Nationalism is ethnically oriented and was largely focused on the opposition of universalist ideas of the empire. The region's current political map was founded on the ruins of four empires of the modern era. In the west, there was the Habsburg Empire (Austria and later Austria-Hungary) and Prussia (later Germany); in the east, there was Russia; and in the south, there was the Ottoman Empire. These were second rate empires among early modern and modern empires in Europe. All of them were landlocked, contiguous empires without transcontinental expansion (with the specific exception of Russia and Germany's efforts in the 19th century). As some historians would argue, the Soviet Union could be considered the next kind of empire and it dominated the region between 1945 and 1989/93. It is very important to realise that modern politics in the region was born of this specific, post-imperial context. And the composite part of this story is an asymmetry between ethnic nationalism and civic identity, sometimes with openly ethnocratic tendencies.

Between 1945 and 1989 Central and Eastern Europe shaped the so-called Second World, an effort to build alternative socialist modernity carried out by Soviet Russia and the USSR from 1917. Despite all failures, I think it is very important to remember that the core idea of this project was indeed emancipation in many senses of the word. To mention just one, it was an effort to challenge the peripheral position and its economic and social consequences. The socialist project

1 This is an extended version of the paper presented at the Summer University of the European Left in Budapest in 2017. I have also included some of the discussion topics and comments that featured during the workshop. I would like to thank all the participants for their remarks and comments.

stemmed from the capitalist system with its inequalities, including unequal exchange or so-called "backwardness". From this point of view, the development after the fall of the Soviet bloc/socialist/Soviet project meant the **failure to escape the peripheral position** and to create a new alternative centre. In this sense, the Soviet-led socialist project was also a modernisation strategy with its successes and failures. Thus, the next main characteristic is that of **post-socialist/ post-Soviet** legacies, which are again internally diverse within the region. The key differences may be identified between those countries that were a composite part of the USSR, and are therefore post-Soviet. Socialist, but formally independent and sovereign states in the Balkans and in Central Europe are post-socialist or post-communist. These are not just nuances in naming, but the names also often represent different versions of socialism in the region. However, the key consequence of this development was a systemic discontinuity which unites the region.

When speaking about the *post-imperial condition* in the region, one must also recognise one further important feature: the states in the region were largely experiencing difficult political situations in the 20th century. Too often these nations became just a plaything of powers with tragic consequences, which hardly any of the West European nations had to face. It is not just a systemic discontinuity (socialist – capitalist) but also a statehood discontinuity, which must be taken into account in understanding what is going on today. Central and Eastern European nations are "*not evident*" nations, which means they suffer from uncertainty and fear when facing precarious futures or challenges that they know they do not have strength to react against or change. This is indeed one of many sources of local conservativism and nationalism (and also of xenophobia). Observing 20th century political history helps to explain the nationalist anxiety we experience in the region, which is politically used or abused in the form of different national myths.

POST-COMMUNIST TRANSFORMATION: NEOLIBERALISM TRIUMPHS

Finally, Central and Eastern Europe was undergoing a common but internally diverse path in so-called **post-communist/post-Soviet transformation** after 1989. This was based on predominantly neoliberal formulas of Washington consensus, shock therapy, privatisation, commercialisation, deconstruction of common political identities, of the welfare state, and the radical individualisation celebrating private property and egoism. Also in this experience, the region and its restauration of capitalism was internally diverse, more or less radical. On a general level therefore, it was not only a cheap sale of socialist-owned property and skilful liquidation of any potential competitors for the world market, both realised voluntarily as a part of a "return to Europe". The key notion of transformation was *THE MARKET(S)*, which was celebrated as a key social force. In general, I believe it might be said that neoliberal transformation has become an obstacle to the democratisation of these societies (in the end, neoliberal hegemony devours democracy in Western Europe and America too!) with rather difficult historical developments shaped by peripherality and post-imperial political cultures. This all happened largely despite the original political aims of the 1989 revolution, which did not focus on the markets but primarily on democracy and civic freedoms. The focus of reforms was technocratic, market-oriented, and it was also situated in the uneven position between the apprentice (CEE) and the teacher (the West). There was no space left for conceptual merging of socialist and capitalist economies in terms of an authentic third way either. On the contrary, such a proposal was rather refused on a global level. If neoliberalism celebrated its triumph with fireworks somewhere, it was in this region of Europe. Now, we have entered the era of the consequences.

Returning to the peripherality thesis, we must realise that mental peripherality is often accompanied by subaltern identity, which constitutes economic inequalities and power relations, transforming them into social or cultural hierarchies. This is true on both sides of power relations.

Thus, the transformation process or processes institutionalised an unequal relation between the region and the EU or the West, which went hand in hand with Orientalisation of the region in the Western mind. Meanwhile, on the other side, Europe was viewed as a "European dream" or "return to Europe" in idealistic colours which completely ignored capitalism as a system. Finally, this "European dream" denied the peripherality and ignored all its symptoms.

