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Liminality, precarity, and ambiguous belonging. How social science researchers from Central and Eastern Europe experience and navigate European research spaces

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Abstract

A growing body of literature has pointed out the underrepresentation of Central and Eastern European (CEE) voices and perspectives in European research. While the issue has been documented in a number of fields and theorized from different angles, practice-oriented STS investigations of the issue are scarce. This thesis addresses this gap by examining how CEE researchers make sense of, navigate and negotiate the research spaces they move through, and how they position themselves – and their region – within the larger European research landscape.

Drawing on interviews and mapping exercises with social science researchers from Czechia, Croatia, Hungary, and Russia, I follow researchers' trajectories and explore the construction of their individual research landscapes, uncovering different layers, orientation points, and researchers' negotiation strategies. The analysis is guided by the intersection of postcolonial and postsocialist frameworks together with the concept of epistemic living spaces, connecting global power structures and hierarchies in knowledge production with researchers' individual perceptions and experiences. In this way, I examine the different modes of ordering, epistemic hierarchies and symbolic regimes that shape researchers' sensemaking and mobility, shedding light on precarity, liminality, and othering emerging in European research spaces.

What arises from the findings are not only the experiences of structural lack of resources in Central and Eastern European research spaces, but also the manifestations of "the condition of Eastness", articulated in Martin Müller's (2020) concept of Global East as being caught in between privilege and precarity. CEE research spaces thus emerge in an ambiguous position – on the one hand, materially constrained by different constellations of missing resources, but, on the other, facing the normative expectations of lagging behind and having to catch up. Researchers moving across countries and regions thus have to negotiate these conditions, often translating into uncertain and shifting sense of belonging. Liminality, encapsulated in the concept of the Global East, therefore signifies not only a description of a transitional state and a place on the margins, but also an ambiguous identification and uncertain belonging. This thesis thus elucidates the meanings of 'East' and 'West', that are re-enacted in European research spaces, and contributes to broader debates on global asymmetries in knowledge production. Ultimately, by tracing the (semi)peripheries of European research, it problematizes Europe and 'the West' as unequivocal centres of epistemic privilege and sheds light on its inner differences and asymmetries.

Deutscher Abstract

In einer wachsenden Zahl von Veröffentlichungen wurde auf die Unterrepräsentation mittel- und osteuropäischer (CEE) Stimmen und Perspektiven in der europäischen Forschung hingewiesen. Während dieses Problem in einer Reihe von Fachgebieten dokumentiert und aus verschiedenen Blickwinkeln theoretisch beleuchtet wurde, gibt es nur wenige praxisorientierte STS-Forschung zu diesem Thema. Diese Arbeit versucht diese Lücke zu schließen indem sie untersucht, wie CEE-Forschende die Forschungsräume, in denen sie sich bewegen, verstehen, sich darin zurechtfinden und wie sie sich selbst – und ihre Region – innerhalb der größeren europäischen Forschungslandschaft positionieren.

Auf der Grundlage von Interviews und Kartierungsübungen mit Sozialwissenschaftler*innen aus Tschechien, Kroatien, Ungarn und Russland verfolge ich die Werdegänge der Forscher*innen und zeichne die Konstruktion ihrer individuellen Forschungslandschaften nach, wobei ich verschiedene Ebenen, Orientierungspunkte und Verhandlungsstrategien der Forscher*innen aufdecke. Die Analyse orientiert sich an der Schnittstelle postkolonialer und postsozialistischer Rahmenkonzepte sowie am Konzept epistemischer Lebensräume (Felt & Fochler, 2012) das globale Machtstrukturen und Hierarchien in der Wissensproduktion mit den individuellen Wahrnehmungen und Erfahrungen der Forscher*innen verknüpft. Auf diese Weise verknüpfe ich die verschiedenen Ordnungsformen, epistemischen Hierarchienund symbolischen Regime, die die Sinnbildung und Mobilität von Forschenden prägen, und beleuchte dabei Prekarität, Liminalität und Othering, die in europäischenForschungsräumen entstehen.

Die Ergebnisse illustrieren nicht nur Erfahrungen mit einem strukturellen Mangel an Ressourcen in mittel- und osteuropäischen Forschungsräumen, sondern auch die Manifestationen der „the condition of Eastness“, (z. dt. Zustand des Östlichseins”) der in Martin Müllers (2020) Konzept des „Global East“ als ein Dasein zwischen Privilegien und Prekarität beschrieben wird.

Forschungsräume in Mittel- und Osteuropa befinden sich in einer ambivalenten Position – materiell eingeschränkt durch die Kombination aus fehlenden Ressourcen und institutioneller Unterstützung, kulturell jedoch geprägt von der Erwartung, hinterherzuhinken und Aufholbedarf zu haben. Forscher*innen, die zwischen Ländern und Regionen wechseln, müssen sich mit diesen unterschiedlichen Bedingungen auseinandersetzen, was zu einem unsicheren und sichwandelnden Zugehörigkeitsgefühl führen kann. Liminalität, wie sie im Konzept des Global East verstanden wird, bedeutet daher nicht nur die Beschreibung eines Übergangszustands und eines Ortes am Rande, sondern auch eine ambivalente Identifikation und eine unsichere Zugehörigkeit. Diese Arbeit beleuchtet somit die Bedeutungen von „Ost“

und „West“, die in europäischen Forschungsräumen neu inszeniert werden, und leistet einen Beitrag zu breiteren Debatten über globale Asymmetrien in der Wissensproduktion. Indem sie die (Semi-)Peripherien der europäischen Forschung nachzeichnet, problematisiert sie letztlich Europa und „den Westen“ als unmissverständliche Zentren epistemischer Privilegien und erläutert deren innere Unterschiede und Asymmetrien.

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1 Introduction

> "To gain visibility and recognition one needs to adopt the academic grammar of the Western world." (Koobak et al., 2021, p. 7)

It is often the case that academic interests do not only stem from an intellectual fascination but strongly resonate with one's lived experience as well. That applies to this thesis too. Coming from the Czech Republic to Austria, my connection to this topic may be apparent at first glance. And although my experience of studying abroad has certainly influenced this thesis, my relation to this topic goes much deeper.

Since high school, or maybe even sooner, I remember feeling like my education was fine, but if I went to "the West", it would be better. I remember always hearing comparisons of how things are done "in the West" and how we, in the Czech Republic, need to "catch up". This could have related to specific policies, the ways how institutions were run or how students were taught at schools and universities. It was also this deeply rooted feeling – that by going "West" or "international" (which usually meant the same thing), I would gain something more – that motivated me to seek education abroad, initially through short student exchanges and then later by going for a full study programme in Vienna. Having experienced a small part of the British educational system on high school and then staying in France for one semester have only strengthened this feeling in some sense. Being in these "international" environments was exciting to me, I felt like I was touching and becoming part of – even for a brief moment – the global (sic) world. Although I knew that not everything was necessarily better abroad and I would not want to change many things at home, the feeling of needing to catch up was still strongly present.

Encountering the Czech university system somewhat contributed to this impression, too. I started noticing how little the PhD students were paid at the time (which has luckily changed since then) and how tutors and researchers often juggled several commitments at once in order to keep a decent income. Seeing the sometimes very old-fashioned teaching methods and rigid structures, my feeling that things "in the West" were better (and more progressive) only grew. Even as I was getting older and grew out of this blind admiration, the deep-rooted feeling was still there.

*When I then started studying in Vienna, I was excited to be in such an international environment, full of students and teachers from all around the world, being able to hear very different perspectives and experiences than what I could in Prague. I felt like I was part of *that* international community, however vague and hazy that imagination was. I*

was also struck with how similar, yet different the university structure turned out to be. Although the system worked the same as in Czechia, I was not used to seeing students employed by their departments on a decent wage or offered to write their theses as part of big research projects and actually be paid for it. I was amazed to see PhDs as well as researchers not having to split their attention among two or three different jobs at once and enjoy decent working conditions instead (at least from my perspective). Although large part of this is due to the Austria's generous labour laws (which are by far not the norm in many other European countries) and the Austrian higher education system suffers from other serious problems, I still felt like I got a peek behind the door of how the successful, international, Western science world looks like.

While I was enjoying my presence in this environment, soon I started noticing that the experiences of Central and Eastern Europe were often missing in the discussions and literature I was reading. Most of the time, the topics we discussed in seminars were about the UK and the US, some western European countries like Austria or France, and, at times, Japan or Latin America. Although articles would talk about "Europe" at large, they often only meant its western part, as if the west spoke for the whole continent. Seeing these disparities, I remembered reading articles about Central and Eastern European voices falling through the cracks of European research structures and started connecting them to the debates about epistemic privileges, North and South inequalities, and postcolonial legacies. The picture that started appearing in front of me was a complicated mixture of privilege and precarity, contested centres and (semi)peripheries, and difficult discussions on colonialism, imperialism, and historical injustices. As I was having conversations about Global North and South, European privileges and "the West", I was yet again unable to locate the place that I was coming from in these big schemes. Do researchers in Czechia, Slovakia or Ukraine really have the same benefits as those from France or the UK? Am I missing something here?

As I started diving further into these debates, I slowly came into the trouble of not knowing how to position myself or the CEE as a whole on the map. I was asking myself, was the situation really that unequal as it seemed to me? Do these dividing lines really exist, or are they a product of some black-and-white preconceptions? Can I actually say anything confidently about these asymmetries? And that is where this thesis grew from. In the following pages, as I am trying to understand, explore, and reconstruct the spaces and landscapes of Central and Eastern European researchers I spoke with, I am simultaneously trying to wrap my head around all these questions and figure out for myself where exactly I am and where I want to be.

The European "East" and "West" have never quite disappeared. In the context of current poly-crises and wicked problems, the topic might seem worn and outdated, belonging rather to a historical analysis of the 20th century. Besides the repercussions of the Cold War in the years following its end, however, the topic has been reappearing in different contexts, whether through the EU enlargement processes, migration, economic flows, or different political alliances in recent years. And while other, more acute dividing lines have since taken centre stage, the East-West divide remains highly relevant in many fields and contexts.

In research, several articles have pointed out the disbalance between Western and Eastern European authors in journals, textbooks, boards, associations and committees (e.g. Mälksoo, 2021; Wöhrer, 2016; Alejandro, 2021). The divide is also reflected in the European Union's research and innovation policy, where the issue repeatedly arises in connection with unequal allocation of grants or participation in innovation programs (*Data Corner*, n.d.). As the Science|Business network reported, "none of the top regions [of Horizon Europe] are located in member states that joined the EU after 2004. The younger member states, which together represent almost a quarter of the EU's population, capture less than 9% of Horizon Europe funding" (*Viewpoint*, n.d.). European Commission therefore set up a separate Widening program in the Horizon Europe framework which aims to assist countries that "lag behind" in research and innovation. It is no surprise, then, that the list consists almost exclusively of countries of the former Eastern Bloc (European Commission, 2021).

However, these statistical reports provide only a limited insight into the lived reality of European research. They do not explain how the differences in grant allocation arise or what causes such "lagging behind". Economic disparities, which are evident not only in research but also in other economic sectors (Bruszt & Vukov, 2024), is one thing; the content and workings of research itself is another.

How is research in Europe experienced by people moving inside it then? The debates on inequalities and in global knowledge production often portray Europe and "the West" as centres of epistemic privilege, enjoying the benefits of an academic core (see, e.g., Quijano, 2007). Europe is thus often portrayed as a homogeneous whole, devoid of internal differences and inequalities. Although the privileged, hegemonic position of Europe and "the West" is indisputable, marginalised and racialised spaces within Europe are often left out as a result. In practice, that can translate into invisibility of their experience, lack of recognition of theoretical work as well as exclusion from important European decision-making places. While a number of authors has described their experiences with prejudice, ostracization, and discrimination in academic spaces in Europe, also due to their Central and Eastern European origin (Burlyuk & Rahbari, 2023; Silova et al., 2017), a more comprehensive, practice-oriented analysis of the issue seems to be missing.

When we tie these various threads together, the question arises: how are European research spaces perceived by people on the ground? What kind of (semi)peripheries and borderlands emerge there? And how are the categories of “West” and “East” mobilised and what meanings are attached to them? While answering these questions comprehensively goes beyond the scope of this thesis, they represent the backdrop of this inquiry.

My goal in this thesis is thus to explore this issue through the lens of Central and Eastern European researchers who navigate and move through research spaces in Europe. In order to capture these large mental categories and power dynamics, I decided to delve into their mental maps and trace the multitude of layers, boundaries and pathways that guide their course of action. Through this exploration, I want to investigate how CEE researchers make sense of the academic landscapes they are moving in: what are the key factors that influence their sense-making and movement? And what dividing lines, power hierarchies, and invisible voices emerge there? In following these lines of inquiry, I hope to outline the sketches of the European research landscapes that my interviewees shared with me and point to larger dynamics that are at play there. Ultimately, by highlighting the experiences of researchers from Central and Eastern Europe, I want to problematize the notion of Europe and “the West” as unequivocal centres of epistemic privilege and shed light on its inner differences and (semi)peripheries.

1.1 Structure of the thesis

In what follows, I will present the scholarly debates, authors and pieces of literature that have shaped how I have come to think about the topic at hand. This begins with the classical STS studies on the contexts of knowledge production and the move away from the “objective” knowledge producer towards situated knowledges and perspectives. These basic tenets of STS research, namely seeing how materiality, social interactions, and symbolic regimes influence knowledge production, constitute the starting point of my research. From there, I will move to postcolonial studies, particularly focusing on the postcolonial investigations of power relations in knowledge production. As I will explain further in the theory section, understanding the impact that colonialism continues to have on our being and thinking is, in my view, crucial for grasping the workings of contemporary academia, including research in Europe. Having outlined these two main theoretical strands, I will then zoom in on the debates on contemporary academic settings and the inequalities as well as postcolonial residues therein.

After discussing the epistemic centres and peripheries, I will move to the main object of this inquiry, which is Central and Eastern Europe. First, I will reconstruct the emergence of “Eastern Europe” as a notion dividing Europe into halves and probe the meanings that are associated with it. Following on that, I will summarize current scholarly debates about the Central and

Eastern Europe today and outline the manifestations of the East-West divide in there, including the differences in research. The last part of the literature review then maps STS scholarship on research practices and the workings of academic spaces.

Following the literature review, I will articulate my research questions and present my theoretical framework, which consists of three parts: first, the literature on postcolonial and post-socialist intersections, which provides the basic framework of my interpretation and contextualization of the topic. Second, it is the conceptualization of spaces and places, constituting a key component of my analysis. And finally, I will introduce the concept of epistemic living spaces, which serves as a key analytical tool for me, enabling me to decipher researchers' perceptions and orientation within their research spaces and Europe at large. At the end of the theoretical chapter, I will also present a glossary of key terms used in this thesis to clarify them. I will explain what I mean by "research spaces", how I understand "research landscapes", and how I situate them within a broader European context. The last part of the conceptual and analytical toolbox is the methodology where I will explain the methods I used, including the mapping exercises, as well as my positionality towards the topic and the ethical considerations.

In the second half of the thesis, I will delve into the material and present my research findings. The empirical chapter is structured as three different levels of exploring researchers' landscapes: first, orientation and sensemaking, where I will trace the foundational layers of researchers' sensemaking and the basic orientation points that guided their movement. The second level of this exploration consists of researchers' agency and navigation – how they recounted their movement through the different research spaces and what spaces they build for themselves. Finally, the third level focuses on questions of identity: how researchers negotiated their identity in the different environments, what they saw as their home, and what that says about the position of Central and Eastern Europe as a whole. The chapter will then conclude with their desires and utopias. In the end of the thesis, I will discuss the findings and contextualise them in connection to the discussed literature and then offer a brief conclusion.

As I am exploring and reconstructing the research landscapes of my interviewees, the thesis itself becomes a miniature landscape of sorts. Departing from a place of curiosity and uncertainty, I am slowly exploring the arguments and debates, laying the foundations for the actual investigation, and establishing my orientation points through the theoretical frameworks and methodological tools. The individual concepts, questions, theories, and methods thus become my building blocks and structures which I can dive into the empirical findings with and build analytical insights on. As I am reconstructing the landscapes of my interviewees, I am mapping and building a landscape of my own. Reaching the end of this exploration thus provides me a clearer understanding of my own position and a map of my own.

2 State of the art

2.1 Introduction: From ‘view from nowhere’ to ‘view from somewhere’

What knowledge gets to be created, recognized, and valued? And what knowledge remains in the shadows? A number of scholars has by now shown that what we know and how we know it is fundamentally dependent on both the social and material context in which knowledge is produced (e.g. Fleck, 1979; Kuhn, 1962; Callon, 1986; Shapin, 1988; Schiebinger, 2004; Schiebinger & Swan, 2007). Unlike proponents of the positivist view that looks at knowledge through the prism of objectivity, rationality, and object-subject divide, these authors highlighted the socially constructed nature of knowledge – that is, its reliance on collectively established norms that define what counts as credible investigation, description, and transmission of information. Recognizing this contingency does not imply relativising all knowledge or erasing the border between truth and lie altogether; rather, it opens the door for a deeper understanding of the intricate processes of knowledge production and, most importantly, a scrutiny of the power relations and hierarchies embedded in them.

A crucial step in deciphering and localizing scientific knowledge was taken by the early science studies when Bruno Latour (1987), Steve Woolgar (1986), Harry Collins (1975, 1992), Karin Knorr-Cetina (1981, 1999) and others started exploring the physical core of traditional scientific knowledge-making production – the laboratory. These first lab studies, which looked underneath the hands and apparatuses of scientists to trace how facts are constructed and discoveries made, started disclosing the black boxes of science, showing that scientific knowledge, despite its claim of universality, was in fact tied to a particular place and context of its creation.

Although the level of dependency varied across disciplines and topics, what these studies showed was that the location, local practices, individual decisions as well as material settings and wider societal context can profoundly impact the final result of scientific endeavour. Not only can they influence when and how are hypotheses stabilised into facts, as in the case of novel experiments or reproductions of nature, but also how these findings and observations then travel and are recognized elsewhere (e.g. Latour, 1987; Collins, 1992; Latour, 1993; Schiebinger & Swan, 2007).

While these early anthropological observations of scientific practice drew attention to understanding science as culture, authors like David Livingstone (2003), Thomas Gieryn (2000, 2002) or Robert Kohler (2002) focused on the role of place and investigated the relationship between the location of research and its form and content. By comparing the

various locations of where science had been practiced – whether in a lab, a farm, a museum, or “out there” in nature – they highlighted the different rationales, methods, theories, and practices that each of the places requires. These particularities together with their different sets of limitations and possibilities of abstraction then provided further evidence for understanding knowledge as embedded in a particular social and spatial setting. Nonetheless, the relationship between the knowledge and its place of origin is not simply one-directional. As Gieryn (2002) pointed out, once scientific claims are accepted as true and seen as universal (and therefore place-less), their credibility seemingly diminishes if their localized nature is brought to the forefront. Yet, it is precisely this spatial and contextual situatedness that enables these claims to become facts in the first place. Scientific knowledge claims are therefore expected to get rid of their local underpinnings while being dependent on them at the same time. Gieryn (2002) called these places “truth-spots”, highlighting the validating function they perform. This tension between locality and universality constitutes a key concern for these debates and also lies at the core of the topic of this thesis.

The conclusion coming from these studies is clear: research is not placeless. Any investigation into the nuances of knowledge production – whether scientific or otherwise – then needs to take its location into account. As Livingstone (2003) summarised, “[w]hat has been promoted as scientific objectivity, as the ‘view from nowhere’, turns out to have always been a ‘view from somewhere’. The recognition that rationality is not disembodied but positioned has significant implications for understanding science and scientists” (184).

If knowledge depends on the place of its production, where does the researcher stand in all of this? Following up on lab studies and the problematisation of “objective” science, feminist scholars like Sandra Harding (1986), Dorothy E. Smith (1987, 1990) or Donna Haraway (1988) went further in probing the power lines of scientific practice, particularly focusing on the notion of unbiased, detached researcher. Drawing on feminist insights and the long-standing exclusion of women, people of colour, and other groups deemed “other” or “not rational”, they highlighted the deep limitations of the proclaimed objective “view from nowhere”. In contrast, they pointed out that our view of the world is fundamentally influenced by our position; where we stand and from what point we look at the world determines what we can see and how we understand it. In other words, as Sandra Harding (1986) argued, researchers can never completely erase their bias since their identities, bodies and social positions are always inherently part of their very presence in research. As a response, feminist scholars offered different conceptions of objectivity, ones that account for the inherently embodied, situated and socially interrelated position of any researcher.

Considering that the “unbiased, detached” researcher had mostly been white and male, Sandra Harding (1991) together with Dorothy Smith (1987) and others argued for grounding research in particular women’s experiences which, they contended, would provide for a more solid and objective ground for research – thereby developing the concepts of ‘strong objectivity’ (Harding, 1991) and ‘feminist standpoint theory’ (Smith, 1987; Harding, 2004). Donna Haraway (1988) made a crucial contribution to this debate by introducing the concept of ‘situated knowledges’ which similarly argues that only a partial perspective can grant objectivity. In contrast to the feminist standpoint theory, however, her argument is not based only on women’s experiences, but in any knowledge made in marked bodies (i.e. those that have not been taken-for-granted as neutral, such as people of colour, female or disabled) that differ from predominantly male and white thinkers. Nevertheless, the crucial argument of situated knowledges does not lie in the specific identity of the researcher, but in the acknowledgement of one’s very situatedness and of the affordances and limitations of one’s view. Only such an anchor, Haraway argues, can provide real responsibility for the claims one makes. In this way, she connects knowledge to power and responsibility and calls for doing away with the object-subject divide, foregrounding the interconnected relations between people and their environments instead. This approach of seeing bodies and objects as agents has later prompted other feminist thinkers to develop the political and ethical dimensions further, such as in ‘thinking with care’ (de la Bellacasa, 2012). As Haraway says:

> “The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies governing the relations of what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility. Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see” (Haraway, 1988, p. 583).

From early sociological and anthropological studies of science to STS and feminist scholarship, it has been shown time and time again that knowledge is not made in a vacuum. It is shaped by the conditions, practices, and positions from which it arises. When, how, by whom and in what context knowledge is created determines not only its form and credibility, but also its circulation and recognition. While lab studies highlighted science as a cultural practice, feminist scholars have brought attention to the importance of recognizing one's situatedness and positionality in a wider social context. As these critical approaches oscillated between radically constructivist conceptions and feminist empiricism, Haraway (1988) offered a bridge between the two by outlining feminist objectivity as situated knowledge, emphasizing responsibility, embodiment, and partial perspective of all claims. Taken together, these ideas form the basis for the

subsequent discussions: once the spatial and social situatedness of knowledge production is recognized, its influences and founding blocks can be investigated and described much more accurately. In what follows, I will first turn to another strand of scholarship that interrogates the geopolitics of knowledge, that is postcolonial studies. From there, I will shortly outline how the East-West distinction in Europe has come about and how it manifests today. Having set the basic orientation points and spatial marks, I will zoom in on life in research and move the discussion inside academia, outlining how current academic production as well as academic mobility have been studied and conceptualized in STS and beyond. The literature review will then conclude with a short segment on the studies of research practices, creating a bridge to the conceptual delimitation.

2.2 Postcolonial scholarship and coloniality of knowledge

Issues of the invisibility, distortion or complete erasure of ways of being and knowing belong to central questions of postcolonial studies. Authors from this vast and comprehensive strand of scholarship have pointed out how the history of colonisation, mostly European colonisation, shaped and continues to shape the current order of the world – whether in economic, political, or cultural terms (e.g. Nkrumah, 1965; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Chakrabarty, 2000; Quijano, 2000; Lugones, 2010). The scope and depth of postcolonial studies is so broad that I do not aspire to cover it in its entirety here – what I want to focus on, however, is its conceptualisation of politics of knowledge (i.e. how knowledge is created and disseminated and who holds the power in these processes). As I will show later, postcolonial perspectives on knowledge production are useful not only to traditional areas of (post)colonial relations, but to the internal zones and peripheries of Europe, too.

Colonialism has had an all-encompassing impact on political and societal orders as well as on both the mind and bodies of colonized people, as Frantz Fanon (1952) famously detailed. To capture this influence, postcolonial authors developed three main concepts that make up global coloniality: ‘coloniality of power’, ‘coloniality of being’, and ‘coloniality of knowledge’ (e.g. Benyera, 2020, p. 53). While all three concepts are somewhat interrelated, each describing some aspects of the violent subjugation of people and their cultures, it is the latter that is most relevant here.

The term ‘coloniality of knowledge’ is traditionally ascribed to Aníbal Quijano (2000, 2007) who devised it as an essential part of ‘coloniality of power’. While ‘coloniality of power’ describes the hierarchisation of people under racial categories and the resulting division of ruling power, (Quijano, 2000), ‘coloniality of knowledge’ aims to capture the analogous hierarchisation of knowledge and dominance of Eurocentric intellectual traditions (Quijano, 2007). According to

Quijano (2007), the subjugation of non-Western (in this case non-European) knowledges included not only the suppression of their ways of knowing and understanding, but also of their ideas, symbols, expressions and imagination. Indigenous people were instead forced to adopt colonial manners and symbols as well as European modes of knowledge production. Quijano asserts that this constituted a crucial part of colonial power over subjugated populations, giving rise to the 'cultural coloniality' that persists until today.

> „Then European culture was made seductive: it gave access to power. After all, beyond repression, the main instrument of all power is its seduction. Cultural Europeanisation was transformed into an aspiration. It was a way of participating and later to reach the same material benefits and the same power as the Europeans: viz, to conquer nature – in short for 'development'. European culture became a universal cultural model" (Quijano, 2007, p. 169).

The critique of Eurocentric universalism and its role in constituting global coloniality is shared by scholars from across postcolonial studies (e.g. Chakrabarty, 2000; Connell, 2006; Lugones, 2010; Mignolo, 2012). In their view, it was the ideals that took hold during the European Enlightenment – mainly rationalism, objectivism, and universalism – that were the main propellers of colonial erasure of non-Western knowledges. As these notions set the terms for what was accepted as "civilized", "rational" and "universal", they relegated other ways of being and knowing to the "barbaric", "irrational", and "local" – thus making them unworthy and allowing their colonisation and subjugation (Quijano, 2007; Mignolo, 2012). Moreover, as María Lugones (2010) notes, this ordering and subjugation has gone deep into intimate spheres. According to Lugones, gender itself is a colonial imposition, creating tension between hypersexuality and sexual passivity and adding another layer to the process of dehumanisation. Due to this added binary, colonized "[m]ales became not-human-as-men, and colonized females became not-human-as-women" (Lugones, 2010, p. 744). This 'coloniality of gender', Lugones argues, further divided and hierarchised colonized populations.

Such an ordering, erasure, and imposition of particular knowledges and ways of being has therefore constituted an essential part of European colonialism, ultimately contributing to the political and economic successes of the West (Mignolo, 2012). Since Quijano, Mignolo, Lugones and others trace the roots of these inequalities back to the inception of nation-states, capitalism, and European colonial expansion in the 16th century, they see coloniality fundamentally coupled with modernity – often described as "two faces of the same coin" (Mignolo, 2012, p. xvi). It is for this reason that the two are often referred to as a single entity, 'modernity/coloniality' (Quijano, 2007; Mignolo, 2012; Lugones, 2010).

The crucial part of the argument, however, is that this hierarchisation has never ceased to exist; it continues to shape not only the political or economic affairs, but the recognition and distribution of knowledge, too. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak made a substantial contribution to the debate on the violent epistemic practices by bringing attention to the denial of subjectivity at the intersection of class, race, and gender. In her seminal work ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988), Spivak detailed how European thinkers rejected the idea of representation and thus denied "the Other of Europe" (p. 75) a voice and ability to speak for themselves. In other words, those who are deemed objects (rather than producers) of knowledge are denied subjectivity and voice in the debate. Highlighting the situation of “Third World” women, Spivak’s work emphasized the multilayered racialised and gendered position of those who are deemed “Other” in (post)colonial world.

What emerges from these works, among other things, is another layer of the tense connection between the global and the local. In the same manner that scientific knowledge – seen through the prism of objectivity and rationality – gains credibility only if it becomes de-territorialized (Gieryn, 2002), the histories, traditions, and knowledges that are deemed “local” in this context remain unacknowledged precisely because of their local embeddedness. As Walter Mignolo points out in his book “Local Histories/Global Designs” (2012), Western civilisation is then the only one retaining claims of universality, hiding its own local origin and making its local history a universal one.

> “Not only were the histories of other civilizations, coexisting with the Western one, relegated to the past of world history and to their localities, but by being placed in the past and being local they were also deprived of their own claim to universality” (Mignolo, 2012, p. ix).

But what is the West in all these debates? While there are plenty of references to the West across the mentioned literature, clear definitions of its borders are scarce. Mignolo eventually addresses it by acknowledging that his critique and discomfort does not lie with Western history itself, “but rather with the imperial belief that the rest of the world shall submit to its cosmology, and […] that the unfolding of world history has been of one temporality and would, of necessity, lead to a present that corresponds to the Western civilization” (Mignolo, 2012, p. x). As the quote shows, postcolonial critique of the West outlined here isn’t about identifying its boundaries as it is about resisting the residual colonial power relations and hierarchies.

It is then also from this place of resistance that postcolonial authors call for decoloniality (Quijano, 2007; Lugones, 2010; Connell, 2014; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) and provincializing Europe and the West (Chakrabarty, 2000). These efforts aim not only at countering Western

universalism, but also at making Western intellectual traditions and histories local again, downgrading them from pedestals of civilisational role-model to one among many traditions and histories (Mignolo, 2012). Decoloniality, while diverse in its many forms, is therefore generally intended to de-link local histories with their ways of knowing and being from colonial impositions and legacies. In the context of knowledge production, this entails centring of local, non-Western epistemologies and knowledges and rejecting rationalism, universalism and object-subject divide as the only credible ways of producing knowledge (e.g. Escobar, 2007; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). In some cases, it means the restoration of cosmologies, traditions, practices, and identities that belong to the particular localities and social worlds (e.g. De la Cadena, 2015; Lugones, 2010). In others, it is about reworking or uprooting the educational systems that perpetuate coloniality of knowledge in canons and curricula as well as in pedagogical praxis (e.g. Bhambra et al., 2018; I. Fúnez-Flores et al., 2022). At the same time, all of these layers are interwoven with resistance to extractivism – the exploitation of local histories, concepts, insights, and goals with no regard for the context of where they come from or what they mean in and for their communities (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Two Convivial Thinkers, 2024; Kondo & Swanson, 2020).

As these scholars stress, engagement with decoloniality does not necessarily result in uprooting colonial structures, especially if these efforts are embedded in colonial or imperial structures, such as academic spaces themselves (Two Convivial Thinkers, 2024). As a result, many warn against a blind adoption of the term, emptying it of any real meaning and making decoloniality a simple “metaphor” (Tuck & Yang, 2012). As this list hopefully suggests, decoloniality spans a wide spectrum of practices, approaches and theories that strive to counter the vast scope of influence that European coloniality has had on the world. It is thus by no means a unified, homogenous project and this short outline is only a very modest introduction to its possibilities.

If the debates on coloniality and decolonial futures have something in common, it is the search for the place of resistance in the ruptures between the *global* and the *local*. To use Mignolo’s (2012) vocabulary again, it is the meeting place of global designs (i.e. colonial, universalist, capitalist projects) and local histories where resistance to coloniality comes from. Building on Gloria Anzaldúa’s seminal book “Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza” (1987), Walter Mignolo, later also with Madina Tlostanova, (2012; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006) put forward the notion of “border thinking” to call for thinking from “dwelling in the borders” of these colonial encounters instead of looking at them afar. In his view, it is in this point of “colonial difference” where Western colonial universalistic epistemologies are confronted with local, subaltern knowledges and which, according to Mignolo, provides most fruitful perspectives and possibilities of resistance to coloniality. This idea has been further advanced by María Lugones

(2010) who, building on Anzaldúa, Mignolo as well as Quijano, located the point of resistance in the 'fractured locus' and argued for understanding the subjectivity of those who find themselves there. The importance of this literature and schools of thought for the topic at hand is not only in recognizing the global hierarchies of knowledges and epistemologies, but also in sharpening the sensibilities of power relations embedded in knowledge production. Although the European research context might seem far from the deeply violent histories that these postcolonial authors come from, it is part of the same modern/colonial system that propelled them and that continues to carry these legacies.

2.2.1 Global inequalities in contemporary academia

Having outlined the foundations of postcolonial critique of knowledge production, let's now move inside academic spaces and trace the epistemic hegemonies and inequalities there. An increasing number of articles has by now pointed out inequalities in how academic knowledge is produced and distributed around the world. One of the main topics in this realm of scholarship is the proportion of knowledge exchange between Global North and Global South, where Global South serves as a site for gathering data and cases for theories and concepts developed in the Global North. Murat Ergin and Aybike Alkan (2019), for instance, compared the geographic markers in sociological journals in Japan, Turkey and the United States, and found that scholarship from the US and Japan "overwhelmingly [made] universalist assumptions toward their knowledge claims" (p. 265) whereas authors locating themselves in Global South emphasised their localised positionality. Coming back to the dynamics of global and local described above, this tension between universalism and localness shows the unequal positions researchers at the two different places occupy. Similar findings were made by Guilherme Cavalcante Silva (2019) or Sarah Anne Ganter and Félix Ortéga (2019) in Big Data research and communication studies respectively. Focusing on the visibility of Latin America, they showed that the majority of the respective scholarships tended to write "about" the Global South (in this case Latin America) rather than "from" the South, thereby reinforcing extractivist practices in academia. In health studies, it has been equally pointed out that the vast majority of research was being done in the Global North using "Northern" perspectives while research in Global South was hampered by economic as well as linguistic obstacles. That included open access publishing as the fees for open access were often unattainable by researchers from low-income countries. As a result, health researchers in the South were dependent on data from the North while their own research rarely got to Northern audiences (Adcock & Fottrell, 2008). Such a power disbalance was also described in transdisciplinary research where authors pointed out the impact of diverging interests and existing power structures on transdisciplinary collaborations (Schmidt & Pröpper, 2017). One of the influential

factors there was also the source of funding which, as the authors found, determined the decision-making positions in the team and further strengthened existing hierarchies:

> "The funder's influence over the [transdisciplinary] process from its conception onwards greatly determines the discourse on structural challenges throughout. Making African partners only sub-contractors, with all communication and money processed via their German counterpart, reproduced North–South power asymmetries and dependencies. Following this cascade of power, hierarchies were enforced within the team, as a core group held the leading position to decide on the conceptualisation, participation, and process of the project within the scope given by the funder" (Schmidt & Pröpper, 2017, p. 376).

While these studies concentrated on the nature and dynamics of research collaborations and publications, Raewyn Connell (2006) turned to the theoretical foundations of social scientific research. His study made an important contribution to this debate by analysing three influential works of social theory, namely Coleman's Foundations of Social Theory, Bourdieu's Logic of Practice, and Giddens's Constitution of Society. Having the geopolitics of knowledge in mind, Connell identified four moves that "constitute the Northernness of general social theory: claiming universality, reading from the centre, gestures of exclusion, and grand erasure" (Connell, 2006, p. 237). Thinking with the postcolonial scholarship presented above, these moves clearly correspond to the coloniality of knowledge that Quijano, Mignolo and others described, indicating the persistence of postcolonial power relations in contemporary academia.

In response to these reported inequalities, a growing number of authors is calling for decolonising academic spaces and infrastructures, including uprooting the dependencies on "Northern" theories and means of validation (e.g. Connell, 2014; Okune, 2019). Nevertheless, as was suggested above, the simple inclusion of Indigenous actors or adoption of the decolonial terms does not equal solution to the problem. A stand-alone body of literature has mapped the instrumental inclusion of indigenous knowledges within fields like environmental science (e.g. Latulippe & Klenk, 2020) and warned against blind adoption of non-Western terms without sensibility for their localised meanings and own histories of violence and imperialism (e.g. Kondo & Swanson, 2020).

Apart from problems connected with resources and conceptual lens, researchers have also raised the issue of linguistic barriers. With English as the global language of science, researchers with English as a second language have reported more hardship in writing articles as well as publishing their research in journals (e.g. Duszak & Lewkowicz, 2008; Lillis & Curry, 2010). Some studies also observed bias in the acceptance of articles in open review processes

whereby reviewers favoured research produced in the US and other English-speaking countries as well as prestigious institutions over less known places and non-English areas (Okike et al., 2008; Ross et al., 2006). Nonetheless, the measurable influence of language skills remains contested as some authors warn against a blind adoption of the "disadvantage orthodoxy" and omission of other factors, such as cultural specifics, the level of training in scientific writing or availability of other resources needed for publishing (Hyland, 2016).

When considering global inequalities in academia, it has to be said that each discipline and subfield is governed by different logic, norms, standards and structures which significantly hampers any wider comparison. Nonetheless, although these studies are not representative, they point to a pattern that recurs in various corners of the academic sphere, shedding light on the power structures that continue to influence academic exchange and collaboration to this day.

2.2.2 Postcolonial encounters in STS

Probing the role of cultures and problematizing the epistemic hegemonies in science has been also at the core of STS. While one strand of literature has focused on studying the entanglements of technoscience with colonialism on specific historical and technological examples (Law, 1984; Mol & De Laet, 2000; Schiebinger, 2004; Schiebinger & Swan, 2005; Prasad, 2014), a growing body of literature has examined its wider theoretical implications, including the discipline's own epistemic hegemonies (Anderson, 2017; Law & Lin, 2017; Lyons et al., 2017; Prasad, 2022). The latter strand includes authors like Sandra Harding (1998, 2011), Warwick Anderson (2009), Helen Verran (2001, 2002), Banu Subramaniam (2001, 2016), or John Law (Law & Joks, 2019; Law & Lin, 2017; Lin & Law, 2019), all of whom have explored the intersections of science, postcolonialism, and knowledge politics in STS for more than 20 years now. Helen Verran, for instance, has contrasted modern scientific knowledge with local and Indigenous knowledges in environmental protection (Verran, 2002, 2009) as well as mathematics (Verran, 2001). In these accounts, she has not only showed the different possible understandings of nature preservation and ways of counting but also outlined contours of new ontological politics based on them. Sandra Harding (1998), on the other hand, looked at modern science using feminist and postcolonial lenses, theorising on the implications of these approaches for epistemology and understanding of scientific knowledge. In a similar vein, Warwick Anderson and John Law, who have written extensively on postcolonial engagements with and in STS, argued for re-orienting and provincializing STS – that is, not only to engage with non-Western cases and histories, but also to apply non-Western (or non-Euro-American) ideas, theories and analytical lens and diversify STS approaches (Anderson, 2009, 2017; Law & Lin, 2017; Law & Joks, 2019).

Despite these numerous works, researchers have repeatedly pointed out that non-Western STS scholarship often remains invisible in STS debates (Dumoulin Kervran et al., 2018; Vessuri, 2019). As John Law and Wen-yuan Lin (2017) described, STS itself falls into the pitfall of engaging with non-Western cases mostly through Western (or Euro-American) theories. And while there have been outlines of non-Western analytical lens and theoretical creolisation (e.g. Chen, 2012; Zhan, 2014), the efforts to adopt non-Western theories by Western scholars often runs the risk of academic extractivism, where intellectual traditions are used without regard for their situated context and meaning (e.g. Altmann, 2020; Kondo & Swanson, 2020). Law and Lin (2017) contend that the field still suffers from theoretical asymmetry where Euro-American concepts dominate and influence thinking of non-Western scholars. This "analytical-industrial complex", they say, although different in every local setting, skews the overall picture of non-Western scientific production through institutionalisation and prioritisation of English-language publications and Euro-American concepts. In other words, when researchers study in the UK or the US and learn Euro-American theories, as in the Taiwanese example described by Law and Lin, they can face difficulties when coming back to their home countries and trying to engage with local topics and scholarship. Moreover, institutional incentives for international (mostly English) publications can often mean that researchers also need to adjust to international audiences by adopting English conceptual vocabulary and Western lens. As Law and Lin show, this can create divisions not only within local academia but also inside academics themselves:

> "Lin sometimes feels that his head and his body are in different places, as if he has been intellectually beheaded. Or, to put it less dramatically, he feels that his head is full of Euro-American theory and knowledge while his body inhabits Taiwan" (Law & Lin, 2017, p. 215).

Their argument therefore calls for overcoming this 'postcolonial divide' and creating "multiple centres, a variety of postcolonial symmetries, and a series of different STSs" (Law & Lin, 2017, p. 214). The works of John Law and Wen-yuan Lin, along with those of Warwick Anderson (2012) or Daiwie Fu (2007, 2020), exemplify a growing strand of STS scholarship rooted in East Asia. Over the years, East Asian STS, with the EASTS (*EASTS*, n.d.) journal as its flagship, has established as one of the strongholds of non-Western STS, essentially creating one of these new centres.

Similar calls for re-orientation have come from Latin America where STS has a strong tradition. Multiple Latin American scholars have called out the blindness of Western STS towards the problems found in global peripheries and the struggles that scholarship coming out of these regions has to deal with (Dumoulin Kervran et al., 2018; Kreimer & Vessuri, 2018; Vessuri,

2019). The effort to counter this hegemony materialized, among other things, in the establishment of the Tapuya journal which directly responds to these tensions and grounds Latin American perspectives in global debates ('What Does Tapuya Mean?', 2018). However, the discussions of epistemic hegemonies and post- and decolonial possibilities in STS have not been confined only to these geographical areas but include a plethora of feminist explorations of the issue (Lyons et al., 2017; Subramaniam et al., 2016) as well as inquiries into the role of linguistic capacities in thinking in and about STS (Law & Mol, 2020).

As John Law and Wen-yuan Lin (2017) remarked, postcoloniality is a troubled term, often rejected for centering coloniality or making colonialism a thing of the past. Moreover, as can be clearly seen in the pages above, the debates largely revolve around binary categories, such as Global North and South, Western and non-Western, modern and Indigenous, global and local. While many authors acknowledge the essentialising and homogenising nature of these dichotomies, they still use them for orientation, often without actually identifying what they mean or whom they include there (see, for instance, Mignolo, 2012; Quijano, 2007). Perhaps due to the complicated nature of such definitions, the boundaries of these terms often remain only implied.

In one of his articles, John Law has looked into the ontology of the "North" and probed the problems of such a "one-world world" (Law, 2015). Highlighting the variety of realities and practices within the "North", he concluded that "the post-colonial encounter is to be found not simply at those points where the North meets the South, but also deep within the North itself" (Law, 2015, p. 136). It is then precisely these spaces, ruptures and encounters that I want to focus on here. Although scholars in STS have already raised the issues of "Northern" multiplicities (e.g. Mol, 2014), they seem to reside mostly in the West of Europe (if not North America), leaving other regions in the shadows. As I will argue below, one of those overshadowed regions is Eastern Europe. What follows is therefore an exploration into this space, its multiple constitutions as well as its connections to the postcolonial debates and experiences.

2.3 The European East & West: ambiguity, contestation, and the present

"The East is different but similar, Other but not quite."
(M. Müller, 2020, p. 738)

The question of what exactly Eastern Europe is and whom it includes it far less straightforward than it might seem. Countless works have been written on this issue, defining the region along historical, political, economic, or ethnic lines (e.g. Wolff, 1994; Kuus, 2004, 2007; Mälksoo, 2009a; Lewicki, 2023). Nevertheless, as all these works show, the meaning and demarcation

of Eastern Europe is far from stabilised – not least due to the loaded connotations associated with it. In the next paragraphs, I will try to unpack some of these notions, outlining the development of the term and the meanings embedded in it.

Any attempt to situate Eastern Europe within global debates on power relations exposes the region's often ambiguous or overlooked position. When imagining the Global North, one might think of the US, Canada, Europe, probably also Australia and New Zealand. Global South, on the other hand, usually denotes Africa, Latin America and most of Asia. But when we zoom in on these groupings and think about the criteria more in depth, their contours start to fall apart. Which category does Russia belong to? What does Bulgaria have in common with Australia? And do Albania, Slovakia, or Macedonia enjoy the same epistemic privileges as the UK or the US? As Martin Müller (2020) pointed out, many places seem to fall through the cracks of this division, and the former Second World especially so: "[t]he East is too rich to be a proper part of the South, but too poor to be a part of the North. It is too powerful to be periphery, but too weak to be the centre. Power relationships run every which way" (p. 735-736). As a result, the countries that once stood between the capitalist First World and the postcolonial Third World now seem to be out of the picture, stuck in between the borders and dividing lines, as if they belonged nowhere. According to Müller, the former communist bloc therefore suffers from dual exclusion – being too poor and too rich, colonizing as well as colonized, aggressors as well as victims, it belongs neither to the South nor to the North. In order to retrieve these places from this invisible realm and recognize their specific positionality, Müller introduces the term "Global East".

In Müller's account, Global East is not confined to a particular geographic area; rather, it is "an epistemic space" occupied by those between the North and South. While his perspective is firmly rooted in the experience of post-communist countries, he stresses that "the condition of Eastness" applies to any country lying in this liminal space, whether it is Eastern Europe, South Korea, Turkey, or the Middle East. What constitutes the Global East is then its "eternal transition towards an elusive modernity" (M. Müller, 2020, p. 736), marked by associations of backwardness and otherness, and the resulting liminality. From this perspective, it has been object to a similar modern/colonial "mission civilisatrice" as the Global South – placed in a subordinate position to the Western European and North American bastions of modernity which it constantly strives to catch up with but never quite manages to do so.

While the concept has gained significant traction since Müller's (2020) definition, it did not go without criticism. Some authors have called into question generalising nature of the concept and its potential appeal to "Eastern" societies (Zarycki, 2020), while others pointed out the risk of fostering orientalism or Eastern exceptionalist populism (M. Müller, 2021). Authors such as Kislenko (2026) have also problematised the vague definition as well as Müller's engagement

with the discussions on Global North and South, claiming that the concept results from a “false analogy”, among others. Martin Müller (2021) reacted to some of these critiques, emphasizing the tentative process behind its creation and admitting the limitations of developing such an “emancipatory project” from one particular position. Müller nonetheless reiterated his intention to conceive of the Global East not as tied to a specific territory or temporal frame, but rather as an epistemological project, which aims captures the state of in-betweennes rather than one particular positionality, and challenge the North-South binary from a place outside of it (M. Müller, 2021).

The construction, association, and othering Eastern Europe has been studied by many other authors more in depth, such as Larry Wolff (1994), Maria Todorova (2009), Madina Tlostanova (2008, 2015), or Iver Neumann (1999). Larry Wolff marked a substantial contribution to this debate with his book “Inventing Eastern Europe, The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment” (1994). By analysing travellers’ accounts, maps and fictional writings from the 18th century as well as works of thinkers like Voltaire, Rousseau, or Herder, Wolff unearthed a network of ideas and imaginations that contributed to the formation of European identities and value-laden demarcations.

Wolff (1994) claims that up until Renaissance, Europe was divided between north and south where the city states of Italy represented the cultural role-model while the ‘northerners’ equated barbarians. What is now Poland and Russia thus belonged to the same cultural unit as Germany or Denmark. The change, Wolff argues, came with the onset of Enlightenment. As the centre of European culture moved from Venice, Florence, and Rome to Paris, London, and Amsterdam, the thinkers of the 18th century put forward a new framework and reoriented Europe to the East and West. According to Wolff, it did not only change the viewpoint but, crucially, created new boundaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’, setting terms of who and what belongs to the ‘European civilisation’ and where the territory of barbarians and backwardness begins.

Wolff’s analysis concentrated on the ‘philosophic geography’ which openly combined philosophical deliberations about the essential character of peoples and cultures with geographic layout. Its examples include the count of Ségur who, when passing from Prussia to Poland, supposedly “felt he had ‘left’ Europe entirely, and furthermore had ‘moved back ten centuries’” (Wolff, 1994, p. 6) or the American explorer John Ledyard who called the same passing “the nice Gradation by which I pass from Civilization to Incivilization” (cited in Wolff, 1994, p. 354), later calling it so abrupt that it proved the “inferiority of the Eastern to the Western World“ and “the barrier of Asiatic & European manners” (cited in Wolff, 1994, p. 354). Other excerpts show numerous assessments of racial characteristics of Russians, likening them to people in Africa and calling them fit for slavery. The process of Othering was in Wolff’s view best demonstrated by the fact that many of the 18th century authors started calling Eastern

Europe “the Orient of Europe” or the “Republic of the Orient” (Wolff, 1994, p. 283), which supposedly persisted in French scholarship up until the First World War. Ultimately, Wolff calls these processes and positioning of Eastern Europe ‘demi-orientalisation’, suggesting that they were part of larger project of “integrating knowledge and power, perpetrating domination and subordination” (Wolff, 1994, p. 8).

In line with other authors studying these East-West relations through the prism of modernity, coloniality, and subjugation of knowledge, Wolff emphasizes that Eastern Europe was not deemed at the very end of the ‘barbarian spectrum’. That was designated for people from more distant parts of the world and with a different skin colour. Rather, he contends, the region was placed “on the developmental scale that measured the distance between civilisation and barbarism” (Wolff, 1994, p. 13), showing yet another side of the “civilising” mission.

Although Wolff’s account certainly provides a significant and convincing insight into the construction of mental categories that are in use to this today, it is important to highlight that his analysis focused solely on the discourse of Western European thinkers, omitting the social, political and material realities as well as voices of Eastern Europeans themselves. The book has therefore been criticised for offering only a skewed picture, not including other, less judgmental accounts and authors, or not comparing the assessments of Eastern Europe with those of Spain or Italy which would provide a more comprehensive picture (Confino, 1994).

While the understanding and associations of Eastern Europe have certainly changed since the Enlightenment, a number of authors claims that the notions of backwardness and otherness have never actually disappeared (e.g. Kuus, 2004b; Sojka, 2019; M. Müller, 2020; Kalmar, 2022; Lewicki, 2023). Maria Todorova (2009), for instance, analysed texts from the 18th century until the present and described the mythologization and orientalisation of the Balkans, again pointing out the borderline position of being “’the other’ within”. Although predominantly white and Christian, Todorova claimed that the region has served as a substitution for orientalism, serving “as a repository of negative characteristics against which a positive and self-congratulatory image of the “European” and the “West” has been constructed” (Todorova, 2009, p. 188). Madina Tlostanova, on the other hand, investigated the issues of Otherness and liminality in the Caucasian post-soviet space, coming to similar conclusions (2008, 2011).

Perhaps because of these connotations – loaded not only with Enlightenment ideas but also with the history of Cold War and soviet influence – there have been repeated contestations of Eastern Europe and calls for a more nuanced designation. In the recent decades, scholars focusing on the area of post-communist Europe have adopted various other terms to describe the post-communist Europe – ‘Central Europe’, ‘East-Central Europe’ and ‘Central and Eastern Europe’.

Iver Neumann (1999), who tracked the uses of the 'East' in European identity formation, argued that the European identity, including Central European one, is a result of continuous efforts to contrast itself against the Other, whether it is Turks, Russians, or the 'Orient'. In his account, Central Europe, as a category distinct from Eastern Europe, was invented by Czech, Polish, and Hungarian dissidents during the communist era in order to mark the region as different from Russia, not belonging into its cultural and political sphere (see, for instance, Kundera, 1983). As Krishan Kumar (2022) notes, while 'Central Europe' highlights the shared historical legacy of the Habsburg monarchy, 'East-Central Europe' enlarges the sphere to the north and east of these "core" countries, including Ukraine or the Baltic countries. At the end, what all these terms have in common is the exclusion of Russia, despite (or precisely because of) "its looming presence over many centuries" (Kumar, 2022, p. 74).

Kumar's paper (2022) again highlights the imperial history of the region. Having been ruled by the Holy Roman, Habsburg, Ottoman, Romanov and Hohenzollern empires as well as by the Nazis and the Soviets, the Central and Eastern European nations have found themselves on the borders of empires countless times. This (semi)peripheral and subjugated position, Kumar argues, has had a long-lasting impact not only on the economic or infrastructural development, but also on questions of political identity, giving rise to the different new designations and demarcations of the region.

Reacting to the re-inventions of names for Eastern Europe, Müller (2020) and others however noted that such renaming pushes the "condition of Eastness" only further away, reproducing its stigmatising nature in an attempt to flee its effects at the expense of (more Eastern) others. Since Müller's argument lies in re-instating the Global East onto the stage of global knowledge production, he calls for adopting 'strategic essentialism' – that is, re-appropriating the East in spite of its homogenising nature in order to make space for the perspectives and experiences coming from there. In line with this thinking, my aim here is to focus on these liminal spaces and experiences in European research production and, in this way, shed light on "the condition of Eastness" in contemporary research. Nonetheless, when talking about the geographic space of post-communist Europe, I will follow the language used in contemporary scholarship that is concerned with this area and use the term Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) instead.

2.3.1 Central and Eastern Europe today

Having sketched out the history and meanings embedded in the categories of 'East' and 'West', let's now look at how these divisions and legacies manifest today. Scholarly debates on Central and Eastern Europe have often focused on political and economic transformations that followed the fall of communist regimes. Large part of the early literature framed the region through transition paradigms, depicting CEE as moving from socialist planned economy to

liberal democracy and market economy following the example of its Western counterpart (Offe, 1994; Blokker, 2005).

This perspective of “catching up”, although still present in public discourse, has since been criticised for implying a linear, fixed path to political stability and economic prosperity, obscuring the social costs of rapid privatisation, uneven pace of reforms, and the emergence of new inequalities (Blokker, 2005; Pehe & Wawrzyniak, 2023; Artner, 2018). Scholars have also highlighted how neoliberal restructuring – marked by austerity, weak social protections, and foreign-led investment – generated precarious labour markets, new social inequalities, and widespread disillusionment with democratic institutions (Medve-Bálint & Boda, 2014; Vukov, 2020; Eberle & Šitera, 2023; Uhde, 2016). As some authors claim, the resulting precarity as well as weakening of welfare infrastructures then arguably paved way for political frustrations, contributing to the rise of illiberal and populist ideologies in the region (e.g. Kalmar, 2022). Because of this political development, CEE countries have been often associated with “democratic backsliding” (Bermeo, 2016) although this concept has been criticised for setting normative, linear assumptions and omitting wider circumstances as well as inner differences (Cianetti et al., 2018; Eberle & Šitera, 2023). More recent scholarship, represented also in the debates above, has concentrated on Central and Eastern Europe’s semi-peripheral position within Europe and the global economy, refraining from the transitional and “catching up” narratives and focusing on the particular systemic factors and asymmetric dependencies instead (e.g. Boatcă, 2013; Samaluk, 2016; Kalmar, 2022; Lewicki, 2023; Eberle & Šitera, 2023).

The material consequences of the semi-peripheral position manifest, among others, in migration flows and labour relations. Although Western European states were already seeing millions of Eastern European refugees coming in during the Cold War, the fall of the Iron Curtain prompted heated public as well as academic debates about the future and effects of further East-West migration (Ardittis, 1994; Wallace, 2002; Favell, 2008). The issue became even more contentious with the Eastern enlargement of the EU in 2004 when ten new member states – eight of which belonged to the post-communist ‘East’ – joined the bloc. The accession was accompanied not only by discussions on the economic effects on both sending and receiving countries, but also by scepticism of Western European states to opening up borders to the East (Favell, 2008). The East-West division reemerged more recently with the refugee crisis of 2015 which highlighted the deep discrepancies in public attitudes towards migration and acceptance of refugees between the “old” and “new” EU countries. This time it was the CEE countries who expressed fierce opposition to welcoming migrants which, according to Ivan Krastev, manifested the region’s dissatisfaction with the effects of globalization and the unfulfilled promises of catching up with the West (Krastev, 2017).