As Croatian philosopher Boris Buden argues, the transformation process made the citizens of the region "children of post-communism"; it infantilised them. They had to be "taught" first to become "Europeans" (because European means EURO-pean) with a set of largely technocratic steps, again neoliberally oriented on business, market and eco-

nomic competitiveness (for example, productivity of work). The "candidate" countries had to pass through the accession process, to implement necessary norms and rules. On the other hand, the region's subalterity is not only accompanied by uncritical copying of the Western models and mimicry, but also by silencing. The subaltern is indeed usually voiceless, it cannot represent itself, nor is it represented by the West.

In summary, the transformation negative dynamics (which help to explain recent authoritarian and conservative tendencies, but which do not mean that there were no positive sides) cemented a) peripherality, b) subalterity and c) Oriental perception of Central Eastern Europe and Russia in the West. It did not create conditions to overcome peripherality and therefore could not contribute to the economic and social divergence with the (idealised) West. Yet, this was what was largely expected and even promised as a form of neoliberal transformative ideology. With the global crisis of 2008, the divergent path was made visible and this has led to frustration, or even anti-Western hatred and illiberal tendencies (as a composite part of peripheral anti-Westernism).

HOMO NEOLIBERALIS: MAKING A PERFECT NEOLIBERAL SUBJECT

Neoliberal transformation was of course not just an economic or political set of processes. It had to work with **social consent** and thus with ideology. The emphasis on the market and market relations together with the ideology of individualism help to constitute neoliberal subjectivities. Indeed, we can use a metaphor of "*homo neoliberalis*" as a subjectivity which helps to reproduce (against her/his interest) neoliberal capitalist relations. These furthermore destroy a societal tissue, paralysing social solidarity and collectivist institutions, such as trade unions, political parties and movements, etc. Perhaps, it is the idea of nation, which is the last surviving collectivist identity. Unfortunately, this constitutes a heavy burden from the past and is an easy instrument of the "*divide et impera*" strategy. On an anthropological level, it is a logical answer to uncertainty and anxiety.

It is perhaps beneficial to highlight that neoliberalism preaches deregulation and freedom, but is socially regulative in terms of constructing neoliberal subjectivity. The key characteristic here is the predominance of capitalist relations over all spheres of social and private life. In this sense, it has got totalising tendencies.

Homo neoliberalis is largely depoliticised everywhere in the region, with some nuances in different countries of this region. This depoliticisation turned in some cases to the enforcement of authoritarian tendencies, which usually went hand in hand with oligarchisation of the economy as one of the layers of a peripheral economy. In other cases, it turned towards post-democracy with consumerism as a central practice of politics.

In Russia, the failure of shock therapy turned into **oligarchisation** accompanied by state capture, regional fragmentation and a new emphasis on authoritative centralisation as a reaction. In Ukraine, the oligarchic state capture was even more chaotic and conflictful, weakening Ukraine economically and socially. In Russia's case, shock therapy contributed to the nearly full-scale bankruptcy with social shocks and search for conservative stabilisation. Indeed, on an official level, Putin's regime refuses and opposes any idea of revolution. On the contrary, in Ukraine, it was a "revolution" stolen by oligarchs that was reinterpreted as the formula to solve problems caused by oligarchisation. Oligarchisation is a typical feature of Moldovan politics too. Georgia might be a next example (see Bzina Ivanishvili and his associates).

But there are clearly signs of oligarchisation in the other countries of the region, as well as in the President Donald Trump's USA. In the Czech Republic, Andrej Babiš, a billionaire owning transnational corporation Agrofert and other businesses, is likely to be the new prime minister.[2] His political philosophy is preaching business values with a clear apolitical position. This rhetoric is simply the newest expression of disappointment with democratic politics in the Czech Republic, as well as in the region as such. And of course, it is transnational business that in different ways, directly or indirectly, dominates the politics in the region. But, and this is important, oligarchisation cannot be understood outside post-communist/neoliberal transformation

2 In October 2017, ANO, a political movement of Andrej Babiš won the Czech parliamentary election. ANO and Andrej Babiš as a prime minister formed the minority government. In early January, the Parliament should vote on government confidence.

as an unequal distribution of property and economy in the region. Paradoxically then, these winners of transformation began to rebrand themselves as a new type of hero. They are apolitical businessmen who "can do it", successful models of *homo neoliberalis*, because they are rich, preaching that politics and business are actually one and the same.

While authoritarian tendencies are part of historical legacies in the region, the neoliberal peripheral capitalism contributed to their resurrection or resuscitation in new forms. The same goes for the rise of political conservativism turning against liberalism. Both are fed by systemic uncertainty and injustice, which are embedded in contexts of lack of rule of law or weak rule of law (indeed, money decides). It is so that authoritarian leaders usually offer **security**, seen by *homo neoliberalis* as a question of protection, police and other biopolitical processes that are essentially paternalistic, echoing a long history of serfdom in this region.[3] On the other hand, the question of social justice, and the struggle for it, is largely omitted or marginalised.