The nature and levels of East-West migration itself have of course changed significantly over time. Today, there are still steady, although much lower streams of people migrating from the East of Europe to the richer West, whether for work, education, or simply a standard of living (Manolova, 2019; Saar, 2023; Hoffmann, 2024). Scholarship has investigated the motivations of people to move or stay put (Saar, 2023; Hoffmann, 2024), as well as experiences of CEE migrant workers and the national communities living abroad (Manolova, 2019; Nowicka, 2024; Sojka, 2019). Recently, the literature has centred attention on perceived inequalities and discrimination of Central and Eastern Europeans in the West, mostly looking at national communities in countries such as the UK, Spain or Germany which have significant CEE minorities (Manolova, 2019; Rzepnikowska, 2023; Narkowicz, 2023; Sojka, 2019; Nowicka, 2024). As these studies show, the motivations for west-ward migration often stem from uneven economic development, low wages, or a search for better educational opportunities (Hoffmann, 2024; Manolova, 2019; Saar, 2023).

Being part of the EU or Europe at large, however, does not prevent CEE migrants from experiences of ostracization and discrimination (Narkowicz, 2023; Sime et al., 2022). The topic has gained significant traction in recent years. While some authors looked into the discrimination and othering of Eastern Europeans in labour relations, such as Narkowitz (2023), Sojka (2019) or Rzepnikowska (2023), others have approached the topic more broadly, looking at the wider sociopolitical contexts as well as conceptual debates. Among these is the work of Aleksandra Lewicki (2023) who investigated the ‘categories of belonging’ invoked in relation to Eastern Europeans in Western European political discourse and legal actions. Lewicki contends that neoliberal policies that accompanied post-socialist transformations and accession to EU reinforced the historical peripheralization of Eastern Europe and “attributed a distinctive positionality to ‘Eastern Europeans’ in West European racial hierarchies” (p. 1482). This is exemplified by efforts of assimilation and ‘catching up’, but also by discourses in which Eastern Europeans are blamed for spreading illnesses, undeservingly straining public services, or organizing crime and trafficking (Lewicki, 2023). Although the use of racial categories in connection to Eastern Europeans is debated, Lewicki supports its use arguing that it “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” (Lewicki, 2023, pp. 1482–1483).

A similar contribution to this debate was made by Canadian anthropologist and political scientist Ivan Kalmar who mapped the rise of illiberalism in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Czechia in his book “White, But Not Quite: Central Europe’s Illiberal Revolt” (2022). In his view, the political discontent in these countries can be (at least partially) explained by the unfulfilled promises of attaining Western European standards of living combined with a pressure on harsh

neoliberal policies and the peripheralization of the region by the West of Europe. Loosely building on Wallerstein's world-system theory (2011), Kalmar argues that Central Europe moves on the spectrum between core and (semi-)periphery, only to be never fully accepted by the Western core – thereby being "white, but not quite" (Kalmar, 2022, 2023).

Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that the question of how to frame exclusion and discrimination towards Eastern Europeans is not settled and seeing it through the lens of racism is sometimes disputed (Nowicka, 2024; Tudor, 2023). At the same time, as all the authors highlight, the language of racism is not intended to make the experiences of Eastern Europeans equal to those of people of colour or other more ostracised religious and ethnic minorities. Instead, authors like Lewicki (2023), Sojka (2019), as well as Kalmar (2022, 2023) in this context conceptualise racism as a process of inclusion and exclusion based on group stereotypes and presumptions. All of them simultaneously emphasize that such racialization falls much more heavily on groups that are not read as white and/or Christian. Their argument, therefore, rather lies in the contention that the othering of Eastern Europeans constitutes a part of the same process of racialization that, in a much more overt and rougher version, impacts people of colour, religious and ethnic minorities or migrants – a point shared in Müller's (2020) conception of Global East. This strand of scholarship thus clearly complements the arguments put forward by Müller (2020) as well as Kumar (2022) and others, stressing the liminal position of the region, caught between privilege and precarity.

The questions of inequality, exclusion and precarity of Eastern Europeans have been raised within academic spaces as well. Several authors have by now pointed out the exclusion of Eastern European perspectives in academic debates as well as institutional structures. Maria Mälksoo (2021), for instance, pointed out that Central and Eastern European (CEE) scholarship is significantly underrepresented in major journals of International relations and authors affiliated with CEE institutions are equally missing in influential editorial boards and among recipients of prestigious grants. Other authors have brought attention to the exclusion of Central and Eastern European voices, especially of CEE feminist perspectives, in security debates (Nyklová et al., 2019; O'Sullivan & Krulišová, 2023) which was clearly demonstrated in scholarly framings of the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Hendl et al., 2024). Similarly as the literature above, these authors explain the exclusion of Ukrainian, or Central and Eastern European, voices in debates about the very region as 'epistemic imperialism' (Sonevytsky, 2022) and 'Westplaning', demonstrating "the treatment of Europe's East and its people as objects rather than subjects of history" (Hendl, 2022, p. 176).

Such critique has also appeared in other fields like gender studies (Kulawik & Kravchenko, 2020). For instance, Veronika Wöhrer's analysis (2016) of gender studies textbooks, encyclopaedias, and journals in Slovakia, Germany, the US, and India revealed an almost

complete omission of authors and scholarship not only from Global South (or "majority world" in Wöhrer's terms), but also from post-communist space. Considering the location of non-Western authors more closely, she concluded that "[w]hile empirical data or illustrative examples come from the majority world, theories and concepts are developed by authors in the metropole. It seems that migrating to these centres is crucial for scholars from the majority world to access networks and prominent international publishing arenas" (Wöhrer, 2016, p. 337).

Such findings are corroborated by some experiences of CEE researchers themselves. Iveta Silova, Zsuzsa Millei, and Nelli Piattoeva (2017), for example, describe being constantly "exoticised" and deemed "not Western enough" in their professional academic contexts. This process went supposedly so far that one of the authors' academic activities and achievements in the Caucasian region was completely dismissed and they were forced to start anew. Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (2023) contributed to this debate by collecting a series of different testimonies and perspectives from various 'migrant academics' about their experiences of precarity and resilience in Europe. While the book does not concentrate only on Central and Eastern Europeans, it offers a wide spectrum of experiences of liminality, exclusion, ambiguous privilege that many researchers, including those from CEE, encounter (e.g. Axyonova, 2023; Kluczewska, 2023; Vitáčková, 2023). Despite coming from different areas and fields, these authors repeatedly show that their experiences in academia are not completely dissimilar to those of Latin American or African scholars described above.

Because of these resemblances, a growing strand of scholarship is exploring the similarities (and differences) of postsocialist and postcolonial experiences, situating CEE in discourses on global coloniality (e.g. Boatcă, 2013; Tlostanova, 2008, 2015; Boatcă & Tlostanova, 2021; Silova et al., 2017). Among those authors is Madina Tlostanova who, along with Redi Koobak and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert (2016; 2021) explored their own different encounters with postcolonial and postsocialist intersections within academic settings, finding themselves in similar liminal positionalities despite coming from different contexts. Suruchi Thapar-Björkert grew up in an Indian, anti-colonial family, Redi Koobak in postsocialist Estonia and Madina Tlostanova in the USSR, they all found themselves in a state of "in between" – for Thapar Björkert, it was the clash between her identity and the privilege of her academic institution, for Tlostanova, the conflicting attributions of race as her non-European, non-Russian descent made her "Black" in Russia but "Russian" in Europe. For Koobak, the in-betweenness was perhaps most nuanced but also most relevant for the topic in question here:

> "Aways feeling slightly off or out of sync, she spent most of her graduate studies unwittingly clinging on to the largely unquestioned 'catching up with the West' mode of thought that has dominated Estonian society since the 1990s. […] Paradoxically, her

> position is often read as similar to the West but not similar enough, while also registering as different yet again not different enough to fit into the category of the third world 'other'" (Tlostanova et al., 2016, p. 216).

While the impacts of the global coloniality might not be visible from this excerpt, it is the process of othering and a sense of not-quite-belonging that is at the root of the shared experience described by the authors: "The coloniality of knowledge […] turns each of us into an exotic, impenetrable and invisible other of the neoliberal (Western) modernity – forever lagging behind, striving to assimilate and often simply representing the void" (Tlostanova et al., 2016, p. 214). The temporal aspect of constant lagging behind is symptomatic of both CEE and its similarities to postcolonial experiences. The affinities between the two perspectives go much deeper however and I will detail their relations and more literature on the topic in the theoretical section.

Lastly, although STS is concerned with highlighting multiplicities and blind spots in research, it seems to suffer from the same problem as the above-mentioned disciplines. Although some hubs of STS can be found across Central and Eastern Europe, the discipline as a whole still seems to suffer from a certain blindness towards postsocialist experiences. The issue has already been highlighted at multiple workshops and plenaries (Bauer et al., 2014; Ginelli et al., 2016), although arguably with little resonance. As Bauer et al. (2014) pointed out, STS is missing both the engagement with postsocialist cases as well as the presence of its works in postsocialist studies. These are all the more striking given the importance of science and technology for communist regimes, but also the frequent intersections of STS and postcolonialism that encourage sensibility to internal peripheries. While exceptions to the rule exist (e.g. Collier, 2011; Stöckelová, 2012; Nikula & Tchalakov, 2014; Stöckelová et al., 2023), Ginelli et al. (2016) pointed out that postsocialist STS scholars often struggle with similar problems such as inadequate funding or lack of institutional opportunities. Tereza Stöckelová (2018), however, warned against the essentialisation of Central and Eastern European academia. Recognising the specific development of social sciences in Central and Eastern Europe, she called for investigations of empirical similarities and differences with symmetrical lens, in line with the tradition of ANT.

As can be seen, the calls for engaging with Central and Eastern European scholarship and experiences have appeared across different disciplines, including STS. With this thesis, I intend to contribute to these debates and connect the scholarship on Central and Eastern Europe with STS focus on research practices and materialities. In order to do so, I will now turn to last piece of the puzzle – the STS literature on research practices and researchers' sensemaking.

2.4 Exploring research practices from STS perspectives

The investigation of research spaces and practices has a long tradition in STS. While early science studies concentrated on unpacking the black boxes of natural sciences, later scholarship broadened the scope and paid attention to different knowledge-making spaces as well as to their social, material and symbolic dimensions.

The discussion on understanding different research spaces and practices goes back to Karin Knorr Cetina's work of 'epistemic cultures'. Her studies on the "different machineries of knowing" laid foundations for future investigations of disciplinary norms, social structures and concrete research practices. Departing from constructivist and contextual understanding of knowledge (Knorr Cetina, 1981), the concept of 'epistemic cultures' brought attention to the materiality of knowledge-making practices and enabled researchers to grasp the specificities of knowledge production in particular professional collectives. Other scholars built on this notion and introduced conceptions that further expanded its scope. The most notable is the concept of 'epistemic living spaces' (Felt, 2009; Felt & Fochler, 2011) which shifted the focus from disciplinary norms and large collectives to individual researchers and their perceptions. This move entailed broadening the perspective and including not only the epistemic, social and material aspects, but also temporal, symbolic and spatial dimensions of research. As I will explain further in the theory section, the emphasis on researchers' perception and sensemaking also highlighted the perceived ability to move and act within a given space, capturing the understanding of one's agency, possibilities as well as symbolic maps and boundaries that guide researchers' actions.

The key study that introduced the concept of epistemic living spaces to analyse research practices across multiple national contexts was "Knowing and Living in Academic Research" (Felt, 2009). While focusing on the role of gender, it examined knowledge production practices in five European countries (Czechia, Slovakia, Austria, Finland, and the UK) investigating the implications of the establishment of the European Research Area. One of the analytical lenses was also the European East-West divide – the findings, however, did not confirm any sharp differences between the two groups. The distinction was rather seen as performative and context-based, creating certain orders of value without being precisely defined (Felt, 2009).

What the study found, among others, was that the different modes of ordering – whether in ranking and classification of research, different forms of boundary work, or various other value systems – played a central role in researchers' practices, shaping and informing researchers' perceptions and actions. Yet, the authors highlighted that these modes of ordering are "always multiple, more or less mundane and partly even contradictory, as researchers always participate in different communities of practice" (Felt & Stöckelová, 2009, p. 43). As Felt and

Stöckelová (2009) also emphasized, researchers often worked with their positioning strategically. This was clearly visible in the use of East/West distinction whereby bioscience researchers mostly emphasized collaborative ties with countries more to the West than they were themselves (e.g. Austrians mentioning their US and German ties, Czechs mentioning Western Europe and Slovaks mentioning ties with Czechia), suggesting a clear 'westward trend' in internationalisation. This was the case for social sciences as well, although language and national affinities were found to play a much more important role than in biosciences. Yet, interestingly, social scientists from all five countries except the UK still expressed concern "about being (regarded as) too local or lagging behind" (Felt & Stöckelová, 2009, p. 62). The narrative of 'lagging behind' and having to 'catch up' turned out particularly strong in Czech accounts, although social scientists highlighted a more local, Central European context.

Overall, what the authors found in such accounts was a "clear understanding that there is a 'western way of doings things in research' – which is framed by using a vocabulary of competitiveness and aggressiveness – which is the only model to follow if one wants to be successful" (Felt & Stöckelová, 2009, p. 63). Nonetheless, these discursive practices might have changed since the study was conducted more than 15 years ago, as the more recent article by Tereza Stöckelová (2018) suggests.

The concept of epistemic living spaces was later also mobilized by Sarah Davies (2020) who compared local differences in research practices through interviews with scientists who experienced international mobility. The findings included differences in the level of resources, work/life balance, notions of efficiency as well as hierarchy in labs or nature of social interactions. Interviewees also mentioned different purposes of research (such as in basic and applied research institutions), varying ambitions or scale of research, as well as imaginations of science as a collective process and differing value judgments. The comparison showed, among others, that scientific mobility offers valuable insights into local variations in scientific practice. While researchers have direct experience of different research environments, Davies emphasizes that the constructed nature of these accounts needs to be kept in mind (Davies, 2020, p. 101). Yet, it is the research into these constructed and often strategic comparisons of different scientific environments that Davies highlights as an important area for further research, in order to explore "what scientists have to say about differences between particular sites not only as an indication of different lived experiences of science but as a discursive move in which value is attributed or denied" (Davies, 2020, p. 111).

Besides explorations of local variations, STS literature has also explored the differences between academic and commercial research, focusing, for instance, on different manifestation of capitalist logic or strategies of managing uncertainty in research (Fochler, 2016; Fochler & Sigl, 2018). While these studies described a number differences of how private and public

research institutions operate, they also highlighted how the logics of assetization or innovation increasingly penetrate academic settings (Fochler, 2016; Falkenberg, 2021; Vallas & Kleinman, 2008). It is precisely such adoption of commercial strategies and growing neoliberalization of academic research that has become a dominant theme in studies focusing on contemporary research. Whether it is an increasing pressure for commercialisation and innovativeness (Falkenberg, 2021), competitiveness and market orientation of universities (Fochler et al., 2025), or quantification (Burrows, 2012a; R. Müller & de Rijcke, 2017), the spreading logic of privatisation is undeniable (Mirowski, 2011). Authors have therefore begun to talk about ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) as well as ‘audit culture’ (Shore, 2008) pervading academic activities, intended to make them part of the wider knowledge economy (Vallas & Kleinman, 2008; Fochler et al., 2025).

As much as these changes affect the running of research institutions, they also affect everyday realities and practices of researchers. Pressures to be productive and deliver measurable results leads to intense competition, which can result in less knowledge sharing, even though that is one of the fundamental pillars of academic life (Fochler, 2016). Moreover, converting research into quantifiable, measurable numbers often overlooks other important aspects of research and can distort the overall picture of academic quality and success (Burrows, 2012b). This is also linked to the many expectations that successful researchers have to meet, such as innovative research or a high number of publications in impacted journals (Falkenberg, 2021; R. Müller, 2019). As already mentioned, different evaluation systems lead researchers to a situation where they have to juggle several different and often conflicting expectations and criteria at once (Falkenberg, 2021; Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003). The pressure for constant productivity – often manifested through multiple different responsibilities at once – also deprives researchers of the "timeless time" that would enable them to immerse in their topic and not feel pressured to do something else (Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003). Lastly, questions of shifting temporality also include changes in the long-time frames in which researchers used to work as academic research is increasingly being done in short-term, limited projects that do not provide researchers with stability. Many researchers are therefore part of several projects at once, having to split their attention and time and further straining their personal resources (Franssen & de Rijcke, 2019; R. Müller, 2019). This ‘projectification’ and ‘hyper-competition’ then results in even greater precariousness of researchers, especially of early-career ones whose positions are even more unstable and susceptible to these pressures (Fochler et al., 2016; Franssen & de Rijcke, 2019). It is also for this reason that early-career researchers are at the centre of much of the literature on contemporary working conditions in academia, highlighting their precarity as well as strategies of survival (Haddow & Hammarfelt, 2019; R. Müller, 2019; Wöhrer, 2014b, 2014a). My aim with this thesis is therefore to complement the

literature on researchers' experiences and working conditions in contemporary academia while filling the gap of missing Central and Eastern European voice and experiences in STS.

2.5 Conclusion

Tying all these threads together, the founding pillars of this thesis are becoming clear. As I have shown, there is an abundance of works on global asymmetries and inequalities in academic knowledge production, which often stem from colonial relations, as well as a growing body of literature on the ambiguous position of Central and Eastern Europe. More and more authors have brought attention in recent years to the lack of Central and Eastern European voices in European research while others from the region have shared their experiences with encountering prejudices, stereotypes, or exclusion. Although the issue has been pointed out in different disciplines and conceptualised theoretically, a practice-oriented, STS analysis of this issue seems to be missing.

My goal here is thus to address this gap and investigate how social science researchers from CEE experience being and moving in European research – specifically, how they make sense of and navigate research spaces in Europe. In this way, I want to highlight the experiences of those on the ground and inspect if and how the structural issues described above affect their movement in academia. By doing so, I hope to contribute to the existing scholarship on the position of Central and Eastern Europe as well as to the literature on asymmetries and inequalities in knowledge production. At the backdrop of this inquiry are thus larger questions about epistemic privileges and global dynamics of politics of knowledge.

3 Research questions

My exploration of researchers' sensemaking and movement revolves around three main topics – researchers' navigation of research spaces, their construction of identity, and perceived variations in research practices across different spaces. The following research questions therefore capture each of these topics respectively.

Since my exploration of the topic starts from the mapping of researchers' movement and their navigation of European research landscapes, the main question that guides my research is the following:

> *RQ: How do social science researchers from Central and Eastern Europe make sense of and navigate research spaces in Europe?*

As I will explain further in the theory section, I am not interested in researchers' experiences with mobility itself – rather, I see mobility as an entry point into the different research spaces and as a magnifying glass that enables me to better capture the power lines and dynamics that researchers encounter in them. By following researchers' navigation strategies as well as the ways in which researchers build their own spaces, I want to track and highlight the influences, pressures, possibilities and limitations that CEE researchers encounter in academic spaces. I am not only interested in these external circumstances, however. This lens also enables me to see how Central and Eastern European researchers themselves perceive the landscapes and what actions they take to actively negotiate and shape them. In other words, one part of my aim here is to shed light on the boundaries and possibilities that shape CEE researchers' work and movement in Europe; and at the same time, I want to explore how they themselves perceive and respond to the existing conditions, thereby bringing their own perspectives to the forefront.

To connect these navigation and negotiation strategies to the aforementioned discussions on inequalities and asymmetries in academic spaces as well as to the debates on CEE positionality, there are two sub questions that pursue these aspects more in detail:

> *SQ2: How do researchers navigate and negotiate their movement through research spaces?*
>
> *SQ2: How do researchers understand and construct their sense of belonging when navigating different research spaces?*

In following the construction of sense of belonging, I want to understand how researchers relate to Central and Eastern Europe, what role their relation to the region plays in their research life and how they work with this part of their identity when navigating European

research landscapes. The connection of research spaces to research practices then aims to capture the perceived differences in how research is done in various spaces, encompassing all the different aspects of research work from theoretical frameworks and intellectual traditions to research infrastructures and social organisations of research. Last but not least, focusing on this relation should also shed light on the differences and asymmetries of doing research in Europe and also on the tensions between the *local* and *global* in European knowledge production.

4 Theory & sensitizing concepts

The analytical framework that guided my research consists of three pillars: literature on postcolonial and postsocialist intersections, conceptualisations of space and mobility, and the concept of epistemic living spaces. First, postcolonial and postsocialist perspectives enable me to situate Central and Eastern Europe in the discourse on global coloniality, especially in the realm of knowledge production, and point to the global asymmetries and power structures at play. As I will detail below, this strand of literature conceptualises issues like the dominance of Western European knowledge production, hierarchisation of intellectual traditions or the promotion of universalist claims at the expense of local intellectual traditions, none of which are exclusive to historically postcolonial contexts. Using this literature therefore allows me to capture and explain these intricate and often hidden dynamics in Europe and, at the same time, attend to the similarities as well as differences of postcolonial and postsocialist contexts. Second, space and mobility play a key role as the central units of my analysis and their conceptualisation therefore sets the ground for further investigation. My understanding of *space* stems from relational approaches that connect the material with the social and see space as both forming and being formed by social action (Löw, 2008). This conceptualisation thus opens *spaces* up for examining how they are constructed, what values and meanings are attached to them and how they form social behaviour and action. The third and last part of the theoretical toolbox is the concept of epistemic living spaces that serves as the main tool of analysis, offering a comprehensive conception of the various dimensions of research. It focuses on the researchers themselves, their perceptions of research spaces and broader structures, and, above all, their sense of agency within these structures, which is central to this work. As such, epistemic living spaces connect all the different levels, from researchers' perceptions to their research spaces and wider power structures.

In what follows, I will explore these three areas respectively and explain how they help me in understanding researcher's experiences and academic heterogeneity in Europe. I will first delve into the literature on postcolonial and postsocialist spaces and show how these two

realms intersect and where they differ. I will then explain how I understand the key terms, why I see this approach as valuable for my research and what its limitations are. After that, I will clarify my understanding of space and mobility and their role in my research and, finally, I will explain the concept of the epistemic living spaces.

4.1 Similarity in difference: Postcolonial and postsocialist intersections

My thinking about academic landscapes in Europe starts first and foremost with postcolonial and postsocialist scholarship. Although these two strands are extensive in themselves, literature combining both has gained traction only in recent years. An increasing number of authors is combining postcolonial and postsocialist perspectives in order to map their similarities and mutually enrich both approaches with new insights (e.g. Cervinkova, 2012; Tlostanova et al., 2016; Kołodziejczyk & Şandru, 2017; Silova et al., 2017; Boatcă & Tlostanova, 2021). However, despite the growing amount of literature on the topic, there is no unified theory or approach. As I will show below, scholars often do not share a uniform definition of key terms, and there are some disagreements as to which notions should be used in these contexts. As a result, this strand of scholarship serves me rather as a set of sensitizing concepts that help me grasp power dynamics, asymmetries and inequalities in knowledge production – whether it is the hierarchisation of different kinds of knowledges, dominance of certain intellectual traditions over others, or tensions between universality and localness. It is also due to this fragmented nature and only partial overlap that I refer to this theoretical anchor as “intersections” rather than theories or studies. Since I have already presented the basic tenets of postcolonial scholarship in the literature review above, I will only briefly summarise them here and focus on their conjunction with postsocialist perspectives.

The literature I lean on consists of various pieces of theorising and shared experiences that attempt to situate postsocialist perspectives in a global context. Authors such as Martin Müller (2019, 2020), Madina Tlostanova (2008, 2012, 2015), Redi Koobak and Suruchi Thapar-Björkert (Koobak et al., 2021) and others (Cervinkova, 2012; Silova et al., 2017; Sojka, 2019) compare postsocialist experiences with postcolonial contexts and highlight how these two perspectives converge and where they differ from each other. While there is a number of limitations in comparing these two perspectives, I believe that the literature provides many productive debates and valuable insights for the topic at hand.

As I have already explained in the literature review, postcolonial studies are based on the fundamental premise that modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin and that colonial legacies continue to impact societies until today. The triad of the main concepts that describe this matrix are the coloniality of power, coloniality of being, and coloniality of knowledge (Quijano, 2000, 2007; Mignolo, 2012). It is the coloniality of knowledge that is

crucial here, as it describes the systematic erasure or subordination of certain types of knowledges over others, the dominance of Western European intellectual traditions, the power dynamics associated with claims to universality and the devaluation of knowledges that are perceived as locally confined and not subscribing to the Euro-American traditions (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2012).

Although this line of research originates primarily in Latin America, the power structures it highlights extend far beyond its borders. As I have shown in the literature review, postcolonial scholars maintain that European universalism is at the core of global coloniality (e.g. Chakrabarty, 2000; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006; Quijano, 2007; Lugones, 2010), but the concrete delineation of who belongs to this privileged group in Europe remains vague. As a result, many places fall through the cracks of these homogenising and schematic categories, and Central and Eastern Europe is one of them. It is then this ambiguous and liminal position of the former Second World where literature on postcolonial and postsocialist intersections comes from (Todorova, 2009; M. Müller, 2020; Tlostanova, 2012).

One of the prominent authors of this strand of scholarship is Madina Tlostanova (2008, 2011, 2012, 2015) whose counters this apparent place-lessness of postsocialist countries by drawing parallels between the postcolonial and postsocialist experiences and re-introducing the Second World into the debates on global coloniality. As she contends, the former Second World has been marked by its own imperial history as well as a troubled transformation which resulted in “self-orientalization and self-racializing, inferiority complexes, mimicry and other phenomena well analysed by postcolonial theorists” (Tlostanova, 2012, p. 132). Tlostanova thus highlights the similarities of postcolonial and postsocialist experiences while attending to the different histories that these lines of thinking come from.

This perspective, which highlights the imperial histories of Central and Eastern Europe and the specific form of orientalisation and inferiority complexes found there, provides the fundamental framework for my thinking and interpretation. I am, however, aware that postcolonial and post-socialist experiences cannot be simply equated – both historical and geopolitical spheres have their own specific imperial and colonial histories, and one perspective cannot be purely transferred to the other.

My understanding therefore follows Tlostanova’s (2012) and Mignolo’s (2006; 2012) call for putting emphasis on plurality and intersubjectivity, acknowledging differences but still learning from each other. The question thus becomes: “How to define and theorize this *similarity in difference*?” (Tlostanova, 2012, p. 131, emphasis my own). Instead of trying to uniformly apply postcolonial theories on postsocialist spaces, Tlostanova calls for focusing on “the geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge growing out of the local histories, subjectivities and

experiences of eastern and south-eastern Europe, central Asia, Caucasus or Russia" (Tlostanova, 2012, p. 132). In other words, the aim is to centre local situatedness over universal claims and to make room for diverse experiences rather than reducing them to simplistic categories.

Moreover, as Tlostanova and Mignolo (2012) emphasise, coloniality is different from colonialism. While the latter denotes a particular social and historical regime tied to concrete places and histories, modernity/coloniality marks a global ideological order that manifests itself in various forms. For Tlostanova, global coloniality is "the idea of classifying humankind in relation to the colonial matrix of power and the ontological marginalization of non-western and not quite western people – a typical tool of modernity easily detected in colonialism of any kind, as well as in socialist discourses" (Tlostanova, 2012, p. 133). Coloniality of being and coloniality of knowledge thus describe these regimes of hierarchisation, marginalisation and othering in different ways of being and knowing – such as "the usual asymmetrical cosmopolitanism in which the North may easily remain ignorant of the South but the opposite is never allowed" (Tlostanova et al., 2016, p. 212).

My intention in mapping these intersections is therefore not in reducing or relativising the weight of European colonial violence, but in looking at the systems of power that enabled them. As Mignolo and Tlostanova (2012) highlighted, "[i]t is necessary to make it clear from the start that, although the point of origination of the particular conceptual structure (modernity/coloniality/ (de)coloniality) was located in South America, its scope is not limited to South America and the Caribbean. To think that way would be similar to believing that, if the concept of "biopolitics" originated in Europe, it is valid only for Europe" (p. 3). Their argument is therefore based on the assertion that both the Soviet empire and European colonies belong to the same modern/colonial matrix, being placed on a on the "developmental scale" of the civilising mission (Wolff, 1994, p. 13).

It is precisely for this reason that I find the intersection of postcolonial and postsocialist theoretical approaches important. It is not merely a matter of highlighting colonial structures, but also of integrating the so-called Second World and post-socialist experiences into the equation and thus showing the different shades and nuances of these systems of power. In other words, I view the postsocialist perspectives as offering a more fine-grained understanding of global knowledge production and thereby challenging simplistic and binary divisions of the world.

To highlight the spectrum of range of ways in which global coloniality manifests itself, many authors use the lens of core-periphery relations (e.g. Boatcă, 2013; Kalmar, 2022). This perspective draws on Immanuel Wallerstein's (2011) world-system analysis which originally

traced the origins of modern capitalism and global distribution of power. While Wallerstein always claimed it to be an analytical tool rather than a full-fledged theory, it has since been widely adopted, further developed and used in different contexts (Robinson, 2011). In sum, the world-system perspective emphasizes the distribution of labour and tasks and distinguishes between the centres and peripheries of "modes of production," with the periphery serving as a source of labour and resources and the core as the locus of profit accumulation and decision-making (Wallerstein, 2011). Although Wallerstein's original use has often been criticised as nation-state-centric (Robinson, 2011), Ivan Kalmar (2022) emphasizes that the core-periphery dynamic is far from static and unified, since each global periphery has its own local core and peripheral regions and vice versa. As such, it offers a flexible, yet accurate portrayal of power relations, hierarchies, and dependencies within a particular unit of analysis. While this is not my main theoretical perspective, I find it highly useful in describing the relations and positioning of CEE, not least with regard to the global coloniality. Along with authors like Kalmar (2022), Boatcă (2013) and others, I subscribe to the designation of CEE as a semi-periphery that benefits from some of the privileges of the European core while not being fully included in it, at times serving as a source of labour and resources.

4.1.1 Clarifying the 'posts': postsocialism, postcommunism, and the Global East

Before concluding this section, I want to clarify the key terms, namely 'postsocialism', 'postcommunism' as well as the 'Global East'. According to Koobak et al. (2021), postsocialism is mostly an analytical term, devoid of a fixed time or geography: "Postsocialism is not only about a certain time after socialism and not just about people living in former state socialist spaces. It is also a characteristic of the world in its globality after the end of the Cold War" (Koobak et al., 2021, p. 1). In practice, this aims to draw attention to the precarity of the former Second World that is "being perpetually assigned to a peripheral role and having a bitter sense of defeat" (Koobak et al., 2021, p. 8). This aspect of chronicity, of a state of constant transition, moral rehabilitation and never-ending "catching up" with the West of Europe is crucial – not only in defining postsocialism, but also in illuminating the subordinary position that postsocialist spaces are put in, validating exploitation and structural neglect, as some authors argue (Kolářová & Koobak, 2021). It is this connection, then, that connects postsocialism with postcolonialism because "[a]s analytical terms, both postcolonialism and postsocialism are concerned with legacies of imperial power, dependence, resistance, and hybridity, therefore pointing to multiple productive convergences between the two" (Koobak et al., 2021, p. 3).

Although the notion is well established and used frequently in scholarly literature (see, for instance, Kołodziejczyk & Şandru, 2017), there are continuous debates about its meaning and use. According to Muller (2019), postsocialism started appearing in 1990s, first as a temporal designation, later also as a political movement and as a theoretical concept. In Müller's

account, its ambition was never to present a singular theory of postsocialism, but rather to contrast postsocialist experiences with Western ideals and challenge the concept of unidirectional progress.

> "If there was thus one unifying thread across postsocialism (and postcommunism), it was the eschewal of teleological narratives of transition and of the ultimate annihilation of difference. […] It was a commitment towards impurities and hybrids that reflected a process of transformation in which one order was waning and another one never quite arrived, leaving a state of indeterminacy and therefore opportunity" (M. Müller, 2019, p. 538).

The troubles connected with the term are further illustrated by Hana Cervinkova (2012) who pointed out that postsocialism as a term did not arise from local discourse, but was invented by Western scholars. Academics coming from the 'postsocialist' spaces, on the other hand, have largely used 'postcommunism' instead since, some argued, it described the lived reality of communist regimes more accurately than the idea of 'real socialism' (Cervinkova, 2012, p. 157). While postcolonialism emerged out of emancipatory struggles and carries that history within its scholarship, Cervinkova argues, postsocialism is lacking both of these aspects and is instead built on Western epistemic hegemony: "Seen from this local critical perspective, postsocialism is an orientalizing concept through which western anthropologists constructed postcommunist Europe" (Cervinkova, 2012, p. 159). Despite that, Cervinkova still considers recent debates combining postcolonial and postsocialist approaches productive and supports their further explorations. Citing Chari and Verdery (2009), the author points out the three areas of commonalities and productive intersections between postsocialist and postcolonial experiences:

> 1) rethinking the concept of empire,
>
> 2) disrupting the "three worlds division of the Cold War" and the modernization theory,
>
> 3) researching "the governmental practices of state-sanctioned racism" which occurred both in colonialism and communism, albeit in different forms (Cervinkova, 2012, p. 160).

Both Cervinkova and Müller (2019) ultimately agree that postsocialism as a concept lost (or never even possessed) its emancipatory power. Yet, both authors support the engagement with postcolonial theory with the goal of mapping local colonial/imperial structures and inequalities. While I do share the view that postsocialism became to a large extent an empty category, as Manuela Boatcă (2021) also argues, I find the areas of intersections highlighted above useful and productive for analysis.

In the following analysis, I therefore differentiate between two terms: *postsocialist* and *CEE*. Bearing all of the limitations above in mind, I use *postsocialist* to refer to the theoretical literature and concepts that actively work with this term, and the *CEE* to refer to the geographical area of Central and Eastern Europe. My understanding of *postsocialism* is grounded in its temporal and geographic origin i.e. in the former Second World after the end of the Cold War, but more importantly, I take it as a signifier of the state of liminality or in-betweenness, marking the promissory, yet unfinished transformation. Its precise definition thus remains obscure and fleeting, just as the "the condition of Eastness" that Müller (2020) describes.

Because of this constant ambiguity, however, I find Martin Müller's definition of the "condition of Eastness" and Global East to be most fitting in describing the nature of these relations. To reiterate, Müller "use[s] 'East' here as a shorthand not so much for a geographical region, but for an epistemic space – a liminal space in-between North and South" (M. Müller, 2020, p. 735). It is defined by the experience of dual exclusion and the state of being "on the way northward, but at the same time seem stuck in eternal transition towards an elusive modernity" (p. 736).

In summary, I am drawing on the literature on postcolonial and postsocialist intersections to situate Central and Eastern Europe in global knowledge production and highlight the power structures at play there. I intend to use this perspective openly, without a set of clear assumptions but with a sensibility towards the hierarchisation of certain types of knowledges over others, the dominance of (mostly) Western European intellectual traditions, and the subordination of localized knowledge in favour of universalising claims. In this context, postcolonial theory lends itself as a toolbox that enlightens the power dynamics surrounding knowledge production and names the processes of othering, orientalisation or subordination therein. Literature on postsocialist experiences, on the other hand, highlights the experiences of liminality, or in-betweenness, of catching up but being stuck, while situating these experiences within wider global power dynamics. The benefit of combining these two perspectives is then in disrupting the narratives of modernization and schematic divisions of the world (e.g. North v South, First-Second-Third world) and shedding light on hegemonic discourses, imperial power lines and systems of othering or racialisation (Cervinkova, 2012; Chari & Verdery, 2009).

While attending to these tensions between 'local histories' and 'global designs' (Mignolo, 2012), it is however important to keep in mind that thinking in these large categories is always to some extent schematic and homogenising. That is to say, 'postsocialist spaces' are no more a unified entity than the Global North and South. Although centring 'the West' in all these debates does arguably reflect global power dynamics, it can also overshadow other, perhaps

less prominent power structures and local dynamics at play. Moreover, approaching such spaces and people as having been assigned a “fixed position” (see Tlostanova, 2012), determined by global colonial empires, neglects their own agency and self-determination as well as inner differences. Any comparison and discussion of these two perspectives thus have to be done carefully, with attention to the manifold of actors and influences. Having these considerations in mind, my intention is to attend to the varieties and multiplicities of European academic spaces (Law, 2015; Silova et al., 2017) as well as local histories and experiences (Tlostanova, 2012) and see whether and how specifically the described phenomena are reflected in the perceptions and experiences of researchers who move through them.

4.2 On space & mobility

In order to connect these large, value-laden categories to concrete research spaces, I draw on approaches that conceptualise space as relationally constituted, formed by the intertwinement of the material structure and social practices. In what follows, I will briefly introduce the strain of literature that my thinking about spaces stems from and then highlight how it contributes to my analysis. In the second part of this section, I will shortly present the literature on mobilities that informed my research.

Although sociological investigations of space as a social category have a long history, contemporary analyses of socio-spatial relations stem mainly from the so-called spatial turn in social theory, dating back to the 1970s (Fuller & Löw, 2017). Authors like Henri Lefèbvre (1991) or David Harvey (2010), among others, began study space not only as a structure for social action but also as its result. Space thus came to be understood as produced, not merely given (Fuller & Löw, 2017). Lefèbvre, just as Harvey, focused primarily on capitalist control and the appropriation of space, which led him to a perspective centred on the state and capitalist structures. Despite this, however, he opened new avenues for exploring the relationships between space and everyday social practices (Fuller & Löw, 2017; Löw, 2008).

To examine these more closely, Lefèbvre developed a triad of concepts, capturing spatial practices, representations of space, and representational space (Löw, 2008). There is already a distinction between different levels, perceptions, and constitutions of spaces, and above all, their power relations and consequences. Although, as Martina Löw (2008) points out, Lefèbvre’s conception of social practices was non-reflexive and did not account for the influence of practices on space, his categorisation still differentiated between space as given and space as potential, highlighting the relative and changing nature of space (Löw, 2008). The reason why this is important here is the fundamental understanding of space as both providing a structure for social practices and being their result. As Martina Löw (2008) summarised it, “[s]pace makes action possible and is itself the field of action” (p. 28).

These premises then gave rise to spatial sociology and the now widespread relational approach to space that I am drawing on here (Fuller & Löw, 2017). This perspective emphasizes the interconnection between material structures and social practices, bringing to the forefront the subjective perceptions and moulding of spaces, including the meanings and values attributed to them. This is also why this approach is key to my research here, as it offers a comprehensive view of how researchers form and interact with their research spaces.

For Martina Löw and Martin Fuller (2017), space is "that which is concrete, multi-dimensional, lived-in and experienced. Spaces are relationally constituted, contestable and processual" (p. 476). Their definition thus highlights the relational and processual nature of spaces, which includes the constitutive role of social practices, but also the impacts and influences that spaces have on them. Löw (2008) further differentiates between 'positioning practices' or 'spacing' and 'synthesis', to separate the "objects and bodies that are placed in the world and the modes of making-sense of the meaning of particular spaces" (Fuller & Löw, 2017, p. 476). What comes to the centre of these investigations are therefore the relative perceptions themselves – especially, to use Fuller and Löw's vocabulary, seeing *when* space becomes significant and *how* it is produced.

These questions are also at the core of this thesis, making this approach fitting here. As I trace researchers' trajectories and landscapes, I examine precisely these processes of sensemaking and building of spaces and investigate when and how they become important. In this sense, I make use of Löw's (2008) differentiation between synthesis and positioning practices since I look not only at researchers' perceptions of individual research spaces, but also at their positioning within wider structures and geographies. Space thus functions as the basic analytical unit here, reflecting and magnifying the perceptions, experiences, structures, and dynamics that surround it.

As a result, I understand spaces as constituted both by social actors and material structures, actively constructed by actors who interact with them and interpret them in their own particular ways. This construction is still tied to the material structures and objects that make up that space, which again shape the ways of interaction and interpretation. Such a perspective therefore connects the material with the symbolic, enabling me to see how one co-produces the other and how this interaction plays out in researchers' perceptions.

The relationships between space, place, and social practices have also been examined within STS. I will not cover the entire range of STS approaches here, but I will mention the work of Thomas Gieryn (2000), who was one of the first in STS to conceptualise 'place' as a product of interactions between "material forms and interpretative understandings or experiences" (Gieryn, 2000, p. 471). As he argued, "[p]laces are made as people ascribe qualities to the

material and social stuff gathered there: ours or theirs; safe or dangerous; public or private; unfamiliar or known; rich or poor; Black or White; beautiful or ugly; new or old; accessible or not" (Gieryn, 2000, p. 472). Through these attributions of meaning, Gieryn contended, places encompass particular sets of values and normative orders, maintaining hierarchies and a sense of difference, whether based on race, class or gender, and becoming vessels of power (Gieryn, 2000). While Fuller and Löw (2017) argue that situating Gieryn's conception of 'place' in sociology of space faces many challenges, Gieryn's approach brings to light the power structures that spaces carry and signify and connects them to STS investigations of sociotechnical practices, values and normative orders.

Nonetheless, if spaces are a representation of the material dispositions and social meanings, what does mobility do with all of this? While mobility does occupy quite a central role in my exploration of European research spaces, I understand it primarily as a means of seeing the difference rather than an end in itself. Accordingly, while researchers' experiences of mobility provide interesting insights in themselves, I want to focus on the research landscapes and researchers' position in them rather than on the movement itself.

As Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2006) noted, mobility is a global, wide-ranging phenomenon that includes the movement of people, animals, commodities, thoughts, messages or technologies. It encompasses refugees as well as students, soldiers as well as people on holidays. In other words, "[a]ll the world seems to be on the move" (p. 207). This ever-pervasive modality, i.e. the presence of mobility, they argued, gives way for a new mobility paradigm in social sciences. Their article, published twenty years ago, can be seen as marking a new era, one that moves away from static, deterritorialized view on society towards more interconnected, mobile perspective. Yet, what Sheller and Urry (2006) argued for went beyond the mere acknowledgment of movement – it was a call for considering the intertwinement of mobile with the immobile, for seeing what moves and what remains stable.

This is also the perspective I want to take in this thesis. Rather than investigating the nuances of mobility, I want to see what researchers' mobility says about the spaces it connects. At the same time, in line with Sheller and Urry's call for a more nuanced perspective, I do not want to simply see mobility as a binary between staying and going. As Maarja Saar (2023) emphasized in her study of East-West migration between Estonia and Finland, the attention on movement and mobility tends to overshadow those who decide to stay, creating normative assumptions about the decision to move and putting unequal emphasis on one group over the other.

> "One of the main criticisms of mobility studies' research is the existence of a predominant mobility discourse which recognises mobility and devalues staying […] Staying therefore becomes a non-event, whereas moving is considered to be a

> dramatic life-changing decision. As Hjalm (2014) notes, this sort of bias has been constitutive in developing a paradigm where staying is an act of non-agency, while moving is an act of agency" (Saar, 2023, pp. 154–155).

Saar categorised her interviewees into four subgroups of movers, temporary movers, stayers and those with ambivalent intentions, showing the complex, fluid nature of mobility decisions. Moreover, her study brings attention to the different strategies and kinds of capitals (economic, social, cultural) that people mobilize in order to "stay put" and argues that staying can actually require more resources than moving (e.g. when compensating for missing resources or social safety net). Saar therefore makes the discussions on migration and mobility more nuanced, showing that a decision to move is not simply a product of a binary choice, but a result of a complex matrix of economic, social and cultural capitals as well as temporal considerations.

What this study brings to my understanding of mobility is the nuanced recognition of agency – which can manifest not only as an act of moving, but also as a decision to stay. Furthermore, it shows the interconnectedness of various capitals and strategies in these decisions, highlighting that mobility decisions are not a result of a simple economic equation but encompass a wide array of external factors and personal preferences.

4.3 Epistemic living spaces

Finally, the key tool that enables me to connect researchers' perceptions with their research spaces and broader structures is the concept of epistemic living spaces. As I already described in the literature review, epistemic living spaces build on STS research into epistemic practices in different disciplinary and spatial settings (Knorr Cetina, 1999). In contrast to the epistemic cultures, however, epistemic living spaces move away from investigations of stable structures towards researchers' perceptions and the heterogeneities of life in research (Felt & Fochler, 2011).

In general, epistemic living spaces represent "the multi-dimensional structures – symbolic, social, intellectual, temporal and material – which mould, guide and delimit in more or less subtle ways researchers' (inter)actions, what they aim to know, the degrees of agency they have and how they can produce knowledge" (Felt, 2009, p. 19). What is thus at the core of these investigations is the sense of agency – the perception of possibilities and affordances as well as limitations that researchers experience in their research environments.

The concept was developed by Ulrike Felt and Maximilan Fochler (Felt, 2009; Felt & Fochler, 2011) with the goal of grasping the multitude of aspects shaping contemporary research – from the political, institutional, symbolic and epistemic regimes to personal factors and preferences (Felt, 2009, p. 19). Epistemic living spaces were first mobilized to compare five national

research environments in Europe, capturing the differences in understanding and experiencing research work and illuminating the wider structures governing it (Felt, 2009). It was then further advanced in a study focusing on the impacts of science communication and media representation on academic research, showing the intertwinement of public discourses, science communication, institutional governance and the actual research work (Felt & Fochler, 2011).

As these studies show, epistemic living spaces represent a tool to connect the "individual and collective experiences to more global systemic changes" (Felt & Fochler, 2011, p. 136). The concept thus provides a key framework for linking the various levels of my research – namely, researchers' individual perceptions with the spaces in which they move and the systems and structures they encounter.

These shaping structures and perceived boundaries can manifest in different ways, from various symbolic regimes and sets of values to particular practices as well as feelings of being (intellectually and socially) 'at home' (Felt, 2009, p. 19). In order to analyse these different aspects of research, epistemic living spaces are therefore divided into five dimensions: *epistemic*, *social*, *spatial/material*, *symbolic*, and *temporal*. Although all of the dimensions are deeply intertwined, this differentiation enables me to dissect and compare how researchers perceive their research spaces and to identify the structures that govern them.

The epistemic dimension includes questions of what constitutes good knowledge, how it should be produced as well as what research questions are considered central. This includes whether researchers follow topics based on academic curiosity, innovativeness or societal relevance, but also what kind of intellectual traditions they draw from and how they navigate the tension between the global and local in their research. The epistemological dimension therefore also raises questions about what kinds of knowledge are valued, seen, and reproduced, thereby tying in with themes of the postcolonial and postsocialist approaches. The second, social dimension describes the different forms of togetherness that researchers experience in their work, whether it is competitive or collaborative environment, the expectations places on individuals, or the sense of shared values and norms. It thus captures the importance and nature of social relationships for researchers, but also the reciprocal influence of social organisation and research spaces – that is, the extent to which research spaces shape forms of togetherness and, conversely, how the forms of togetherness shape the perceptions of spaces.

The third dimension then describes the spatial and material structures and affordances that guide and limit researchers' actions. They encompass everything from the physical

construction of research spaces, available infrastructure and equipment to the geographic and symbolic maps that researchers use to navigate and make sense of their own position. It includes the ideas of proximity and distance, the forms of tacit geography as well as the location of what researchers perceive as central nodes in the system. As a result, this dimension sheds light not only on the material construction of spaces, but also on their positioning – what values are attributed to them, what is seen as centre and periphery, and what orientation points guide researchers' movement. This relates also to the fourth dimension of epistemic living spaces, which are symbolic registers determining methods of evaluation, normative expectations, and ideals that are supposed to guide research work. Unlike symbolic maps, however, this category does not concern spatial dimensions, but general values such as excellence, mobility, accountability or academic auditing, which have become the governing logics of contemporary academia and symbolise the wider structures that researchers face. The last layer deals with temporality, i.e. the pace of academic work in a given environment, differentiating between various time regimes (whether institutional, project-based, or personal commitments) as well as the different forms of time, such as the 'timeless time' in contrast to project time (Felt & Fochler, 2011; Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003). As I will show in the empirical chapter, being able to identify the temporal aspects proves critical not only in the experience of research work itself, but also in relation to the perception and formation of research spaces and researchers' navigation strategies.

While these individual dimensions are analytically meaningful, as Felt and Fochler (2011) emphasize, in practice, they are deeply intertwined and impossible to simply separate from one another. Moreover, due to the fluid and constructed nature of these aspects, epistemic living spaces are subject to constant reordering, being changed, protected and stabilised based on external influences as well as researchers' own normative expectations (Felt & Fochler, 2011). Drawing on Thomas Gieryn's (1999) boundary work, epistemic living spaces thus bring light not only to the structures themselves, but also to the 'orientation work' and 'boundary work' of researchers who make sense, navigate, and reshape the spaces they occupy (Felt & Fochler, 2011, p. 136). That is ultimately at the core of this thesis – not only identifying how researchers perceive their research spaces, but also seeing how they navigate, negotiate and build them for themselves. The concept therefore brings to light the messy nature of research, showing the "uncertainties, tensions, and contradictions of living in and doing research" (Felt, 2009, p. 19).

As a result, epistemic living spaces help me not only to analyse researchers' perceptions and experiences with different research spaces, but also elucidate the tensions, contradictions, and uncertainties that researchers navigate and negotiate. Although the concept does not directly interrogate larger power structures, it sheds light on them by showing how they guide and limit

researchers in their work – what is seen as possible and what is beyond the reach – and how researchers' perceptions and actions reconstruct these larger structures. In this way, epistemic living spaces lend themselves as a thread connecting the different levels of this research and creating a comprehensive framework for analysis. It is of course necessary to keep in mind that the perceptions and experiences that concept captures are subjective and constructed, and as such cannot be taken as precise or comparable qualities. Yet, their comparison exposes shared structures that influence the workings of contemporary research.

Altogether, following relational approach to space, I see spaces are constitutive of and constituted by social relations. Using epistemic living spaces, I highlight researchers' perceptions and experiences and shed light on the wider structures they move through. Such a focus on spatiality therefore creates a connecting threat that links the different aspects of this research. Central to this investigation is the attribution of value to different research environments and its impact on researchers' navigation of European research landscape. That includes the questions of what guides researchers' movement, what is perceived as possible or beyond the limits and what norms researchers question, negotiate or resist. Such a framework thus bridges the discussions on postcolonial legacies, epistemic hierarchies and liminality of postsocialist spaces with the mundane practices of everyday academic work. Taken together, these pillars form the conceptual foundation of the thesis and offer tools for tracing the often-hidden dynamics shaping the European research landscape.

4.4 Glossary

Throughout this text, I use a number of different notions for describing various spaces, layers, environments and landscapes that researchers move through. Before I dive deeper into the theoretical underpinnings of my approach to space and mobility, I will now clarify what I mean by these key terms and how they figure in my understanding of the topic.

Research spaces

'Research spaces' represent the basic units of this inquiry. I understand them as the immediate environments in which research is done, physically and socially bounded to a particular position and institution that researchers occupy. They can be defined by a research group, a department or a conference. The size and boundaries of such research spaces can vary depending on the context as well as researchers' understanding. In this sense, 'research spaces', as I see them, resemble 'epistemic living spaces' in that they are both formed by researchers' subjective perception. However, while epistemic living spaces are based on researchers' sensemaking and sense of agency, research spaces rather represent here the environments in which researchers move and act. They are thus anchored in a particular physical setting and tied to a geographical position in contrast to the epistemic living spaces

which can take various forms and locations. This differentiation therefore allows for highlighting the spatial positioning and spatial relations. To put it simply, while epistemic living spaces emphasize perception, research spaces focus on location.

Just as *spaces* in general, I see *research spaces* as constructed both by the material structure and by the meanings and values assigned to them by social actors who interact with them. The geographical anchor therefore does not take away from their social construction (in line with the relational approach outlined above) since any space is constructed through "the physical spacing and processes of sensemaking" (Fuller & Löw, 2017, p. 476). The difference between general 'spaces' and 'research spaces' then lies in the more detailed definition of the particular context (i.e. being defined by research as its primary purpose and activity) and by its concrete spatial anchoring.

Research landscapes – individual vs collective

Another spatial term that is central to my exploration is a 'research landscape'. While a research landscape can carry different meanings in different contexts, I approach it here as the sum of research spaces which researchers move through and relate to. As the maps drawn by my interview partners illustrate below, in the empirical chapter, researchers can understand and picture their landscapes in various ways, sometimes defining them by their networks and communities, other times by the particular cities, regions and countries that have had some significance in their research life. In all of these cases, however, researchers' landscapes are linked by the particular trajectory of the researcher and by the research spaces and communities they are connected to. These aspects – a researchers' trajectory, the research spaces they have moved through and their communities or networks – therefore constitute what I see as the *individual landscapes* of researchers, being actively enacted and shaped by researchers themselves.

European research landscape

While attaining to their multiplicity, I see the individual landscapes as situated within the wider framework of the European research landscape. I understand this as a collective, shared landscape that consists of all the individual research landscapes which are layered on top of each other. It is then their shared characteristics, structures and orientation marks – such as the institutional frameworks, governing logics, or research hubs – that forms the shape of this shared European landscape. As it is an aggregate of different individual landscapes, this landscape is also shaped and formed by researchers who inhabit it and move through it. In the sense that this European research landscape is collective and shared, it is more stable than individual landscapes as its form is not dependent on a single individual but on collective enactments of researchers who move in Europe.

There are two reasons why I want to specify the ‘European research landscape’ here: first, European academia represents the unifying element in the trajectories of my interview partners as well as the main research area in which they move. Second, since I am interested in exploring the centres and (semi)peripheries of European research, it makes sense to think about the wider environment in which these centres and (semi)peripheries are placed. Differentiating between researchers’ individual landscapes and the shared, collectively-enacted European landscape therefore enables me to conceptualise the shared terrain and highlight its overarching structures and power dynamics that might otherwise remain isolated.

5 Methods

The investigation is built on a qualitative interpretive analysis, using semi-structured interviews and subjective mapping exercises. In the following paragraphs, I will briefly explain these methods and how I have come to use them and then talk about the data analysis and the ethical considerations.

5.1 Semi-structured interviews & mapping

Semi-structured interviews represented a relatively straightforward choice, as they allowed me to maintain a fixed interview structure while being able to adapt to the specific topics and journeys of individual researchers. Thanks to this consistent structure, the interviews were comparable and their flexibility enabled me to draw out specific aspects and important insights from each interviewee.

In the periods between September – December 2024 and June – July 2025, I collected seven interviews with social science researchers from Czechia, Croatia, Hungary, and Russia. All of the interviewees were working in Western Europe at the time of the interview and had experiences from different research spaces across Europe. The sampling was a combination of a snowball method and purposive sampling (Jensen & Laurie, 2016) where I directly contacted researchers who matched the target profile. The sampling focused on social science researchers from Central and Eastern Europe who

1) had experience with working in western Europe,

2) were postdocs at the time of the interview, and

3) who worked in political science or international relations.

First of all, my goal was to gain insights from researchers who have moved across different research spaces in Europe and therefore had diverse experiences as well as their subjective comparison. The reason behind the second criterion was the assumption that postdocs would

be more sensitive to potential asymmetries and power hierarchies occurring in research spaces given their relatively precarious position in academic hierarchy. Due to accessibility, I also interviewed a researcher who was not a postdoc, but an assistant professor. However, this aspect turned out to be less important in the interviews, and the difference in career hierarchy did not significantly alter the results. The third criterion stemmed from the fact that a significant part of the literature describing the CEE asymmetries that I used was based in political science or international relations. This choice was therefore motivated by the possible comparability of the results and by its support in the literature. However, it subsequently became apparent that the researchers' career paths and relevant experiences very often crossed disciplinary boundaries, and such narrow definition became less relevant. Nevertheless, all researchers were connected to political science and international relations either through the field of their work or through the department in which they worked.

Most of the interviews were conducted in person in Vienna, while two were conducted online via video call because the researchers were abroad. The interviews were conducted in English, and, in the case of two researchers from the Czech Republic, in Czech. The interviews took between 40-100 minutes each and were recorded on a voice recorder. The recording was then transcribed either manually or through noScribe, an AI transcription tool that runs locally and therefore maintains data protection. I obtained a signed informed consent from each of the interviewees before the interview started.