When speaking about questions of democracy in this region, I believe it is useful to work with the term **political hybridity**, which merges different shades of liberal democracy (usually in a formal sense) with authoritarian or non-democratic/post-democratic practices. The composite part of political hybridity is the fact that democracy and elections continue to be the only sources of political legitimacy. This means that we can meet different versions of post-democracy, or in the case of countries such as Russia, Belarus, partly Ukraine, *competitive authoritarian* regimes. The elections, not mass scale repression or state violence, are perceived as the key instrument of legitimate rule by the incumbents.

Hybridity also helps to take into account the border position of Central and Eastern Europe as a crossroads of very different **civilizational influences**: Western and Eurasian with Islamic/Ottoman. Historically, these influences often went hand in hand with already mentioned imperial dominance. This situation leads to ambivalence in relation to the Atlantic West and the East (or Russia), which clashes with "West or East" geopolitical exclusivism. This exclusivism cannot bridge civilizational hybridity, especially in so-called new Eastern Europe, and causes a tragic conflict of geopolitical/civilizational identity. Such examples are clear in Ukraine or Moldova, both internally torn into pieces as a corollary of geopolitical struggles and ambivalent identities.

Indeed, **cultural wars** are a composite part of neoliberal hegemony in general. Their main political effect is disorientation and divide and rule practices. Everywhere in the region, neoliberal ideology went hand in hand with anti-communist narratives. But this ideological corpus was, in its factual consequences, nothing less than anti-Leftism. The Left was presented as an enemy of (neo)liberal democracy, responsible for the past (represented largely negatively) in public discourse. Virtually, such a narrative helped to paralyse the Left, as well as contributing to the *Blairisation* of social democracies. This was because these parties realised neoliberal policies while in government, partly in an effort to "neutralise" their marginalisation and demonisation. This was true also in a country with a strong social democratic tradition such as the Czech social democracy. Social Democrats contributed to the creation of recent economic and unsustainable models based on assembly lines and cheap labour.

Neoliberal hegemony in the region was not just shock therapy with disorientation effects and anti-Leftist slogans, but it has also sown **generational conflict** into society.[4] Neoliberal discourses turned against the generation spending their productive years in socialism, blaming it essentially for its "crimes" and asking it to evacuate public space as irrelevant. But "as irrelevant" pronounced their lives as well. This tendency was particularly strong in Central Europe and it helped to deepen societal fragmentation, building deep barriers within society between different generations, as both the consequence of neoliberal violence and systemic discontinuity.

3 And serfdom has been a composite part of the peripheral division of labour in the global world-system since the 16th century onwards.

4 I thank Jiří Silný who turned my attention to this example of neoliberal hegemony.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Such an analysis is usually strong in making good observations, but less effective when it comes to viable solutions or developing new visions of change for the future. Especially in the midst of deep social and political crisis, it seems difficult to pronounce a road map of change considering that facts are showing totalising effects of neoliberal hegemony in the region, blended with some heavy burdens from the past.

What seems clear is that authentic and long-standing change must come predominantly from within the region. Thus, it can hardly be imported as a missionary guide from the West. But this does not mean a belief in "original" formulas – I am convinced that Europe as such, beyond differences, faces very similar challenges in different parts of the system. That is true despite differences between the core and the periphery (which is two-dimensional in Europe: the East and the South are two peripheries divided by a wall of ignorance, low knowledge and misunderstanding). Therefore, a respectful dialogue and equal exchange of information/opinions between the Left from CEE and from Western and Southern Europe is critical. This also means, in my opinion, working on the dissemination of knowledge about the region in the West and within the European Left.

It is also clear that the Central and East European societies are in desperate need of breaking the chains of current social fragmentation and depoliticisation. This is not an easy aim, particularly when neoliberal hegemony is permeating every aspect of our lives. Nationalism remains the strongest collective force and the Left struggles to define an adequate antipode. What is clear however is that the current conservative reaction is predestined to fail because it is not offering any solutions. It is not anti-neoliberal but often mixes neoliberalism with populist conservatism to maintain its predominance by means of mimicry. Facing conservative moods, it seems vital to restore the idea of change as a positive phenomenon, as a source of hope, and not as a source of fear and uncertainty.

Huge investments are needed in society in this region, partly because of negative legacies of socialism and neoliberalism. In some countries, we meet a tragic level of societal devastation – either social or economic, or both. Not to mention ecological and other disasters. This brings in, on a theoretical and general level, the question of redistribution of wealth beyond neoliberal economies and beyond a self-destructive prevalence of the economy over politics and society, towards the idea of dignity and quality of life.

To fight against neoliberal hegemony also means a struggle for hegemony everywhere in the region. This involves different battles: starting with the media and ending with culture, including the renewal of positive Leftist traditions, collective memories and historical politics. The Left must be newly rebuilt and re-socialised after 25 years of factual political exile on the island of ideological isolation. Finally, what is desperately needed is to make clear that there IS indeed an alternative to neoliberal capitalism; there is indeed a society (*not individuals and their families*), and that solidarity is not a word from the past but a fundamental condition to resist.