All the interviews were structured along the same pattern: I started by asking the researchers how they got into academia and their specific field and then followed their trajectory across different academic spaces chronologically. First, I asked about the mobility itself, learning about the motivations and reasons for moving, and then dived into the details of their perceptions of each research space. This structure enabled me to follow their reasoning and reconstruct a comparison of the different research spaces they encountered. While I had similar questions prepared for every interviewee, e.g. about their perception of the work collective, the institutional provisions, or the differences in conceptual debates, I let the interviewees talk about what they saw as most significant which allowed me to learn what they assigned importance to and what was less prominent in their perceptions. At the end of the interview, I asked the researchers more general questions about their perception of their Central and Eastern European identity and sense of belonging and then prompted them to map their own research landscape.

The mapping exercise represented an additional analytical tool of the interview process. Similarly to Donnelly et al. (2020), Emmel et al. (2008) or Gieseking (2013), I see mapping exercises as valuable components of qualitative inquiry, revealing novel and sometimes unexpected understandings, emotions and relations. While these mapping methods, such as

those used by Donnelly et al. (2020) and Emmel et al. (2008), usually work with a predefined map or a particular spatial arrangement, my goal was to let researchers depict their research landscapes in whatever form and shape they wanted. In this way, I followed the examples of Gieseking (2013) and Ghiysawan (2022), the latter of which employed subjective mapping as a tool of letting their participants map their emotions without needing to adhere to a fixed geography.

As Gieseking (2013) noted "mental mapping affords a lens into the way people produce and experience space, forms of spatial intelligence, and dynamics of human–environment relations ranging from the minute experiences of everyday life to larger structural oppressions" (p. 712). Incorporating mental mapping into the interviews therefore allowed me to uncover different dimensions of researchers' perceptions and get a closer understanding of how they imagined their research landscapes in the moment. In line with this subjective nature of the exercise, it is important to note that the resulting maps merely captured the momentary imagination of the researcher. Although I had informed all the interview partners of this exercise in advance, they did not know the exact prompt for the drawing and could not think about it before the interview. As a result, the final maps represent their momentary subjective interpretations of the topic and not a fixed representation of their perceptions. As some of the researchers told me after the interview, there were many other ways they could have gone in and the result was simply one of them. Bearing in mind this contingent nature of the drawings, the maps that the researchers drew still constituted a very valuable input into my material.

The mapping itself took part in the second half of the interview. I asked the interviewees if they could draw how they imagined the research landscape they were moving in: what places were important to them, what they related to and if there was anything else they considered important in their research journey. While one researcher declined the exercise, the rest of the interviewees accepted it and, after a short reflection, drew their maps. The drawings did not take more than five or ten minutes, after which I asked the interviewees to explain their maps to me. In the interviews conducted in person, I offered each researcher an A3 paper, pencils, markers, and pens in various colours. Most of the researchers used only one or two pencils, keeping their maps quite minimalistic. The interviewees that I spoke with online used simply any pen and paper that was available to them. Since I did not analyse the drawings based on the material used, but rather on the content, these differences in tools were not significant.

In the end, I obtained six maps, all of which captured a different aspect of researchers' journeys and landscapes. Since they were not directly comparable, I did not develop a fixed analytical manual for analysing them. Instead, I used them as subjective representations of researchers' perceptions. As a result, they are placed throughout the text of the empirical chapter as illustrations of the discussed topics, each of them adding another valuable layer to the verbal

descriptions. I anonymized the maps as much as possible using text blocks to preserve their original appearance while ensuring that specific locations and countries remained unidentifiable. I also made a representation of one of the maps due to the poor quality of the online image. In the text, all maps are accompanied by a caption with a descriptive title which summarises my own understanding of the map. I did not consult the interviewees for these captions.

While this approach allowed me to explore the different themes emerging in researchers' accounts and combine them with my theoretical framework flexibly, the methodology has several limitations. Semi-structured interviews cannot provide an insight into the actual differences between research spaces given their subjective nature. At the same time, interviews are collaborative by nature, which means that meanings are constructed mutually between the interviewer and the interviewee, adding to the constructed and subjective nature of the interviews (Silverman, 2015). While any generalizability is impossible in this kind of research, the relatively small sample of researchers I talked to necessarily brings only partial perspectives and can only account for a fraction of CEE experiences.

Moreover, the pool of perspectives I gathered had been shaped not only by my own criteria, but also by the people who agreed to talk to me, who might have considered the topic relevant or at least worthy of a discussion. In other words, the very fact that someone responded to my invitation might have already shaped the kind of experiences I would receive, especially considering the importance that some of the researchers assigned to the topic when talking to me. However, the material I collected was also influenced by practical circumstances, illustrating the topic at hand – for example, one researcher I contacted declined the interview, explaining that as a postdoc, they were currently facing the height of their job uncertainty, and although they would have liked to, they simply did not have the capacity to discuss these issues at the moment. The temporal and material conditions therefore significantly influenced who I talked to and what I heard as well as how I interpreted the results.

Moreover, there is necessarily a number of local specificities connected to the institution, country, or career stage that influence the perceptions of the individual researchers. As pointed earlier, neither Western nor (Central and) Eastern Europe are monolithic spaces with homogenous experiences, which means that researchers' experiences cannot account for the whole region. Nonetheless, I do not attempt to provide an all-encompassing picture here but rather contribute to the existing debates on CEE lived experiences and perceived asymmetries.

5.2 Coding and analysis

I analysed the material using thematic analysis as described by Braun & Clarke (2006), focusing on identifying recurring patterns, themes, and categories within the interview transcripts. Themes were thus derived both deductively, based on the theoretical framework, and inductively, allowing for the emergence of new themes from the data. First, I immersed in the material, attempting to get an overview and write initial analytical memos. After that, I used MAXQDA and did the first round of coding using deductive codes based on epistemic living spaces as well as inductive codes stemming from the topics that emerged in the interviews. That was followed by several rounds of revisions where I regrouped and reformulated the codes based on the themes emerging from the interviews, then went through the material again, and recoded it. During this process, I erased codes that had less than five coded segments and restructured them. The process was thus iterative, incorporating comparisons across the interviews to identify similarities and differences in researchers' perceptions and experiences. I worked with the original interview transcripts, i.e. using both Czech and English interviews at the same time, without translating them for the analysis. Only quotes used in the empirical chapter were translated using DeepL Pro version, ensuring data protection.

5.3 Positionality and ethical considerations

As the introductory vignette illustrated, my own positionality has shaped this research in many ways. As a person from Central and Eastern Europe who has herself moved abroad and experienced an academic environment outside her home country (albeit only as a student), I came to this project with a personal connection, my own imaginations, experiences, and preconceptions. This shared background was often an asset: it gave me a degree of familiarity with many of the experiences my interviewees described, and in some cases created an immediate sense of common ground through shared cultural references, a common language, or simply the recognition of a similar situation. With some participants, there was also a previous rapport, which made the conversations easier to get into.

The shared interest in the topic also played a role. Some participants were clearly keen to talk about these issues and saw the interview as an opportunity to reflect on experiences they found important. Others were more distant from the topic, participating perhaps out of an understanding of social science research and a sense of solidarity, giving back what they themselves had asked of their own research participants.

At the same time, the shared background also brough about some power dynamics into the play. As my interview partners were more senior researchers than me, they were well-versed in social science methods and fully aware of the conventions of the interview setting. As a

result, I had to navigate my role as the interviewer who is supposed to guide the interview and traditionally possesses the power in this setting (Perera, 2021) while, at the same time, being a student who has significantly less experience and expertise social science research in comparison to the people I interviewed. That being said, none of the interviewees exploited that or made it very apparent. Although the asymmetry was present, I felt quite comfortable in my position, being aware of the situation and trying to let the conversation unfold on its own terms. Beside this, the content of the interviews sometimes touched on sensitive topics, especially when talking about the inability to go back home due to the political situation there. In these cases, I tried to follow the lead of the interviewees rather than pressing on topics that were painful or that went beyond what they wanted to share.

Several ethical considerations also shaped the way I handle and present the material in this thesis. First of all, the trajectories of my interviewees are specific and personal and sharing them could easily lead to compromising their anonymity. To protect their privacy, I refrain from using any details that could potentially compromise their identity – including their name, gender, and specific institutional affiliations. This also involves removing or generalising references to particular universities, cities, or countries where researchers have resided, replacing them with broader geographical designations that preserve the meaning without revealing individual pathways. For the same reason, I do not attribute quotes to specific interviewees since doing so would risk making their particular trajectories traceable, undermining their trust and anonymisation.

Similarly, I do not specify the particular subfields that researchers are part of, beyond noting that all of them touched in some way on political science and/or international relations. Rather than tracing researchers' paths individually or chronologically, I analyse their experiences thematically as they emerged from the material. Lastly, in the effort to refrain from identification of my interview partners, I also refrain from naming their country of origin. Throughout the text, I sometimes substitute it with “home country” or “country of origin”: while I am aware that the notion of home carries its own assumptions about belonging and attachment, I try to use it consciously, reserving it for cases where it was apparent that the researcher still related strongly to their country of origin and the place carried particular significance for them. At the same time, I want to acknowledge that the designation is inevitably imprecise: for some researchers, their country of origin is somewhere they have long been unable to return to; for others, home is not a fixed location but something that moves with them. The term is therefore used with this ambiguity in mind, not in spite of it.

Lastly, I want to address the potential confusion about the inclusion of researchers from Russia. As stated above, the key sampling criterion was researchers’ Central and Eastern European origin. While, as I explained in the literature review, there are contestations about the borders

of Central and Eastern Europe, the notion of CEE usually does not include Russia. I am therefore aware that the inclusion of Russian researchers might seem slightly out of place here. Nonetheless, my goal in this thesis has been to describe what Martin Müller (2020) termed “condition of Eastness”, focusing on the experiences of being Eastern European, but without a particular focus on specific place of origin. Moreover, as I was primarily looking for interviewees in Austria, the pool was somewhat limited. As a result, I simply approached researchers to whom I had access and who were from the Eastern Europe at large, without specifically looking for particular countries to be represented. In addition, the Russian researchers I talked to were all based in Western European universities at least since the beginning of the war in Ukraine and their experiences with navigating the repercussions of the war represented valuable input into the reconstruction of Central and Eastern European experiences, including the inability to go back home and struggling with authoritarian regime. I am aware, however, that Russia’s war against Ukraine represents a very specific, acute and painful dimension of Central and Eastern European lived experiences; one that this thesis does not capture but which certainly deserves attention. The lack of these experiences here – and of Ukrainian voices especially – is thus not a result of a deliberate choice, rather a coincidence, although it still represents a significant gap.

5.3.1 Table of AI use

AI Tool	Work Phase	Prompts/How was the AI used?	Reason for Usage	Comment and Reflection on the Results
DeepL	Translation, Writing	I used the Pro version (which maintains data privacy) to translate parts of the Czech interviews and then translated parts of my text during the writing phase.	I wanted to find the best possible translation for parts of the material that were in Czech. I also sometimes found it easier to write in Czech and then used DeepL to translate it into English.	The translation worked great. Writing in Czech and then having a tool to quickly translate it sped up the pace of my work significantly, especially when I felt stuck during writing.
Chat GPT (v.4), Claude (free version)	Refinement of writing	I asked to formulate my points into coherent sentences or reformulate an existing text and make it more precise. I avoided	I was struggling sometimes to find the right wording for my thoughts or formulate them in a concise way. It helped me sped up the process	Fine-tuning the prompts sometimes took significant time, the text was often generic and not good. It worked only as a first draft

		using any personal details, interviewees' quotes or any other specifications that could compromise the data and pseudonymisation of the interviewees.	and progress when I felt stuck.	that I further edited and rewrote. Still the outcome was helpful in moving me forward and giving me new ideas about a specific formulation or sentence structure. I was aware however of the risks of putting any data into those systems and always abstracted the points made and was careful about not sharing anything specific.
noScribe	Transcription of interviews	I used it to transcribe the interviews to save time.	I did not have time to transcribe all the interviews by myself, so I used it for some of the transcriptions.	I wanted a safe tool that maintains data protection and stores data only locally. noScribe was a great tool for that and proved to be very good in transcribing.

This table was put together by the STS TAs based on the "Documentation Table" developed by the Writing Center of UniGraz.

6 Empirical findings

6.1 Introduction

> *Now I'm here, in the present. But of course, I carry all of this with me, which has somehow shaped and created me and shaped us together.* (Interviewed researcher)

Researchers' trajectories are diverse and intricate, encompassing a wide range of places, experiences, connections, and influences that might seem messy and incoherent at first glance. Yet it is precisely this combination of layers that constitutes researchers' individual landscapes – a collection of spaces they have passed through, the paths they have chosen, and the experiences and feelings that they have carried along the way. Just as the researcher quoted above looks back on their journey, with all its influences and formative experiences that shaped them, I too will now attempt to reconstruct the research landscapes of my interviewees, examining their sensemaking, navigation, and negotiation within European research spaces.

This complex interconnection of different aspects also provides a picture of what epistemic living spaces are about – the intertwinement of social and material constructions, embedded meanings and values as well as various boundaries and affordances that cannot simply be contained in a single story. What the next pages will focus on are therefore not clear definitions of one fixed trajectory, but rather the different possibilities of navigating and living in European academia as a researcher from CEE. Despite the multiplicity, researchers' pathways reveal common problems, frequently encountered obstacles as well as structures that can alleviate or intensify stress and hardship. The chapter therefore takes the form of a gradual exploration the European research landscape, which I understand as the aggregate of research spaces and individual landscapes, and examines what researchers' individual landscapes have in common, where they differ and what overarching structures emerge from them.

The journey starts with an initial mapping of the social and material foundations of research spaces, focusing on the restrictions and affordances that researchers observed in them. This contains the perceived differences between Western European and CEE research spaces as well as the strategies that researchers used to navigate and negotiating them. After laying these basic cornerstones of researchers' sensemaking, I will move to the examination of their mobility and construction of agency – looking at how researchers framed their decision-making, how they negotiated their mobility, and what spatial conceptions and orientation marks guided their movement. Here, I will probe the qualities ascribed to particular cities and countries as well as the various meanings hidden in categories such as "the international".

The third part of this exploration will then focus on researchers' sense of belonging and their relation to Central and Eastern Europe. I will show how researchers position themselves in

their landscapes, where they locate their home, how they identify with the CEE and what attributes and questions arise when discussing questions of Central and Eastern European identity in research. This is also where liminality, as described in Martin Müller's (2020) Global East, comes in – not only as a description of a transitional state and a place on the margins, but also as an expression of ambiguous identification and uncertain belonging. It encapsulates the efforts to not let go of places one calls home as well as the troubles of returning to academia in one's country of origin. Liminality is also what defines the experiences of prejudice and stereotypes that do not fit neatly into one category and sometimes raise questions about what one identifies with. Finally, the chapter will conclude with researchers' future directions and utopias. Although imaginary, these concepts of ideal places and futures highlight the real spaces of possible (and needed) change, providing inspiration and direction for improvement.

6.2 Social and material foundations

> *But there is this very basic economic aspect which I always try to tell that since I am in [Austria], I teach much less so not, even before [the fellowship], when I was in a normal position, normal employed position, I had two, two classes a week and not five or six as all my [Eastern European] friends. My university pays for all sorts of journals, which we try to treat somehow fine. I had money for going to conferences, my friends have to apply for 200 euros to get some or or need three beats to prove that they went to the cheapest, cheapest, cheapest hotel in that particular city to get funded. And it's a half a year of administration procedure so that you can get somehow to an international conference and then you are not published because your English is not good enough. So there is this very material part of the, so you have no time for research, your university has no infrastructure, no money.*

The ways in which researchers made sense of their research spaces stemmed first and foremost from the social and material affordances and restrictions they observed in them. As the quote shows, it was also these affordances and restrictions that made much of the difference between Western and Central and Eastern European spaces in researchers' accounts. Teaching overload, lack of research time, low salaries, inadequate funding, and, in some cases, competitive and isolating academic communities, represented the major issues that researchers associated with research spaces in their countries of origin. While none of these factors are unique to CEE, it was their combination and intensity that set these spaces apart from research environments to the west. At the same time, their particular form and constellation differed from place to place, reflecting the heterogenous and diverse character of the research spaces in question.

The amalgam of these factors thus represents the building blocks and cornerstones of researchers' sensemaking; they appear in all the spaces, taking on different forms, and laying foundations for further insights and experiences. At the same time, they reflect the wider trends governing contemporary academia. As outlined in the literature review, academic spaces are largely governed by quantifiable metrics and auditing culture, competitiveness and projectification, marketization as well as an emphasis on hypermobility. These trends are often summarised as academic capitalism (e.g. Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004a), highlighting the penetration of neoliberal logic into academic spaces. In practice, these phenomena can translate into high requirements for academic output and productivity, the unavailability of permanent contracts, dependence on grants and project-based work, or emphasis on marketable results (Sigl, 2016; Fochler et al., 2016; Franssen & de Rijcke, 2019; Haddow & Hammarfelt, 2019). Since all but one of my interviewees were postdocs at the time of the interview, they were even more exposed to the lack of security inherent to contemporary academic work (Wöhrer, 2014b; Loveday, 2018b). The particular working conditions, such as the pay, time for research, available infrastructure, or institutional support at a given place were therefore all the more important.

The consequences of these issues are significant. In an already precarious and neoliberalized academia, such scarcity of resources pushes researchers into even more difficult positions – low salaries force many into additional jobs, project-dependence fragments attention and creates constant pressure, and limited institutional support restricts participation in wider academic networks. This creates uneven landscapes where some institutions provide researchers with the conditions to flourish, while others overstretch their capacities without meeting basic needs, effectively weakening their position in the broader academic market.

6.2.1 Research infrastructures

One of the primary structures that determine researchers' perceptions of possibilities and limitations is the research infrastructure that their institution provides. Such support can take various forms, whether spatial, financial, or epistemic. Simply having a desk and an office where one can work already constitutes the basis of institutional backing, but the variety of tools and support that institutions can provide is much larger.

One significant part of such an infrastructure is the access to scientific literature, libraries and databases. For some of the interviewees, this was a key issue, yet again revealing the felt different between research spaces in their own country, or Central and Eastern Europe as a whole, and those further west.

In general, the access to academic resources is far from guaranteed, as most scientific articles are still behind a paywall of publishing companies and can be only accessed either through

institutional access or by paying high fees (Fyfe et al., 2017). Scientists therefore traditionally depend on their institutions to provide them with access to academic articles, books, and journals that they need for research. However, the scope of accessible literature can vary significantly across institutions, creating yet another layer of inequality in academic practice. One way that researchers respond to this situation is through the so-called ‘shadow libraries’, or ‘black open access’ (Zukerfeld et al., 2022) – i.e. pirate platforms such as Sci-Hub, LibGen or Anna’s Archive that provide unrestricted access to scientific knowledge by sharing millions of academic articles for free. Since they bypass official publishers and their fees, the operation of these platforms is illegal, which makes them a subject of controversy and lawsuits. However, this does not make them any less attractive to researchers who continue to use them despite their legal status (Bohannon, 2016; Gardner et al., 2017; Zukerfeld et al., 2022).

Previous research has found that such shadow libraries are by no means used only out of necessity and inevitability but very often by users who have solid institutional access to academic production (Bohannon, 2016; Zukerfeld et al., 2022). For some of my interview partners, however, these platforms at times represented the only means of accessing their desired literature. The access to literature thus became another defining feature of research spaces in their home countries.

Issues of accessibility and the available research infrastructure were often associated with the entire country or a region, thereby becoming another signpost in how researchers navigated and understood their research spaces and landscapes. Accessibility, however, did not merely mean access to literature; it also encompassed physical spaces and the overall openness of institutions, which manifested itself in a wide variety of ways. One of the interviewees from Russia, for instance, described the Russian academic environment as characteristically difficult in obtaining access to scientific literature and databases. As an example, they described how the libraries and study spaces of their university seemed inaccessible to them during their studies, imposing a lot of restrictions, rules, and control and discouraging them from ever spending time there.

> *But, you know, if you enter the library, you have to, like, you know, you have to leave all your stuff. You can take your laptop but you need to kind of register it or something like that. And then there's no way you can go out for smoke. I mean, there are smoking rooms, I think, in the old building, but it's, I mean, it's very kind of, it's like going to an archive, right? So if you go there, you have to sit there for hours and do your stuff because, you know, you cannot just move, move around freely because of the nature of the space.*

This experience led the researcher to mostly study alone which significantly influenced their contact with other students and made studying more of a lonely exercise. The physical affordances and restrictions were thus shaping the prevailing forms of togetherness as well as symbolic meanings associated with the institution.

Moreover, this sensation of restrictions and inaccessibility was not limited to physical libraries, but included digital resources, too. In the interviewee's account, they were incomplete and required complicated registration procedures as well. It was at this point that platforms such as Sci-Hub became central to their research, fulfilling most of their library needs. However, even when they moved to a western European institution, they still found the shadow libraries to be useful and important. In their words, despite being able to access large amounts of literature through official channels, "*sometimes there's, like, 20 percent of what you're interested in or 15 or 30, that's not [in the institutional database]"*, giving renewed relevance to shadow libraries.

Nonetheless, the move abroad and the resulting sudden surplus of resources was a turning point for the interviewee for multiple reasons. From spaces characterized by inaccessibility and control, they moved to a place with specialized social science library with virtually unlimited access and extensive study rooms. These newly found possibilities also led to a gradual change in their research habits as they began to make use of these spaces and spend more time there, just as their peers did.

> *And so, people usually would study there through the night, and, or sleep, you know, eat, and so on. So, this, the, the bottom floor is really, kind of, this kind of space where you can do whatever. […] you could work there through the night, and I did that a lot. And so, that was a major thing for me, in addition to the obvious, um, you know, kind of excitement of the fact that there's so much, uh, you have so much resources available to you suddenly.*

Yet again, this account shows the intertwinement of the different aspects of research spaces, where physical barriers and affordances shape local forms of togetherness, symbolic meanings and ultimately also the research practices. The perception of accessibility therefore not only stems from the access to databases or registration procedures but includes social interactions as well as temporal regimes.

Such an experience was, according to this interviewee, far from unique, but represented a wider phenomenon that was particularly relevant for researchers from late Soviet Union. Recalling a story from one particular scholar, the interviewee described the sense of excitement that researchers of that generation shared about coming to *"a proper library for the first time"* where one could *"take a bunch of books"* and have access to all the sources. This

stood in clear contrast to the Soviet institutions of the time which were strictly controlled and required clearances if one wanted to access something. Although this was not relevant for the interviewee and their generation anymore, they said they could still relate to it.

Another interviewee from Hungary described a similar experience, highlighting how important the platforms like Sci-Hub or LibGen had been for them and their Eastern European colleagues. Finishing up their PhD dissertation in a room away from their university during the covid-19 pandemic, their access to resources was greatly limited. The shadow library platforms were thus all the more substantial, making it possible for them to access needed literature. Now that they were part of an Austrian university, however, they found themselves at the other side of the wall, providing access to their colleagues and friends who still depend on the "black open access" routes.

> *I downloaded everything I could, I had no access to libraries. I had LibGen and Sci-Hub. You know what, so without Ligan and Sci-Hub – it's an important sentence, please – no Eastern European would be able to make a PhD and research. It is still now that my [mostly Eastern European] friends who, if, if something is not on Sci-Hub or LibGen, they write me that, [name], can you access it through [the university].*

Again, the difference between what was possible and what was available to researchers was often felt the most when confronted with a new, foreign environment. A different researcher also recounted the striking difference in research infrastructure they encountered in the US. The support provided for researchers that the interviewee witnessed stood in stark contrast to what they were used to in Hungary, highlighting the scale of material inequality in academic research spaces.

> *[…] in the US I was just like, you know, it was astonishing to see that they have not just librarians who specifically send you materials that are published in your field, but also research assistants who would, you know, they would go to an archive and send you back like readable summaries. And obviously that's how I realized that, okay, that's how people write, you know, one book per year, which was like, oh, is this a genius? I mean, some of these people are truly geniuses, but, but okay, there is this, you know, institutional material side too. So this is how it's possible. So the research infrastructure is just completely different.*

The perceived accessibility, whether spatial, physical or digital, therefore represented another key feature of researchers' landscapes as it literally shaped where researchers could go, what they could read and how they worked. This, naturally, also had epistemic implications, as the unavailability of texts – whether in institutional databases or shadow libraries – affected the

knowledge to which researchers had access. As one interviewee pointed out, this configuration may have significantly influenced how researchers thought about their topics and fields.

> *I came across some reflections on Russian kind of Telegram channels, where […] some people kind of started to reflect on how the availability of materials on LibGen shaped their, kind of, you know, perception of their fields and the way they, kind of, what they read. I think it's, it's an under explored topic, […] I think it did shape this a lot.*

These experiences show yet another side of the intertwinement of the material and epistemic layers of research. *What* is being read and *how* is a result of institutional affordances, available databases, as well as physical barriers and rooms. The spatial organisation then literally shapes the forms of togetherness, influencing whether research is perceived as a lonely exercise or a collective effort and a shared activity. Moreover, as these accounts show, all of these aspects can either support researchers in their work and alleviate stress or put obstacles in their way, ultimately creating inequalities in what researchers can achieve at a given time and space.

Another aspect of this infrastructural dimension is the load of administrative tasks that researchers are obliged to do. Bureaucracy represents a significant part of research work, linked not only to necessary procedures at the institution one works at, but, importantly, also to grant applications and project processing. With the general increase in project funding, this part of research work only gains in importance (and time requirements). The number of administrative duties, whether it is filling out forms or going through accountability processes, thus strongly shapes how researchers see their position and research space.

While the paragraphs above highlighted primarily the lacking infrastructures in CEE spaces, the bureaucratic component figured in researchers' accounts regardless of location, making it a sort of omnipresent dimension of their work. The following experiences therefore speak mainly about the extent to which the perception of bureaucratic tasks influenced researchers' overall experience with a particular space.

Although these administrative tasks usually carried negative connotations in the interviews and were associated with taking time that could have been spent on research, the interviewees also found positive aspects in them. As one researcher noted, although bureaucracy could be overwhelming and time-consuming in their experience, it was at least an available tool for identifying problems and reflecting on ethical issues. This applied to the bureaucratic apparatus in general, regardless of a specific place.

> *[…] again it's a double-edged sword because on the one hand all these bureaucratic processes are made to protect the university rather than the researcher or the research participants. But still in this process, there is a kind of opportunity to also reflect on the*

broader ethical challenges. So you have to do a lot of useless stuff, but in this useless kind of clump, there are like little sparks of potentially useful things, and at least you're forced to stop and think.

When they moved to another country, the researcher was struck by the absence of such administrative checks and balances. They described feeling like they were "left to their own devices", which prompted feelings of isolation as well as frustration as they lacked the means to, for example, stop a student from conducting ethically problematic research.

The administrative apparatuses, however, were sometimes also associated with alleviating stress and helping researchers with the bureaucratic parts of their work. In some cases, researchers were also able to use them to get assistance and feedback when writing their grant applications. One of the interviewees, for instance, recounted the crucial role such an infrastructure played in their application for a prestigious fellowship. They described the process as particularly gruesome, primarily due to the neoliberal, market-oriented language that the proposal needed to follow. Being part of an Austrian university that had grant-writing support, however, meant that the researcher could reach out for help. The staff at the university, qualified for these tasks, then gave them feedback on the proposal and thus raised the chances of their success.

I can't imagine better help and support for such things. I mean I, it's an absolutely disgusting grant application process. […]. I, I am a hundred percent sure that the fact that the university […] provided this infrastructure for applicants, so not only me who was already enrolled in the university, but for others who found the supervisor hence got the help, they indeed had a better position. Because without that I wouldn't have known how to write such a shit.

Again, this experience shows the range of tools and support structures that institutions can provide to researchers to significantly improve their standing in the competitive academic market. Therefore, the available research infrastructure shapes not only the specific experiences and perceptions of researchers, but also their position in relation to other researchers and academic spaces. Differences in institutional support, such as assistance with grant applications, funding, or workload highlight the unequal position of those who do not have such infrastructure at their disposal.

Taken together, these accounts show how time affordances, available funding, salary, research infrastructure, and other forms of institutional support are deeply entangled and fundamentally shape researchers' ability to compete and succeed in the realities of academic capitalism. These factors rarely appear in isolation but reinforce one another in ways that compound the difficulties of doing research in underfunded or otherwise restricted environments.

6.2.2. Time, resources & individualized risk

When recounting their trajectories, researchers almost always began with highlighting whether the position in question was focused primarily on teaching or research. This distinction proved important not only researchers' sensemaking, but also in the differentiation between research spaces in the CEE and elsewhere. The paragraphs that follow therefore first illuminate the influence that this tension between teaching and research had on researchers in general, and then focus on its particular intensity in the CEE.

As Franssen and de Rijcke (2019) described, the social structure of academia has changed significantly in recent years as a result of project-based funding. According to the authors, funding research work from individual time-limited projects has led to an increase in temporary positions and overall competitiveness in academic careers. This has resulted not only in a more frequent engagement with the labour market, but also in a sharper differentiation between research- and teaching-intensive positions. Such an experience has proven highly pertinent for my interviewees as well. What mattered in their view on their research landscape was not only the perceived accessibility of positions, i.e. how many were available and what were the chances of one's success at a particular place, but, crucially, also the length and type of the contracts. The distinction between research and teaching therefore turned out to be especially relevant there.

The difference that researchers described between the research and teaching-focused positions had several layers. One was the intensity and the workload associated with teaching-intensive positions which often left researchers overwhelmed. As one researcher described, being in a temporary, teaching-only position was not only very time- and energy-consuming, but it also involved very little contact with the colleagues and research done in the department. This created a strong feeling of expendability, highlighting the precarity of early-career researchers. Shifting to a research-only position was then seen as a welcomed escape and a space of recovery.

> *I had a teaching-only contract, so no research, and this was really hard, like this was really, like, I think I had like twelve teaching hours a week and it was just... a lot of teaching. And really for the first time, it showed me how expendable we are as this like early-career.... yeah you just get like, you come in, you get assigned all this teaching and no one really checks in on you for the rest of the year. […] I went back to [another city] for a postdoc then, and that was easy because I was like coming home basically and also I was entering a research-only contract. So it was like 'I don't have to teach anymore, I can now recover', and that was super nice.*

Researchers expressed similar feelings about positions which were not exclusively focused on teaching, but included research, too. That pointed to another, more prominent layer of the research-teaching tension, namely the lack of time for research. Most often, researchers complained about the high teaching load because it took away their time for research – the activity that not only defined their careers but also was at the core of their career evaluations. The complaints were thus not about the teaching itself, rather, it was a question of temporality: of how much time they spent on their classes and the preparation, how many other administrative duties they had to do and how much time they had left for the research itself. The issue of conflicting time regimes emerged in different contexts, but the tension between teaching time and research time was by far the most pressing. The time left for research then also strongly determined how satisfied they were at a given place.

The strong distinction between teaching and research is not accidental. As Franssen and de Rijcke (2019) point out, the widening gap between research and teaching positions can often lead to research careers being perceived as the ideal path, while teaching-focused positions can be seen as secondary.

> We find that early career researchers have a fear of missing the boat of the research-intensive career if they don't get particular grants that allow them to devote more time to research and publishing" (Franssen & de Rijcke, 2019, p. 150).

Besides the intensity of the workload and the resulting lack of time for research, there is a third layer to the issue, that is the question of institutional expectations and productivity measures. If researchers are assigned heavy teaching load while having to fulfil the same criteria of research output as their non-teaching colleagues, it can create additional source of stress to the already strenuous and uncertain position. One interviewee working in the Netherlands, for example, described the situation resulting from the teaching load in their university as "unbearable". Although some people "managed" to bear such a workload, the interviewee considered the lack of time and space to do research simply unsustainable.

The emphasis on research can therefore stem not only from the personal preference of researchers to do research (as the name of their job would suggest), but also from external pressures and expectations. For early-career researchers in particular, who need to achieve a number of publications and show a track record of scientific achievements in order to establish themselves in their field, the teaching overload can become a critical issue in keeping them behind the imaginary wall of established academics (Franssen & de Rijcke, 2019; Loveday, 2018b). The pressure to meet the quantitative performance indicators and compete in neoliberal academia, however, affect most, if not all researchers regardless of their position (e.g. R. Müller & de Rijcke, 2017; Loveday, 2018b, 2018a; Falkenberg, 2021).

As can be seen, the issue occurs across different borders and countries. What came through the interviews, however, was the particular intensity with which the tension was experienced in Central and Eastern European research spaces. The disbalance between time spent on teaching vs on research and the heavy workload associated with it was an issue that the interviewees highlighted strongly in their accounts, marking a significant orientation point in their research landscapes.

In most cases, the heavy teaching and lack of research time was illustrative, if not defining, of the situation in the interviewees' home countries. Often, the topic did not come up only as description of their specific experience, but as a general observation and a statement on the state of higher education in their country. Interviewees from Hungary, in particular, perceived this imbalance as permeating the entire research infrastructure, leading to the creation of further hierarchies and dissatisfaction within research communities.

> *We have the university structure where you have to teach a lot [interviewee's emphasis] and then there is the research institute structure. […] But there, the people do only research so it's very luxurious and they're a bit better paid. Again, there is an envy and grievances, like they don't have to teach, they can publish more… obviously they can publish more, but then these people are more recognized as researchers. So it's a bad feeling.*

However, the issue did not feature as a stand-alone problem, but rather as one element of a wider complex of missing resources that together created the final picture. Again, what was particular about the situation of CEE in researchers' accounts was the scale and intensity of this disbalance. It became even more noticeable when confronted with environments which had greater financial resources at their disposal.

Again, what makes this disbalance critical are the performance evaluations and productivity measures which researchers are expected to fulfil. Considering the lacking resources, the expectation that researchers will produce the same amount and quality of articles as their colleagues with much more material and temporal provision creates clear frictions and pressure on researchers, as the following quote shows.

> *So it's like when I go back [to their CEE institution] it's, you know, can you do research? Not really during the year. And then you have exams. So it's like the expectation [to publish and fulfil quantitative norms] is there, but to what extent? Also the salaries and, you know. So you have a huge pressure […]*

In other words, if researchers do not have access to the same resources and assistance as their colleagues in other, wealthier institutions, their ability to compete in academic capitalism is greatly hampered. These frictions stemming from temporal regimes and available resources

therefore constituted a stable feature in the interviewees' landscapes, defining the CEE academia and the challenges they have to deal with if they consider going back to their home countries.

As can be seen, most of the elements outlined so far lead to one overarching topic, which is the availability of financial resources. The question of salaries and funding resonated strongly across the interviews, although it featured differently in every context. Funding was what brought researchers to new places, what made them move, and what decided which project they could conduct. And again, it also featured as a marker distinguishing research spaces in the Central and Eastern Europe and those to the west.

The issue was most pertinent to the interviewees from Hungary who described the state of higher education in the country as "extremely underfunded". Other interviewees were softer in their assessments, although it was clearly an issue for those from Czech and Croatian contexts, too. The missing resources manifested in different ways – sometimes it was low salaries, other times the lack of funding for conferences. As before, it was the combination of these different factors that created the whole picture, each figuring differently in every context. What was common, however, was the fact that researchers had to compensate for the lack of funds through their own individual efforts.

One example was already illustrated in the quote above. The lack of resources could manifest in complicated, lengthy processes to get conference funding, which still required finding the cheapest accommodation available. Other times, researchers reported cases of having to fund the travels entirely from one's own resources. Most often, however, interviewees described how researchers had to stretch their capacities to the maximum in order to keep up with the norms and expectations – often at the expense of their research and personal time. One interviewee, for example, recalled having to teach seminars and supervise exams as part of their doctoral studies, but without any financial remuneration. Obliged to fulfil the study requirements, they had to take time off from their own paid work in order to do these tasks, effectively covering the institution's lack of resources with their own labour.

The story hints at another trend that was repeatedly emerging in the interviews, namely the layering of commitments resulting from insufficient pay. For those studying in their original countries, it was often the case that they either did not get any scholarship for their PhD studies or so little that they had to take additional jobs.

> *[…] during the doctorate, I always had a job, either teaching, like just to survive, because you can't survive on seven thousand[1] [Czech crowns], right? So the option is that you just find some other job and do [the doctorate] somehow in the evenings. Or you teach, which we were paid for at the time, we got money for teaching, plus I got money from Erasmus, which was also a way to earn a little, and at the same time I had some project.*

Even after finishing the studies and securing a job at a research institution, the researcher recounted that their position was by definition half dependent on temporary projects. That is, if they had no other project running, they were basically left with a part-time job that provided them only with "better pocket money". As a result, they were forced to constantly apply for grants, being trapped in a cycle of repeated insecurity and a pressure to perform. At one point, they recalled juggling three or four projects simultaneously, which left them exhausted and unwilling to return to such a mode of working. These unsatisfactory working conditions were eventually part of their motivation to move abroad, even if temporarily, in order to flee this environment.

As before, the lack of resources and the need to compensate for them takes away the time and capacity to focus on one's own research. The pressure can thus impact not only researchers' individual capacities to fulfil all their roles, but also the quality of research work they can produce in such conditions. Nevertheless, given the scarcity of resources, the layering of commitments easily becomes the norm – especially if one has a family that they need to support. As another interviewee described, they only way how to provide for their family was to take two full-time positions at the same time, since one simply was not enough. Although officially not allowed, they explained that this was a practiced, although not very common, way of securing a decent income in the Hungarian research environment.

> *And I, I just saw that this is, [other researchers] had families, and this is how you can support the family in Hungary. So that was like, for me, it was obvious that I also want to do these two things. I also felt that legally it's two full positions, but with the salary and the workload, I felt that these are actually, like, ho- you need both to have one nice [income].*

Despite the fact that the two positions required different tasks, they still carried certain expectations regarding the academic output. Nonetheless, the interviewee noted that they did not consider these requirements to be realistic since they were simply impossible to meet

[1] 7000 CZK equals roughly 280 EUR as of 2026. The amount of the doctoral stipend has increased in the Czech Republic since then; it currently amounts to 1.2 times the minimum wage, or approximately 25,000 CZK.

under the existing circumstances. Although this particular combination was still seen as privileged in their community, it still highlighted the extent to which researchers were left to secure decent living conditions through personal effort and sacrifice rather than institutional support.

The ‘outsourcing’ of risks and responsibilities onto the individual has already been described by a number of researchers. The aforementioned Franssen and de Rijcke (2019) highlight that such shifting of responsibilities from institutions onto the individual can easily lead to the “individualisation of precarity” where struggling to fulfil the expectations is seen as a personal failure rather than a system failure (p. 154). Moreover, as Loveday (2018b) points out, the various strategies and tactics academics use to avoid failure are closely tied to the neoliberal transformation of academia. In this setting, researchers are increasingly expected to act as ‘entrepreneurial selves’, taking responsibility for securing their own resources, productivity, and career paths. This emphasis on self-management often brings constant uncertainty and anxiety, which, as Loveday shows, can also function as ways of coping with the pressures of a competitive and precarious academic environment (Loveday, 2018b).

6.2.3 Forms of togetherness

We can see the first layer of researchers’ landscapes forming: it is dominated by short-term contracts, tensions between research time and teaching time, institutional performance expectations as well as the available research infrastructure. But what about the social aspects of research, the colleagues, networks, and work collectives?

In general, these ‘forms of togetherness’ played as essential a role, if not more, in researchers’ sensemaking as the institutional affordances and temporal regimes. Inspiring colleagues and diverse collectives, the size and means of integration, as well as the strength and expression of hierarchies, all significantly influenced researchers’ sense of comfort, satisfaction, and belonging. These experiences were also closely tied to the prevailing values and norms that governed social interactions, which interviewees often summarised as ‘local culture’. Importantly, researchers’ sensemaking was not limited to their immediate institutional settings but was also shaped by the networks they formed across and beyond their academic spaces.

The existence of social ties, functioning work team and wider networks were therefore always at the forefront of researchers’ narratives. They were not specific to one or the other region, but emerged continuously in various shapes, highlighting their key role in constituting research spaces in general. Researchers’ portrayals (and subsequent building) of research spaces thus often highlighted the presence of academic role-models, close coworkers and networks with whom researchers could discuss their work, collaborate, and socialise. As I will show below, this proved crucial not only in the orientation work of my interviewees (how researchers

perceived and made sense of existing environments), but also in how they shaped and moulded research spaces for themselves.

Feelings of integration and isolation (whether social or intellectual) were central here. What influenced them was not only the existence of like-minded people with whom they shared some values, but also the size of their team and its ability to integrate new people into the environment. This was again partly connected to the projectification and short-term contracts which significantly influenced the composition of the teams as well as the sense of proximity in them. In one of the above-mentioned passages, the researcher described the sense of loneliness stemming from their teaching-only, temporary position. The feeling was partly connected to the nature of their work but was also connected to a feeling of isolation from their colleagues which created a sense of hierarchy of "who belongs and who does not". That stood in a strong contrast to how they felt in a smaller university where they had studied before.

> *And it's I think even, it's also different because it's a small, very small place [city 2], so you do get, like you know everyone and you kind of exist as a person, whereas in these big institutions, you're just like a teaching robot. And I, I mean I don't say this like... My colleagues in [city 1] were nice and everything, but just everyone is on such a tempo that they don't have time to invest in someone who is there for like nine months.*

As the quote illustrates, size also has an impact on the forms of togetherness. Smaller departments were often perceived as fostering closeness and more personal forms of interaction, while larger institutions and teams tended to be associated with anonymity and a sense of alienation. This contrast was particularly evident in one account of how arrivals and departures of employees were communicated at a new department. Compared to the in-person welcomes and farewells the interviewee was accustomed to, the impersonal nature of these practices made the feelings of anonymity and alienation even more tangible.

> *[…] [the department meeting] happens online, that it doesn't happen somewhere together […]. And of course it's in German, even though there are colleagues here who don't speak much German, but it's just happening in German. And at the beginning there's always like three minutes of 'who's new and who's leaving' and there are these movements of 'who's coming in, we welcome them, who's leaving, we say goodbye' and it's all very much like it's a factory.*

What these accounts show are the new hierarchies of belonging that such fast-paced environments coupled with temporary contracts create – arguably showing yet another side of life under academic capitalism. The researcher, however, also emphasized that from their experience, the sense of belonging and proximity was not solely dependent on the length of contract, but also on the institutional and collective efforts to integrate new members.

Nonetheless, it can be clearly seen that the prevalence of temporary contracts impacts not only the experience of individual researchers, but also the workings of the forms of togetherness. Considering the already vulnerable position of those employed on short-term contracts (especially as early-career researchers), this additional layer of hierarchy can further deepen their precarity and fundamentally alter what kind of qualities and values they ascribe to a particular research space.

Franssen and de Rijcke (2019) note that not only do researchers rely on temporary contracts for longer than in the past, but this dependence also increases competition on the labour market, turning it into "a mode of governance, reaffirm[ing] the individual as the primary epistemic subject and increase[ing] anxiety and career uncertainty" (p. 158). The forms of togetherness that researchers experienced – how much they felt integrated in their teams, whether they found their teams inspiring or alienating, and what kind of values and (in)formal hierarchies governed those relations – therefore played an important role in how researchers navigated the different environments.

For some of the interviewees, the social norms and shared values were again a sharp marker differentiating between their countries of origin and Western European research spaces they moved to. While this was by no means a universal experience among the interviewees, it highlighted yet another side of what the uncertainty, precarity, and missing resources can give rise to in research teams and communities.

One researcher highlighted the difference they had experienced between the nature of the research collective in their home country and in Austria. They described the community in their country of origin as relatively young and small due to the historical development of social sciences since the fall of communism there. While they did not idealise the workings of research communities in Austria or elsewhere, they felt that the environment in their home country was quite masculine, marked by rivalry and competition for limited positions and resources. As a result, they observed, many of their colleagues – men in particular – saw research as "a sort of an exhibition" or a strategic "game" aimed at securing status and money. This mode of working was ultimately one of the reasons why they preferred to work abroad.

> *[…] it is very much a male-dominated field, and I think that this is very often associated with rivalry and competition for positions and grants, of which there are simply not many, and so people try to quickly get into certain positions, such as associate professors or department heads, or simply to obtain those grants, and for all that, you need to have results, and in the context of teaching 10-12 courses a year, you simply write articles differently than if you had a lot of time. So, in my opinion, this led to people taking a very pragmatic approach to research – how to write as many articles as possible in the*

least amount of time and effort. And that's actually what I found increasingly problematic over time.

The experience reveals not only the impact of high productivity expectations and missing resources (both financial or temporal) on research work, translating into increased competitiveness among researchers, but also the dynamic arising from gender inequality. In this case, the already tense situation caused by the lack of positions and limited resources was further exacerbated by male rivalry and a chase for status which, in turn, led to understanding research mainly as a means of receiving status rather than an end in itself. From this perspective, the pragmatic, or perhaps even utilitarian, approach to research can be interpreted as a way of coping with the publish-or-perish pressures while trying to maintain one's position and status.

Another interviewee from the same country, but from a different field, shared a similar view on local academic structures, pointing out the gendered disbalance in power structures and the centring of competitiveness.

... I don't know, like, it seems to me, I don't want to completely homogenize it, but it seems to me that the [national academic] environment is exactly like that, that all the keys to the system are in the hands of these guys, these people of a certain generation, with a certain habitus, a certain gender, with certain ideas about how proper science should be done, and this has its roots in the 1990s. And... And for a certain type of people, it's just an unliveable environment, I don't know.

While these experiences clearly speak of particular subjective perceptions, the bundle of limited positions, increased competition and a shift in the understanding of research can be again understood as stemming from the unsatisfactory material conditions. In this way, they further underscore the idea expressed earlier by Franssen and de Rijcke (2019) and others, namely how the struggle for scarce positions and resources leads to increased academic competition and individualised precarity. In these cases, however, the lack of security and the pressures to perform were combined with particular local historical and social constellations resulting in rivalry and a gendered (as well as generational) hierarchies in positions of power.

While the rise in precarity and competitiveness is described across different European and global research environments, the difference that emerges here is again in the scale and intensity with which it is experienced in Central and Eastern European research spaces – as if the breadth of missing resources and positions also deepened the state of the local academic environment, including its negative social norms and harmful practices.

Even though neither of the interviewees thought of their research spaces abroad as perfect and without problems, they still experienced them differently, as less dominated by these

gendered hierarchies and highly competitive structures. Even when acknowledging that the Western European institutions face their own structural issues, researchers did not perceive them as equally problematic and “unliveable” as those in their countries of origin.

In contrast, when coming to work in Austria for the first time, one of the researchers found their colleagues to have a very different approach to research, taking it as a serious endeavour instead of the strategic survival game. Being in this environment and receiving funding for travels, conferences, books, and even a language course prompted them to change their view as well and take their work more seriously.

> *And I felt like I had to take it more seriously [laughs], that somebody here like, somebody supported me, so I like want to take it seriously, that it's not some kind of game that I am going to pretend to do some research here.*

In other words, being in an environment with enough resources and steady support suddenly provided the researcher with a much stronger sense of security and seriousness. Their experience thus further illustrates how changes in material conditions can shift one’s own understanding of research as well. At the same time, such a change might not have happened, were it not for a different social group and prevailing social norms.

The social norms and embedded values therefore represent another constitutive element on the imaginary landscapes of researchers. How colleagues treated each other, what hierarchies were at place or what values prevailed in the particular research space strongly determined whether researchers wanted to stay in their research spaces or move elsewhere. The influence of “forms of togetherness” is ultimately visible in a map drawn by one of the interviewees, depicting their research journey. While the perception of the first place was dominated by a feeling of fatigue and exhaustion from the local academic environment, the next positions were defined by isolation and, subsequently, a community that far exceeded the institution, creating a sense of belonging. The fourth and final location, however, was characterised by uncertainty and a step into the unknown – namely, entering the academic environment in the interviewee’s country of origin where they had no prior experiences or local ties.

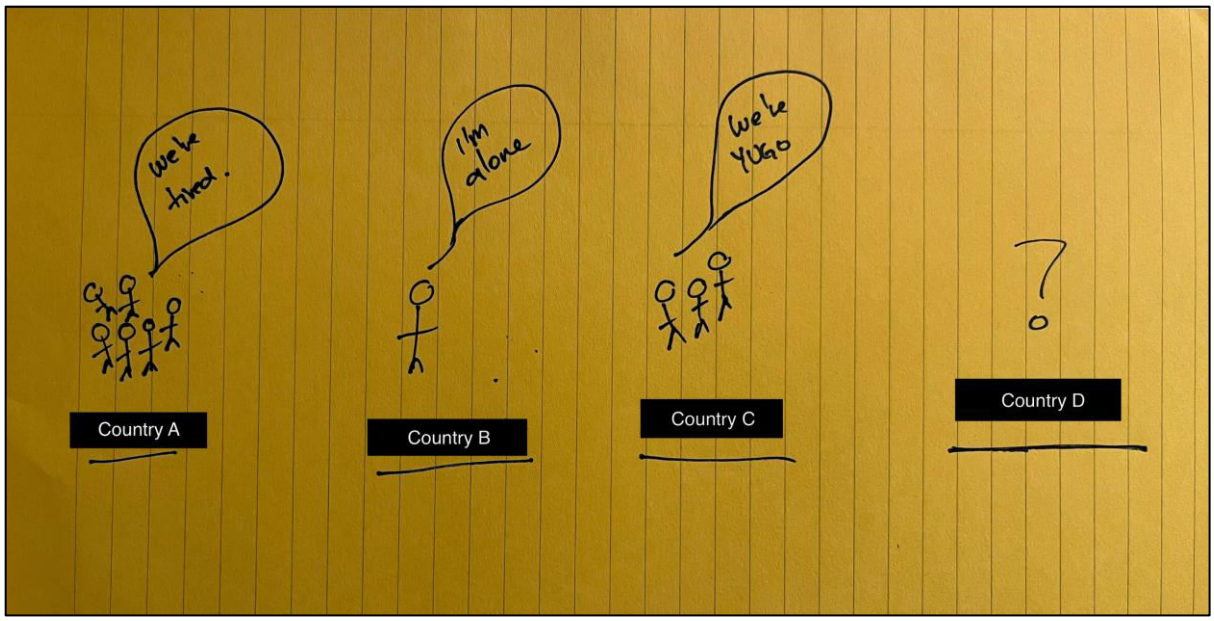

Figure 1: Interviewee's depiction of their research journey: Community and integration. Original picture.

Imagining the metaphorical landscapes, we can see the first orientation points arising in the form of different temporal regimes and workloads, length of contracts, administrative duties and bureaucratic support, as well as feelings of integration and belonging. Several markers emerged from interviewees' accounts that differentiated Central and Eastern European research spaces from those to the west: researchers highlighted the intensity of teaching overload and the lack of research time, low salaries and inadequate funding, as well as competitive communities in some cases. Although these factors stemmed from interviewees' personal experiences, they often found them defining for the whole region.

While none of these factors are unique in academic settings, they highlight the disbalance of material provision and social support that is available to researchers working in wealthier research institutions. In an already neoliberalized academia, ruled by individualism and hypercompetition, the scarcity of resources lead researchers into even more precarious positions – low salaries push many into additional jobs, which reduces the time and capacity available for research; project-dependence creates a constant pressure and a fragmented attention; and limited institutional resources further constrain opportunities to participate in a wider academic community. The landscapes therefore seem to be tilted, on the one side supporting researchers in their endeavours and giving them a competitive (sic) advantage, and on the other, overstretching their capacities while not providing for basic resources, effectively worsening their position on the academic market.

As I will show below, all of this played an important role not only in researchers' sensemaking, but also in how they navigated the different research spaces and what spaces and landscapes they built for themselves.

6.2.4 Influence of politics

The final aspect that formed researchers' perceptions of restrictions and affordances in their research spaces, especially in the CEE, was the influence of politics. While politics is everywhere, the experiences of the researchers I talked to highlight a specific kind of political influence, one that made spaces in CEE more distinct. There were two levels – one was the censorship and direct political interference, and another was the consequence of the political situation on the perception of their research.

Censorship emerged as a significant issue for researchers from Hungary and Russia, reflecting the particular political contexts of both countries. In both cases, institutional and political pressures shaped researchers' academic work in tangible ways – at times, affecting what could be researched, published, and said. While one researcher from Hungary navigated political and academic censorship within the country, an interviewee from Russia faced a different dynamic as the outbreak of the war in Ukraine brought restrictions and bans that effectively cut off contact with the Russian academic community from the outside, interrupting research regardless of its political orientation.

The other side of these authoritarian regimes, however, was that it gave rise to a certain kind of external fascination that researchers could capitalize on. As some of the interviewees noted, the increased attention that resulted from tense or escalating political developments was paradoxically beneficial for their research careers, bringing their work to the forefront.

> *[…] I am a beneficiary of Orbán's rule. We always make jokes with friends of mine who are in the West that Hungary and Poland became interesting countries since these right wing, crazy guys are or have been, used to be in power for Poland.*

According to annother interviewee, this used to be directed at Russia as well, except that the interest is swinging back and forth in time: *"Western fascination with Russia comes and goes with geopolitical development"*. These tendencies can be read as further proves of the partial othering and exoticization of Eastern Europe which becomes of interest to its Western counterparts mainly in cases of major political scandals and autocratic shifts, rather than as an equal partner whose work is worth keeping a close eye on at all times.

Ultimately, the influence of politics on some of the interviewees' lives – in Hungary and Russia especially – is illustrated in the map below. There, the interviewee outlined the different spheres that make up their research landscape: the academic field, the professional practice, activist circles, general public (demos), as well as the international layer. The interviewee struggled to delineate the borders so clearly, emphasizing that they do not see such clear lines and cuts in reality and that ideally, the map of the landscape would be 3D, enabling different layers and overlaps. The international layer would be intersecting all of the underlying ones, as an

interface that enables connection from different places across the landscape. The interviewee also highlighted the constant movement back and forth, finally situating their position on the border between the academic field and the professional praxis. Besides these movements and overlapping layers, however, there is the looming presence of the state. Facing the Hungarian authoritarian regime, the political pressures and censorship permeate almost all the spaces, significantly shaping how one can move and live inside them.

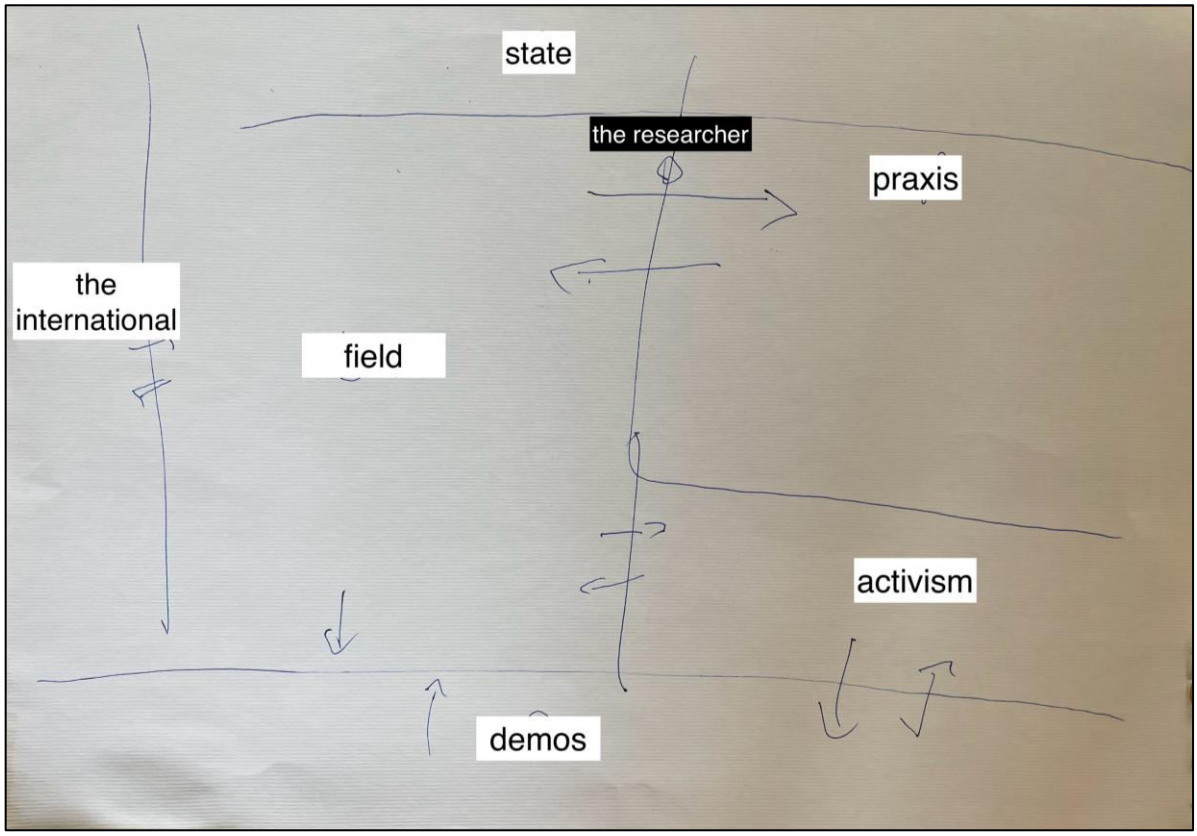

Figure 6. Interviewee's map of their research landscape: Moving back and forth under the shadow of the state. Original picture.

Politics thus played a significant role in a number of the researchers' accounts. It is worth reminding, though, that political regimes and atmospheres differ significantly across Central and Eastern Europe and the region cannot be simply summarised as suffering from the same political problems. The impact political developments have had on researchers I talked to has thus varied substantially, just as the backgrounds and trajectories of researchers themselves.

6.2.5 Crafting and caring for a place of one's own

As researchers navigated the uneven environments, they mobilized different strategies to cope and counter the precarious and uncertain conditions. The twisting and negotiation of mobility was one of them, the layering of commitments or maintaining networks another. What all these narratives came back to, however, was that researchers compensated for missing resources through their own effort or personal expense. In other words, when their institutions were

unable to provide necessary facilities, researchers relied on themselves and their networks to secure the support through other means. This often meant finding alternative funding for conferences, traveling on one's own expense or seeking supervision or advice outside their home institutions. The need to seek alternative resources was heightened in moments of increased precarity, such as during researchers' PhD studies; these can be quite lonely in themselves, but in a situation where researchers did not receive support from their supervisors or departments, the need to seek help elsewhere became even greater. The contacts and networks that researchers had from previous studies and jobs thus proved crucial as researchers could turn to them for support and advice.

> *I approached it kind of pragmatically, that the things I didn't have in the Czech Republic, which was typically supervision, I would look for elsewhere, and I was very active, for example, I went to conferences, I went to summer schools, and I took advantage of every opportunity that came up to travel somewhere, to network somewhere. And I think that helped me a lot. That kind of... Czech mentality, that I can sleep in the cheapest hotel, but I want to go there, I think that helped me a lot, that I actually managed quite a lot during my doctorate.*

As this quote shows, these compensatory strategies also depended on the researchers' confidence and proactive approach. Another interviewee acknowledged having "no modesty at all" in approaching professors they knew and asking for help, seeing that their department did not provide any. While these efforts may seem to stand in direct contrast to the narratives of "accidentality", they are connected through the uncertainty and a level of precarity that researchers find themselves in. Whereas researchers mobilized the narratives of "accidentality" when recounting their trajectory retrospectively – and potentially using it as an explanatory mechanism for the limited agency, they used these proactive compensatory strategies to cope with the given situation in the moment. In both cases, researchers managed their uncertainty and precarity actively, just from different angles. They can thus be seen as two sides of the same coin.

These accounts yet again corroborate Loveday's (2018b) notion of 'entrepreneurial academic self', highlighting the transfer of responsibilities onto individuals who have to take risks and seek resources instead of their institutions – what Franssen and de Rijcke (2019) also termed 'individualisation of precarity' (p. 154). As Loveday notes, "[t]he demands of the so-called 'neoliberal university' have created 'enterprising' academic subjects who understand their own participation as being increasingly individualized" (2018a, p. 771). In their account, academic work is increasingly being seen as detached from wider structures, attributing success or failure solely to the efforts of individual researchers. This comes back to the mobilisation of luck and randomness and a limited sense of agency described above (Loveday, 2018a,

2018b). The reliance on one's proactive approach and contacts can thus be seen – just like the maintenance of networks – as yet another form of coping strategies that researchers employ in the face of the individualized, precarious, performance-oriented academic spaces.

Having to rely on oneself, even with the help of one's networks, is nevertheless still a difficult position to be in. What the interviewees seemed to share was a need and a desire to create their own protected space, a room of their own, where they could exist and persist in their academic endeavours in the long term.

These spaces and rooms could be physical as well as metaphorical; they could be assembled from researchers' collaborators, colleagues, and networks, and enabled by their institutional positions or through grants and funding schemes. The significance of such a corner was also captured in one of the maps that the interviewees drew.

When asked to depict their research landscape, after a moment of pondering the interviewee started to draw their "anchor" – a little corner in their department – that they considered crucial for their existence in academia. Its role was all the more important given the changing political situation and a looming threat of the available funding programs being cancelled.

> *I managed to carve myself a space. […] A little space. By what is called talent funding. […] It allows you to pursue curiosity driven research. This buys you out of [the teaching overload]. […] So, this was possible because I have a great mentor and support network and intellectual collaborators. […] And what will happen later, who knows, because all right-wing governments are hell-bent on defunding science. So, this all threatens my little corner. But because I still have a couple of years, I, with the help of this, my network, trying to secure at least one, but I'm applying everywhere, as much as possible, of individual funding that would continue allowing me to actually save myself as a researcher.*

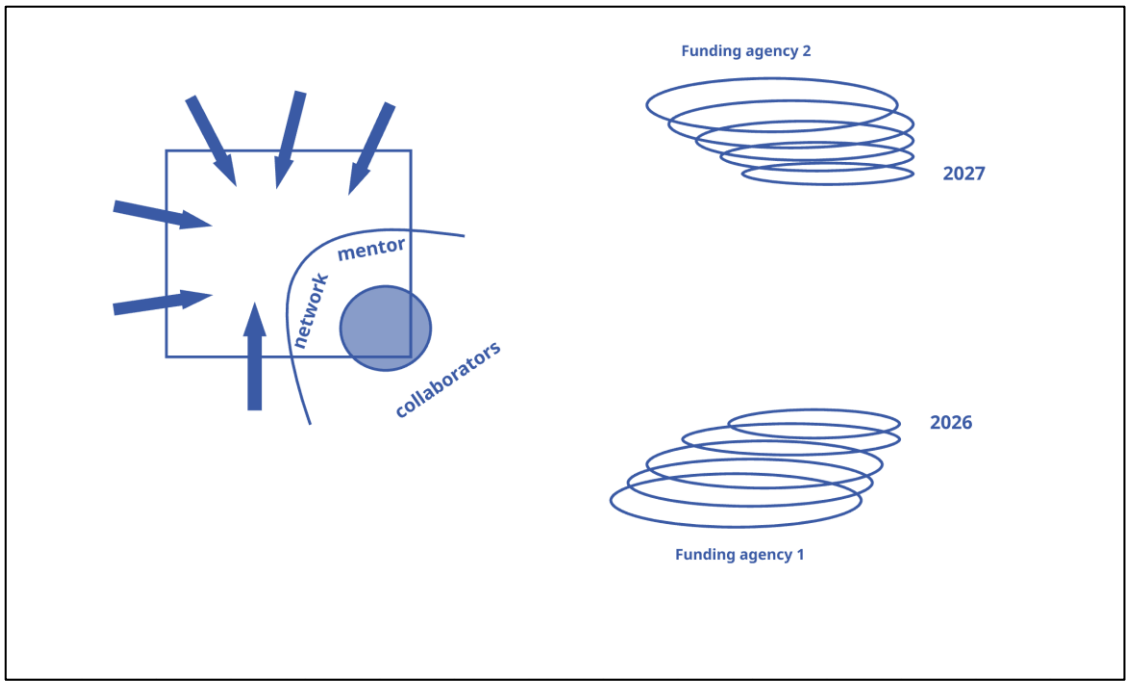

Figure 4. Interviewee's research landscape: A safe anchor. Representation of the map.

As Franssen and de Rijcke (2019) note, project funding schemes represent a common strategy among social scientists of buying themselves out of heavy teaching loads and improving their working conditions. Striving to negotiate, fight for, and carve out one's own corner in the tumultuous academic environment is nonetheless not only a matter of material survival but also of the desire to do research on one's own terms – with minimized pressures, expectations, and norms which researchers oppose. The importance of having space for thinking, writing, and creating has long been known – at least since the time of Virginia Woolf. Yet, the accounts of my interviewees show that building such spaces often required them to navigate a constant tension between their own values and the demands imposed by academic institutions, funding agencies, or, at times, political authorities.

While I turn more fully to the influence of politics later, it is important to highlight here the particular necessity of such protected spaces in environments marked by strong political pressures and attempts to control academic production. As one of the Hungarian interviewees pointed out, when they faced censorship and silencing of critique, it was their close network and colleagues that supported them and protected them from political attacks

> *My immediate environment is very, very, uh, it's almost like a safe space in a sense, that it prote- shielded me from [the political attacks].*

Of course, the need for a 'room of one's own' (Woolf, 1929) is not unique to Central and Eastern Europe. Given the omnipresent neoliberal pressures in academia, it can resonate across different contexts – after all, the map above depicts a situation in a Western European institution. What came through strongly in the interviews, however, was the heightened

importance of such spaces in situations of malfunctioning institutional support or intensified economic and political pressure that Central and Eastern European spaces offer face. Ultimately, having a space of one's own is not just about researchers' sensemaking; it is about creating a fragile but vital space of stability in an environment that offers little of it.

6.3 Agency & navigation

Researchers did not simply accept the norms and hierarchies existing in their landscapes, but reflected on them, negotiated their position within them and, at times, refused to follow them. Their movement through their landscapes was therefore guided by a negotiation between their values and preferences and the external expectations, opportunities, and limitations. As a result, when researchers explained their choices and trajectories, they revealed their sense of agency as well as their strategies of coping with the existing environment. This section will therefore focus on why and how researchers moved to and through different research spaces. What motivated their mobility? How did they understand their possibilities and limitations? And what support structures did they build along the way?

In the first part, I will focus on the sense of agency, i.e. how researchers described their own role and power in moving through different spaces. After that, I will describe the processes of identity work that appeared in these narratives. And finally, I will discuss what was mobile and what remained stable throughout their movement.

6.3.1 "It was accidental"

When recounting their decision-making processes and choices to move from one place to another, interviewees often portrayed them as results of accidental events. The descriptions of their choices being "random" or "accidental" usually appeared early in the interview and kept reoccurring throughout it. Instead of an insistence on a transcending meaning, the interviewees highlighted the contingency and mundanity of their decisions and pathways, emphasizing momentary circumstances and sudden opportunities.

> *It was a bit accidental; I guess for everyone it's a bit accidental.*

Typically, these incidents of "accidentality" would include noticing a job offer on twitter, hearing about an open position from a colleague or an acquaintance or applying "randomly" to places without set intentions of moving there. Sometimes, that also meant that researchers first applied to a position and only then considered if they really wanted to go there – seemingly reversing the temporality of the decision-making process.

> *And I think, again, I just saw a job offer on Twitter in the UK that just kind of made a lot of sense for my profile, so I gave it a shot and it worked out. It wasn't until the moment*

it worked out, because I didn't think it would work out, that I started to really consider it, what if I went there.

In this way, researchers repeatedly downplayed their agency, presenting their trajectory as constructed by external factors rather than their own active decisions. Despite this emphasis on situational factors, a closer look reveals that these seemingly random or accidental choices were driven by very concrete reasons and motivations. In other words, the “accidentality” was usually a proxy for momentary circumstances, available opportunities and personal preferences.

The factors that featured most often in researchers’ accounts were their academic interests and career opportunities, personal relationships and social ties, geographic proximity and language. What played an especially important role, however, were financial possibilities. Questions of affordability, available scholarships and research funding were often decisive in the direction of one’s trajectory, being both enabling and limiting in the choice of places. As it thus turned out, the decisions of the interviewees were thus not as accidental as it might have seemed.

Although these factors and circumstances were fundamentally shaping researchers’ mobility, researchers still had to assess, compare and prioritize certain factors over others. What these narratives of randomness concealed was thus not only researchers’ agency, but also the logic that guided the process of decision-making. While researchers usually clarified the factors that contributed to their trajectories, the way how they arrived to assess them remained vague. As one respondent said, the next direction often simply seemed "obvious”:

I don’t think it was an individual decision in all these cases. It was, I applied because that seemed to be the next obvious thing.

Often, this “obviousness” translated into searching for the “best” education or institution available (considering the circumstances). Other times, it was a matter of prioritising personal relationships, geographic proximity, or affordability. The tendency to obscure the intentions and agency however seemed most pronounced in cases of one’s success, such as getting a scholarship, being accepted to a prestigious institution or getting a good position. This resonates with the existing literature on luck and randomness in researchers’ narratives. In their study of early career researchers’ perception of success and failure, Vik Loveday (2018a) found that researchers used “luck” or “accidentality” as explanations for their successes, but took personal responsibility for their failures. According to the author, such “invocation of ‘luck’ in favourable circumstances, but the taking of personal responsibility when things go badly […] are indicative of the academics’ diminished agency, but also of the wider conditions within the changing landscape of UK [higher education]” (pp. 770-771). According to Loveday, the

mobilisation of “randomness” is therefore yet another manifestation of the responsibilisation and precarisation of academics which individualizes failure without acknowledging structural inequalities. Given the uncertainty of academic work, “luck” can be a symbol of everything that is not “within one’s power to control” but that at the same time fundamentally shapes one’s trajectory (Loveday, 2018a). Similarly, Sarah Davies an Bao-Chau Pham (2023) highlight that luck plays an important role considering the nature of contemporary academia: “The process of navigating a career in science [is] therefore not readily plannable or controllable; rather, it [is] incremental, deeply uncertain, and at times haphazard or chaotic” (p. 292). As such, they argue for luck and accidentality to be taken seriously, also as a way of countering the “hero narratives of excellence and exceptionalism” (Davies & Pham, 2023, p. 295).

What the narratives of “accidentality” and “randomness” of my interview partners indicated most was precisely such a distancing from an idealized image or an archetype of a researcher who has thought through the best career path and thinks strategically and rationally about their future direction. As the emphasis on randomness appeared mainly at the beginning of interviewees’ recounting, it seemed as if they tried to assure me that their trajectory was not a process of linear progress towards a clear goal, but rather that their paths were much messier, unclear and nonlinear.

> *Like in retrospect one can of course make some nice narrative about it all, but all of these decisions here were very much situational, that I wouldn't see so much some attempt at a big, big rationality, but just some things made more sense at the time.*

The researchers’ narratives thus seemed to be an expression of a rejection of these demands for self-improvement, rationalization, strategizing, and overall neoliberalization of themselves in favour of academic success. This again strongly resembles the ‘entrepreneurial self’ described by Loveday (2018b, 2018a), i.e. an academic subject that neoliberal academia creates through different disciplinary measures, such as academic auditing or quantification of productivity. In Loveday’s view, “these practices also have the effect of responsibilising academics for their own performance, whilst inculcating in them enterprising forms of behaviour – understood here as ‘technologies of the self’” (p. 156). The practices otherwise seen as belonging into the domain of business are thus now becoming part and parcel of academic work. The downplaying of one’s agency and reliance on randomness can thus be seen as a response and a way of coping with the uncertainty and precarity of academic work, where researchers lack permanent contracts, stable structures or predictable futures.

Researchers’ more or less explicit refusal of the rationalisation and strategizing in their trajectories then represents one of their navigation strategies through which they either accepted, moulded, compromised or rejected existing norms and values embedded in their

research spaces and beyond. The rejection of the “big rationality” mentioned above, which was present in all interviews to some extent, went hand in hand with the refusal of hypermobility as a mode of working expected of researchers nowadays. The expectation to be mobile and go through a number of research spaces before settling down in one is more of less formally embedded in research institutions and funding programs across countries and continents. The ideal of such a globalised science, however, has been repeatedly criticised for making researchers vulnerable and “stuck in movement” (Turculet, 2022), unable to settle down. This resonated heavily in the interviews as researchers strongly rejected this expectation and emphasized that their understanding of their mobility does not include moving to a new place every two or three years for the sake of their career. Many of the interviewees in fact criticised this normative expectation, described by one interviewee as an “absolutely horrendous idea of science and of people and of life”.

> *I'm very, very angry about the fact that mobility is treated not as an opportunity but as a quality criteria. So you are a good researcher if you lived in many countries. If you de-root yourself every three years, that's- what kind of idea of life they have. They don't have an idea of life. This is this very globalized, neoliberal subject of… […] and then people do it because this is how they can do it. But you lose friends, family every three years. This is what is expected. So I'm not ready to do that. I, I always tell myself if I, if it is expected that after the [fellowship] I should switch a continent or 3000 kilometers then I will not be an academic.*

Although the researchers I spoke with acknowledged that having an international experience helped them in applying for grants and funding for projects, they were very clear about setting boundaries in terms of how far they were willing to go, and why exactly they were moving abroad. Even though all of them did choose life abroad at some point, they emphasised social ties and relationships as well as a sense of belonging as more important than the criteria of academic evaluations.

Nonetheless, part of the unpredictability of research trajectories is also the re-occurring uncertainty if one will find a job in the place where they live. Given the relative scarcity of academic positions, researchers cannot always stay at one place if they want to continue in their careers. This was also a case for some of the interviewees who had to move to a different place despite wanting to stay where they were – highlighting the lack of agency in their mobility. In some cases, the unavailability of positions even meant that researchers had to choose between their academic career or staying in their chosen country, as the following quote describes.

> *[M]y partner and I moved to [the country of origin] and then I was like 'I can find something in [the country]' and that didn't happen, so then, then it was really like okay, so I either start looking for jobs outside of academia, or I start looking for jobs outside of [the country]. And I wasn't ready to give up on academia yet, because I actually still, to this day, like my job as a scholar, […].*

As a result, the researcher took a job hundreds of kilometres away, having to navigate the unexpected turn of events as well as the distance and travelling. Moreover, even when a researcher gets a (temporary) position, the omnipresent uncertainty still looms above. This takes away from a sense of certainty that they will be able to continue living in their preferred place, further emphasizing the precarity of temporary contracts.

> *... So if I managed to stay here, I would be happy, but of course that depends on other things that I can't really do much about.*

The question of "accidentality" or "luck" thus gains even more importance in this context. As Davies and Pham (2023) note, luck becomes "a feature of academic practice, something with agency and a defining yet uncontrollable role in the lives of academics" (p. 288).

6.3.2 Negotiating mobility

Despite their limited sense of agency and the significant role of accidentality, researchers were still the ones who ultimately decided and shaped their mobility trajectories. Their active role manifested itself through the building of structures that helped them maintain stability as well as through their persistent efforts to achieve their goals. In what follows, I will therefore focus on the positive part of their agency, their active use of mobility and on the structures that they built in their movement.

Even though researchers largely portrayed their trajectories as results of coincidence and momentary circumstances, it was still very clear that they exerted significant effort to arrive at their current position. They often masked their efforts, as well as their achievements, as the aforementioned "obviousness" or simply glossed over them without giving it much recognition. Nevertheless, it was clear that they were proactive in their trajectories, and that the image of limited agency does not capture the whole picture.

> *So I, I think I applied, I reapplied. So many, […], I applied and reapplied. So in many cases I had to, I had to be persistent. Yeah, I really want to do that. It's not a big deal if it doesn't happen. But you know, if there's a, there's a possibility, then I would pursue that.*

Along with this proactive stance also went the ability and determination to adjust their mobility and research stays to their needs and preferences. In some cases, mobility represented a form

of escape from unsatisfactory and stressing conditions in their home. Whether it was poor material conditions, a difficult or suffocating social environment, or political pressures, mobility represented an opportunity for some researchers to escape these environments and take a respite. Instead of an external measure of academic success, research mobility – even a temporary one – thus became an escape strategy and an opportunity to improve one's own conditions. This featured especially prominently in narratives of researchers working in Central and Eastern European research spaces, highlighting the perceived differences in resources or social norms.

> *And so I somehow, somehow decided that I would try to connect [the temporary research stay] to some kind of escape strategy. That I would try somehow, somehow, to escape, well, simply from the [institution], at least from that environment where I am now.*

Negotiations on what mobility would mean for researchers and what it would look like in concrete terms also included cases of what I call 'forced mobility', that is, cases where researchers had to move despite their desire to stay where they were. According to one of the researchers, their confidence to negotiate the conditions of moving increased also with the pandemic which normalized online and remote work.

> *I would be in [city 1] a little bit and teach and then I would also be in [home country], so I never fully fully moved, I always also had a flat in [home country]. And it's the same now in [city 2] […] And I think this is like, something that covid made us a little bit more brave to do. Like to do this, like, I'm not gonna move and you can't make me, and there are other ways to make this work.*

What emerges from these accounts is that researchers were not simply confined by external structures, but actively worked with them, shaping both the conditions of their work and the spaces they moved through. Their research spaces were therefore not just given, but gradually made, negotiated and crafted. Before turning to this process in more detail, however, there is one more aspect that shaped how mobility was experienced: the networks and social ties that supported and sustained researchers in their movement.

6.3.3. Support structures

Networks proved crucial in several aspects. First of all, they represented an important factor in opening opportunities and facilitating movement across places, as researchers often relied on their contacts in search of new positions. As I mentioned before, contacts and recommendations from colleagues, supervisors, or other acquaintances significantly influenced researchers' thinking and trajectory, thus shaping their research journey and landscape. Such networks were not limited only to academia but often transcended into non-

academic circles, connecting researchers with other actors in their field. At times, they helped researchers establish themselves in academic circles or preserve valuable insight into their field of research. In the face of precarious working conditions, however, interviewees' networks often represented a means of compensating for the lack of resources, or of maintaining "a back door" open in case they decided to abandon their academic careers.

> *I never had a certainty that I will be able to work in academia. I, it was just one of the possible options and I really wanted to keep it open, not like fixing myself on a trajectory, like, okay, I'm now switching careers and putting everything on one card - I don't know if that expression exists in English - because I knew it's very precarious and way more, way more people with PhDs then positions and, and… So I, I basically always kept the bridges.*

As Loveday (2018b) notes, there are several layers of uncertainty that researchers, especially those on temporary contracts, have to face. As a result, they need to develop coping strategies that help them manage the stress and possible anxiety stemming from the current configuration of academic work. From this perspective, the emphasis on networks, especially non-academic ones, that was clearly present in the interviews, can be seen as part of these strategies to manage uncertainty and insecurity of contemporary academia. They represent yet another tool of coping with academic precarity, enabling researchers to "keep a back door open" in case their academic trajectory does not work out.

However, networks of researchers did not serve only as tools for material security; as already mentioned on previous pages, they also provided a sense of belonging and stability. Even when researchers moved, their connections remained the same and provided them a sense of stability in the otherwise uncertain academic landscapes. As such, networks were constitutive of researchers' community, keeping them grounded and "feeling like at home" regardless of place.

> *I've moved so much and I think that's, like, one thing that keeps it kind of possible is that I'm always kind of in the same community. So even though the place is different, the community is the same.*

The role of social ties, networks, and research communities in mobility can be seen also on the picture below.

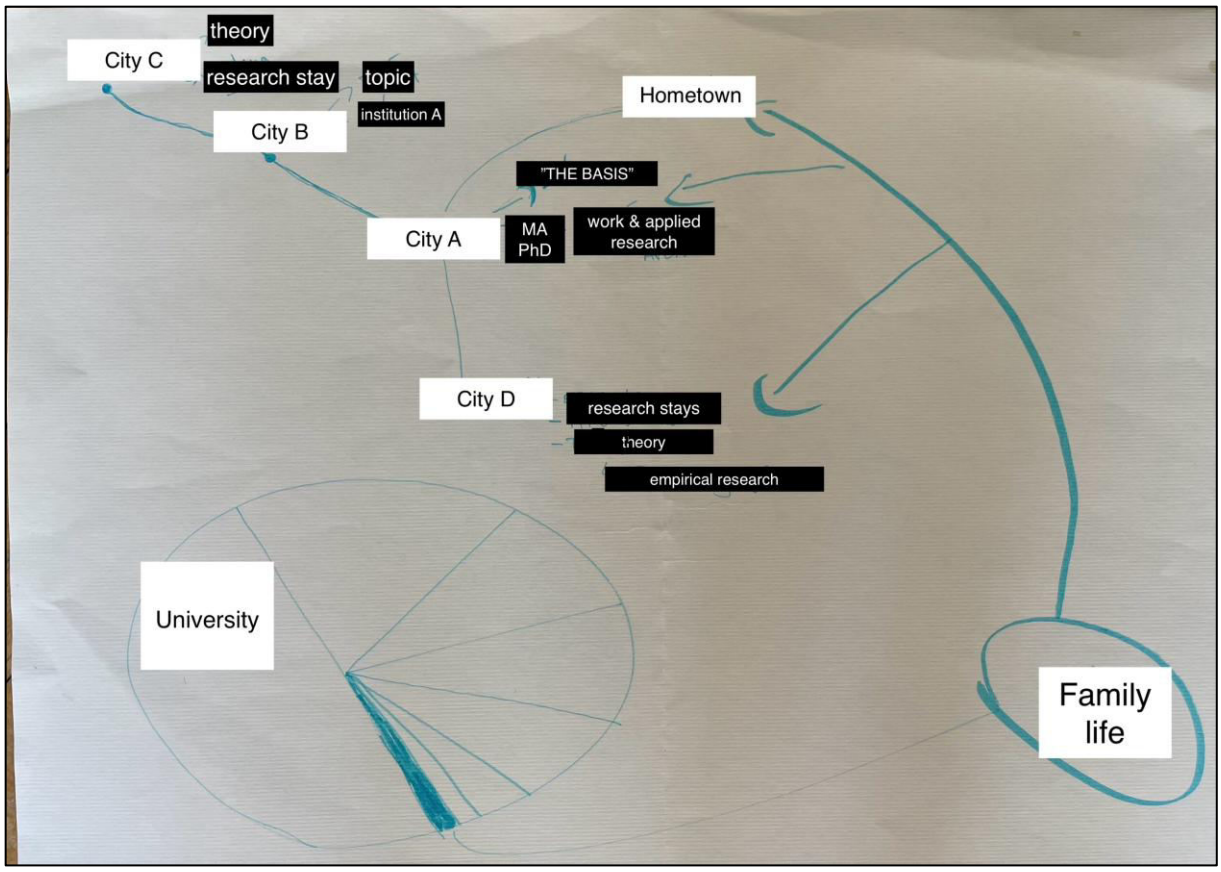

Figure 3. Research landscape drawn by an interviewee: Connections like in Minority report. Original picture.

This research landscape again consists of places that were significant for the interviewee's research career and where the researcher spent longer periods of time. Individual places are linked to specific topics, institutions, and experiences that the researcher had taken away from them. The individual research spaces are therefore characterized not only spatially and thematically, but also temporarily, as they are linked to specific time periods in life. As the interviewee added, the map would ideally be three-dimensional so that they could open up individual places and experiences and zoom in on their details and further division, as in the film Minority report. As the circle in the lower left part of the map illustrates, such an aggregate would include inner categories such as the field, research topics, theoretical and methodological perspectives and communities that define the spaces the interviewee moves through.

> *So I imagine it like this, that I would have some gloves and now there would be some structure in front of me that wouldn't be two-dimensional, but three-dimensional, and I would be pulling out the layers in different ways and letting them disappear again and opening up more detailed things that would enlarge and shrink again and so on. And then it could be like a geographical space, or some kind of intellectual space, or something that would connect in various ways to everyday life, family life.*

As can be seen, all of these categories as well as the localized places are also interwoven with their relationships, especially family, which connects both their research and personal life and home. The map thus also illuminates the aspects that stay in one location and those that move with the researcher elsewhere. At the same time, it illustrates the intertwined nature of epistemic living spaces, which are a combination of epistemic activities, social ties, material resources, geographical and spatial positionality, as well as symbolic and temporal values; all of which influencing each other and shaping the final landscape. Formed by the spaces they occupied, researchers then carry these traces within them, shaping how they move through and give form to their new research environments.

> *Now I'm here, in the present. But of course, I carry all of this with me, which has somehow shaped and created me and shaped us together.*

6.3.4 Spatial orientation and tacit geographies

Having delineated how researchers navigated the different constraints and affordances of their research spaces, there is one more aspect to cover in researcher' navigation strategies – that is the spatial and geographical markers that guided their movement and orientation. The following paragraphs will deal with the meanings and understandings that were contained in notions such as 'proximity', 'distance', the 'international', or 'universal' – categories summarised here as 'tacit geography' (Felt & Stöckelová, 2009). I understand these notions as means of direction and orientation that carry specific meanings and give particular significance to places, thereby adding another layer to researchers' academic landscapes.

Some of these orientation points were already visible above – researchers evoked the size of their work team or institute to explain the level of cohesion or a sense of anonymity and alienation. Size was also invoked in connection to the perceived research freedom, i.e. independence to choose one's research topics. Researchers noted that smaller departments and groups typically followed certain intellectual traditions, which they felt somewhat obliged to engage with; larger environments, on the contrary, were often described as providing more space for researchers to pursue their own topics. Nonetheless, the type of research that was encouraged in a particular environment and its imagined audience were contingent on the specific subfield as well as the location and national context, as I will detail later on.

The perception of size was also connected to a sense of distance and proximity which featured prominently in researchers' sensemaking. These can be understood as further indicators of feelings of belonging or alienation as researchers mobilized them when talking about social connections, networks, and cultural closeness of the research places in question. The perceptions of distance/proximity could thus change depending on the changing networks and social ties. One researcher, for instance, said that the lack of academic or any other social

contact caused by the pandemic during their stay was defining the whole city for them ever since: *"for me, Berlin is a dead city because it was dead when I was there".* This dynamic also worked in the other direction – another interviewee described how the increasing connection of researchers in their home country with their networks abroad brought these places "closer" and bridged the physical distance.

Interestingly, the same logic applied also to relations between different academic communities. As one of the researchers said, they had not even considered applying to Austria for a long time simply because they *"didn't know it exists. It was not on my mental map of Europe"*. When talking about the accessibility of German academia, they similarly described it as largely blind towards Central and Eastern European research: *"in Germany they still don't know that Eastern Europe exists. I mean not as relevant something"*.

Social connections and networks thus appeared to be closely tied to perceptions of relevance and visibility, pointing more broadly to questions of representation within academic settings. This resonates with existing scholarship that has highlighted the limited presence and recognition of Central and Eastern European research within European academic structures, pointing to cases of limited recognition and peripheralization (e.g. Mälksoo, 2021; Wöhrer, 2016; Silova et al., 2017). From this perspective, examining networks and modes of connection can illuminate how such patterns of under-recognition are produced and sustained within European academic spaces.

6.3.4.1 The meanings of 'international'

The notions of distance and proximity were not the most prominent spatial markers in researchers' accounts however. What featured more prominently in their narratives was the international nature of research spaces. The *international* turned out to be an influential quality and impactful signifier, often being defining of a particular group, institution, or city. It shaped where interviewees wanted to go, how integrated they felt, what they read, or whom they imagined their audience to be. Overall, being international was crucial in researchers' sensemaking not only socially, but epistemically, too.

As it emerged in the interviews, the *international* had several meanings. The first and most straightforward one was signalling the composition of their social group or colleagues at large – having colleagues from different, often distant countries gave the environment a particular defining quality in researchers' accounts. This was particularly relevant in cases where the interviewees were 'the international ones' and therefore stood out from the 'locals'. Having international colleagues was thus again tied to a sense of belonging and integration.

> *[…] and then I went to Germany and that was a mega shock… Yeah, because Germany is like super <u>not</u> [interviewee's emphasis] international soo, this was really for me*

shocking… They're all Germans <laughs> […] so this is something I had to get used to, to being like the weird one in the department.

However, the feeling of being in an international environment was not necessarily connected to being physically abroad; going to an 'international' university in one's home country was enough. One of the researchers recalled that studying at a US university in their home country already felt like being abroad, so when they actually moved abroad later on, it did not feel like much of a change. Another interviewee had a similar experience when they entered a US-led university in their country whose atmosphere somehow mesmerized them.

[I]t was this appealing place […]. When I entered the building, you know, I passed through the door, it was like a different atmosphere. […] I certainly felt it's a different country altogether. I mean, the, not just the technology that was there, the professors, the entire working with these readers, the, you know, set of the very international community, […]. But back then, compared to, you know, my original university, it was a huge experience talking to someone from Georgia, from Ethiopia.

Such an experience points to the second meaning of the *international*, which was often equalled with *attractive*, *interesting*, or *exciting* – interviewees often referred to the feeling they had when they entered the "international" institution and experienced its environment for the first time. *International* thus denoted not only the composition of the colleagues, but it also encompassed a sense of excitement and interest as interviewees met people from different backgrounds and were confronted with new ideas and perspectives. As another interviewee described, when they started their studies abroad, they suddenly felt that their field *"wasn't something that I am studying from this classroom in Prague about the world, but what I live in the conversations with the people around"*.

As interviewees associated international environments with excitement, novelty, and intellectual stimulation, the *international* also emerged as a signifier of better or more valuable opportunities in comparison to those gained in one's own country – representing a third meaning of the word. This distinction was not necessarily so clear-cut in researchers' perceptions, but it emerged as an underlying understanding behind their descriptions. On the one hand, its value was connected to a sense of prestige or intellectual novelty found in such environments which stood out from interviewees' 'local' academic spaces (visible in one of the quotes above). On the other hand, it stemmed from the wider valuation regimes in contemporary academic settings.

Interviewees recalled repeatedly that their decisions to go abroad – whether for studies or work – were partly motivated by the fact that having an international experience would be seen as more valuable in their careers and CVs. This is clearly connected to the way research work is

valued and assessed today, requiring researchers to move through different research spaces and acquire international experience. Spending time abroad therefore becomes almost an obligatory passage point for researchers, especially if they want (and need) to apply for project funding, which often necessitates or rewards such experiences. As a result, an international experience becomes part of the requirements to compete in academic markets, encouraging researchers to take on yet another responsibility to fulfil.

The ways in which researchers responded to these institutionalized expectations varied as some preferred to get a whole degree or position abroad and others sought only temporary research stays. This was connected to the particular strategies of navigating such norms, which I will describe more in detail in the next section. However, the interviews also revealed that prioritizing the *international* over the *local* has become part of the established values in some collectives. As such, the international trajectory was not only formally valued by the institutions but also provided researchers with recognition and respect among their colleagues. One researcher, for instance, recounted that their previous international experience raised their social status not only during their doctoral studies at home, but also when they entered their new department abroad.

> *[…] when my colleague was introducing me when I came in here, she was always careful... Because people tended to read 'I'm the one from the Czech Republic who came here for the postdoc from the Czech Republic' and my colleague would say, 'No no, she came from [the UK], because most people took it to mean that I've lived in the Czech Republic all my life, then I moved here, and she always said you have to emphasise that it was significantly more international the way you came because otherwise you're going to be treated very differently, which is a bit sad...*

What emerges from this is not only the added value attached to an international trajectory, but also the nuanced contrast between research experiences from the Czech Republic and from the UK. As the researcher specified, having worked only in the Czech Republic would have been seen as less valuable and less respected than having experiences from a British research environment. An international (in this context also Western European) experience therefore had an impact not only on the perceived level of expertise and research knowledge, but also the way one was treated by others. Altogether, these differences point to the subtle interpretive frameworks through which CEE positionality is assigned a particular – at times negative – value.

The prioritisation of the *international* over the *local* points to the fourth and last meaning of the word. As it turned out, the *international* was often synonymous with British and US

environments. The UK and the US thus served as referential points, systems to which the *local* was being compared to, often without acknowledging their equally localized nature.

This association manifested in several ways. In some cases, researchers simply compared their own 'local' systems of higher education to the 'international' one, specifying at some moment that by the *international,* they actually meant the US or the UK.

> *So, in Russia, we have also PhD degrees that are different from the kind of international PhDs. […] Normally, it's less, kind of, it's much more kind of autonomous, you just basically do whatever you want for three years, maybe going for some courses. And then, writing a thesis, which is different, again, from, it's kind of less extensive, I guess, than a PhD thesis you would do in the UK or the US especially.*

These comparisons were not limited to study programs but included the understanding of what topics belong into one's fields or how research is done. The UK and the US thus served as points of reference and symbols of how things are "normally" done. In some cases, they were also taken as representing the "universal". One of the researchers explained, for example, that they never had to adapt to teaching styles abroad because their own department was based on the "universal" methods, i.e. reading-based seminars and essay writing instead of oral exams and large lectures. As the researcher then said, this form of teaching at the department was significantly shaped by two academics who had spent time at universities in New York, from where they "copied" this style of teaching. In this case, the "universal" mode of teaching thus meant one based on the US educational traditions, making the US system a kind of a "universal" role-model.

Yet, these comparisons did not necessarily signal that researchers themselves would see the UK or the US systems as more valuable or 'better' than others. Often, they were critical of these research spaces, pointing out their own local problems. They might have referred to them simply because the US and UK university structures are familiar and widely recognized, making them convenient points of comparison for less familiar systems. It could also reflect the influence of the US and UK teaching and research practices, or the perception of these institutions as prestigious, highly ranked centres that attract students and researchers from around the world. Whatever the reason, the frequent references to these specific research environments indicate the position that both countries occupy in researchers' tacit geographies.

6.3.4.2 Global and local

A better understanding of these relations can be gained by looking at who the researchers imagined as their audience and whom they saw as representing their discipline. As I will show below, these ideas revealed how researchers perceived the centres and peripheries of their

disciplines and how this affected their research topics. One of the interviewees, for instance, recounted the difference they noticed between the UK and another university in Europe. Since the city in the UK where they were based was considered the "birthplace" of their field, the researcher felt that there was a strong emphasis on theoretical debates and discussions about the discipline as a whole. Such a general, conceptual focus stood in contrast to their previous experience from the university which they saw as drawing more on regional topics.

> *And in [the city in the UK] then, it was very much about [the field], because in [the city] there is this whole narrative about the birth of [the field] and... And I think they, maybe we'll come to this later, I think at [the other university] there is a lot of, more this like local, regional expertise and people study kind of, I don't wanna say real things, but they have real like area expertise, whereas [in the city in the UK] it's very common, that like your audience is the discipline, so it was very, kind of, much more [the field] as a discipline and your contribution is to the [the field] as a discipline. So it was very, for me, different thing.*

The distinction that the interviewee highlighted was not specifically about one institution or the other, but rather about the difference between a research focus based on a *localized* expertise and a general, theoretical approach where the *"audience is the discipline"*. The specific thematic directions of each institution point to the historic and intellectual traditions that underpin them, shaping the nature of the research within. Nevertheless, it also shows the understanding of who and what represents "the field" or "the discipline" and who is closer to particular local contexts, and thereby further from "the centre". The UK city in question thus emerges as one of the 'central nodes in the system' (to use the language of epistemic living spaces), a key location that has central importance in the formation and direction of a field and community.

The central position of these specific research spaces and their relation to more distant topics and places was further visible in the descriptions of the imagined audience. This dynamic again resembled the one shown above, in that the proximity to the perceived centre determined the level to which one drew on a "localized expertise" and the need to explain its importance and context.

> *I mean I know for [the subfield] studies, I assume it's for everyone else – it's also constantly proving like 'but the mainstream should listen to us, but the mainstream should include us, but the mainstream should have more space for us, but the mainstr-' and so it's constantly this like work of translating your area expertise or your kind of empirical stuff into this 'but look! this is also important! but look!' like talking to the discipline, which is actually British and American scholars.*

This individual reflection is symptomatic of a wider pattern across the interviews, showing the UK and the US as synonymous not only with the *international* but also with the *discipline* itself, thereby standing again as a symbol of the *universal* rather than *local*. In this sense, both research environments emerge as central nodes in researchers' landscapes, carrying significant symbolic as well as material power. As a result, they give the slowly emerging landscapes a concrete spatial grounding, establishing the centres and simultaneously producing their own (semi-)peripheries.

Although the relationship between the distance from the perceived "centre" and the research topics is neither fixed nor straightforward, it closely echoes patterns already identified in the existing literature. As Lohaus et al. (2021) found in their large comparative study, "[j]ournals outside the core more often feature articles with a descriptive approach, and this tendency is not limited to atheoretical works. […] Yet explicitly 'non-Western' theorizing remains rare" (p. 1). Similar findings were published by Ergin & Alkan (2019) or Cavalcante Silva (2019) who showed that research produced in the academic centres in the Global North tended to make universalist statements whereas researchers from the Global South spent more time explaining their cases at the expense of deeper theoretical debates. Such a difference between Northern – in this case rather Western – theory and Southern (Eastern) reality was also described within Europe (Havelková, 1996; Hendl et al., 2024). We can also recall Raewyn Connell's (2006) work on the "northerness of social theory", identifying 'claims of universality' and 'reading from the centre' as some of the key moves. What emerges from this scholarship is therefore a persistent connection between a proximity to "the core" and a universalist character of research. As I will show below, this dynamic turned out to be relevant for Central and Eastern European research spaces, too.

At the same time, it is important to highlight that the designations such as the centre and periphery, just like East and West, are not fixed nor clearly bounded categories. Rather, they are relational, fluid and often remain implicit. As Felt and Stöckelová (2009) note, "both are more or less invisible, tacit modes of ordering being performed in contemporary research systems, materialising only rarely explicitly as clearly delimited categories (p. 58). The *international* and *universal* belong precisely among these notions, just as the centre and (semi-)periphery, East and West. They form normative reference points, organizing academic value and orientation without having their own limits ever fully defined. The *discipline* recalled above partly also fulfils this function, although it did not occur as frequently in researchers' narratives as the former two. As a result, what is seen as a core/periphery or East/West depends on the positioning of the actors using these categories – while for my interviewees, the core might represent the UK and the US, researchers in Latin America or in south-east Asia might locate their centres elsewhere.

In the accounts of the researchers I talked to, such an orientation of production and distribution of knowledge was not limited to academic research but appeared embedded in everyday affairs as well. One interviewee, for instance, reflected on how their students in Slovakia were highly knowledgeable about the US elections while remaining unfamiliar with some of the local political movements. Such examples point to how the centres and peripheries in knowledge production shape horizons of attention and relevance, reinforcing the given status and reaffirming the normative order.

Importantly, these central nodes do not simply represent power and prestige, but they also carry particular intellectual traditions, dominant questions, and established ways of framing research problems. In doing so, they shape which topics are considered relevant or theoretically significant, thereby continuously reaffirming their own centrality.

The distance to these centres played a role as well. Some of the researchers reflected on how a newly found distance from these centres changed their view on who the relevant audience was as well as what topics were important to cover. For instance, reflecting on the “work of translation” mentioned above, the researcher said that when they moved from the British environment back to Central and Eastern Europe, they realized that their perception of relevant topics shifted as well.

> *when you're in the UK, you live in this like colonial, postcolonial context, right. So, and it's really felt, like everyone studies colonial- like critical social sciences, everyone is talking about colonialism, everything is about postcolonialism, and I mean, super important, I'm not saying that it shouldn't be. But now that I'm out of it a little bit, it is a very specific British thing, right, like we don't all have to talk about British colonialism. Like, some other things are also important.*

The experience further highlights the influence of spatial dimension on the epistemic side of research. In this case, moving outside of the centre made visible the particular local traditions and assumptions otherwise presented as general or universal. The role of proximity or distance described earlier therefore gains another layer here, one connected to the perception of relevance and the attention to particular topics. Size of the research community played a role as well, as it sometimes determined the extent of the perceived need to engage with “international” topics and debates. In the view of some researchers, having a large enough research community in a country or a region could mean that the audience and research structures available were “enough” for researchers to move in, without feeling the need to adopt “internationally” attractive language or topics. The intersecting positions, knowledge flows, and movement of people in between them is ultimately illustrated the map below, drawn by one of the interviewees.

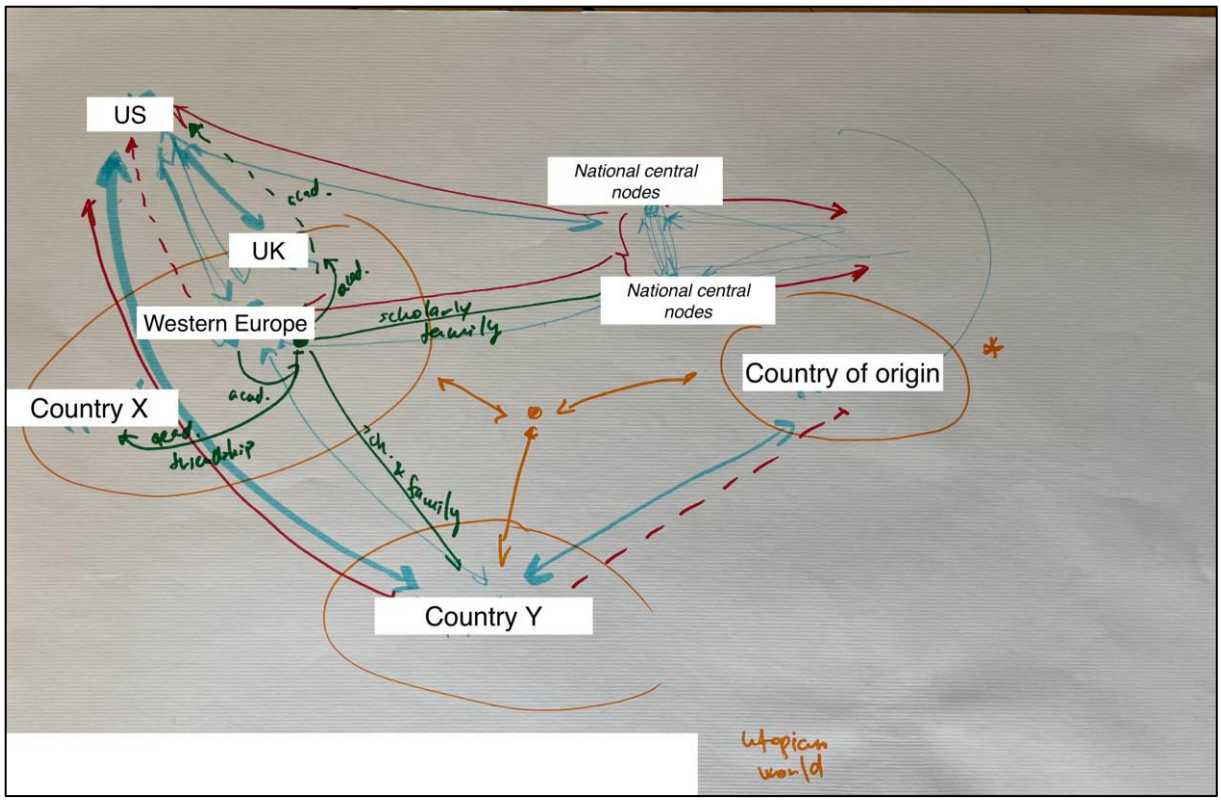

Figure 2. Research landscape of the interviewee: Westward flows and social ties. Original picture.

This research landscape takes the form of a network, highlighting the most important locations for both the researcher themselves and their research communities. On the right-hand side is the researcher's country of origin with its two academic central nodes, which are highly interconnected and have links to the rest of the country – although this movement is rather one-sided, heading towards these large cities. According to the researcher, *"there's a bit of a core-periphery situation going on, in the sense that, um, kind of the, the outputs of intellectual labour, so to speak, kind of spread throughout [the country], and, the brains come from [the country] to the centres. I think it's less polarized, like, less bifurcated, now, and depends on the field, but there's a bit of that"*. On the left side is then Western Europe – separately, without Eastern Europe – along with Britain and the United States. The bottom of the map is occupied by a non-European country that the researcher is affiliated to, both through family and academic ties. All these national and regional spaces are thus connected by both intensive research ties and the interviewee's personal connections. As a whole, the map shows the broadly westward direction of these flows and ties: despite being reciprocal, they are stronger towards the west and weaker towards the east. Although, as the researcher noted, people sometimes return from these centres, it happens *"already after they've done some work,"* which again highlights the core-periphery dynamic.

All this points to the issue re-emerging throughout this text, which is the tension between the *global* and *local*. Specifically, it is about the 'local histories' and 'global designs' (Mignolo,

2012); about the spreading of one local history into others under the veil of universality, and its portrayal as a global design valid for all. It is also about the creation of uneven grounds, divided into centres and (semi-)peripheries, and the tilted distribution of knowledge. In what comes next, the focus shifts from these landscapes and fixed landmarks to the researchers' sense of belonging and relation to Central and Eastern Europe.

6.4 Liminality & sense of belonging

Considering the numerous navigation and negotiation strategies that researchers employ as well as the tacit geographies that inform their movement, where do they see themselves in their landscapes? Although some of the maps have already suggested researchers' understanding of their position, in this last section now, I will focus on researchers' sense of belonging and identification with Central and Eastern Europe. What did they see as their home? How did they understand and construct their sense of belonging? And what role did Central and Eastern Europe play in it all?

6.4.1 On the verge of different worlds

Given the mobile, changing and nonlinear trajectories of my interviewees, it is perhaps not surprising that what they referred to as 'home' was also flexible and dynamic. Instead of locating one stable home, researchers more often referred to "feeling like at home", suggesting the fluid and multiple nature of what "home" could mean in their research journeys. As such, the notion had different forms, various meanings and locations. It did not necessarily arise as one concrete space, but rather as an environment which provided researchers with sense of comfort and proximity, close relationships, and a known environment.

As such, where researchers "felt like at home" was closely linked to their sense of belonging and integration. As I detailed above, this was influenced by the values and norms established in a particular work group, its size as well as pace of work, or presence of one's networks. Home was a place where one had a partner, friends, where they could "exist as a person" and where they knew the environment. It was thus mostly defined by researchers' social ties, but geographic as well as cultural proximity played a role as well. Some specifically referred to their country of origin as their home where they wanted to return to and to which they felt most connected, while others had more mobile understanding of what their homes were, as the following quote shows.

> *Well, this has become more complicated in recent years. Because in the environment I come from, there's a strong concept of home. That a person has one home and can't have more than one home, […], and that's your home, the place you always return to. […] it's still there somehow, but I tend to say that I have more than one home. That part*

of my family lives here, part of my family lives there. At the same time, I'm in [city 2] now and I'm kind of alternating between the two. [City 1] – [City 2]. And we were in [city 3] for a while and I could imagine us living there too. So my relationship to home, or to the idea or concept of home, is more flexible, I would say. More than continuing the tradition of the environment I come from. And right now, it would be on that axis.

Home was therefore fluid and changeable as researchers decided to move and thus took their feeling of home with themselves, attributing it to a new place. What proved to be significant and shared by researchers, however, was a state of being tied to different worlds and finding one's place in between. In other words, despite moving abroad, they did not want to let go of their previous homes, especially if it concerned their country of origin. Although not all interviewees specifically referred to their place of origin as their home, it always featured prominently in their narratives and thinking.

Such a desire mostly manifested in attempts to connect the interviewee's research spaces with those in their home country, either by bridging the distance and strengthening their connection through *"some kind of combined [research] presence", "a dual career"* or simply by moving back and forth between the places.

This dynamic often functioned as a compromise between choosing an interesting position or career development while also being close to home. Given the instability and pressures of academic environments, interviewees had to repeatedly navigate between their personal wishes and available positions and contracts. Researchers' movements thus resembled a pendulum moving back and forth, repeatedly looking for a way to combine professional interests and personal life while trying to hold onto the different places and worlds at the same time.

This was captured in a map of another interviewee who depicted their research landscape as such a movement between being abroad and back at home. The map represents not only the movement of the researcher, but also the movement of their networks which are seeping through the borders, connecting the home country with the networks outside. These connections are happening somewhat naturally, without a significant effort of the researcher themselves, yet it contributes to their desire to connect the worlds that they are part of.

I think my journeys are very much back and forth. And... And maybe over the years, the distance, let's say [...] the distance between what I do or did in [home country], let's say in that region, and what I do abroad, is getting smaller, in my opinion, because I am able to connect the two worlds better and they are no longer so terribly distant worlds for me. But it's a bit of a dynamic thing, sometimes it pulls me closer and sometimes further away, so it's kind of back and forth.

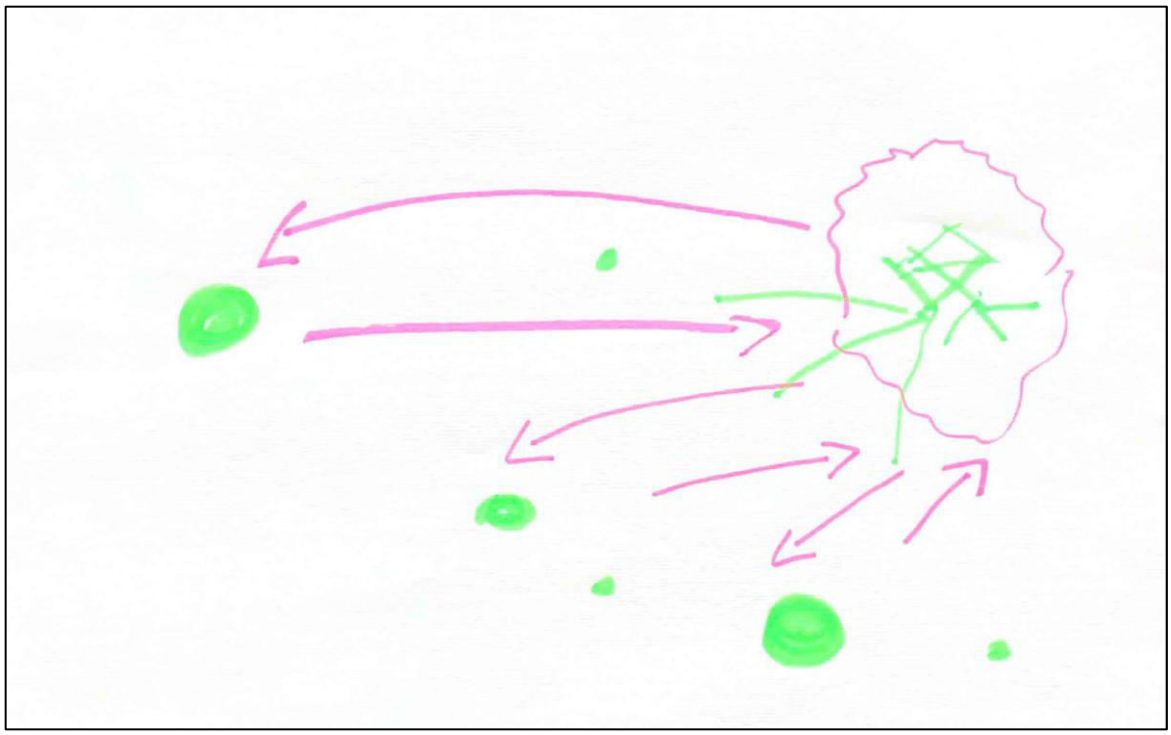

Figure 5. Researcher's landscape: Being on the verge of different worlds. Original picture.

As the networks (depicted in green) are interconnecting and becoming part of the "international" world, the interviewee sees them as drawing both worlds together and bringing them closer to the researcher too. As they said, although holding onto both worlds at the same time is ultimately impossible, they could not imagine moving away from their home country completely just as they could not imagine cutting off the international ties. Their home country thus represents a centre of gravity that maintains a level of stability and grounding in researcher's movement, even if they live elsewhere.

The result of this movement is a place on the border, on the edge of both worlds, allowing them to be close to both their home country and international structures. The researcher found such a place in Vienna, since they already had networks and contacts there and it is geographically as well as culturally close to their home country. This was shared by multiple researchers who found Vienna to be an optimal or suitable place in-between. As another interviewee said, *"it's a kind of familiar world, and world that's not too, too far, too remote".* Familiarity thus proved to play an important role in what researchers chose as their long-term location or where they wanted to be.

The position of Vienna, and Austria at large, is not accidental in this regard. Austria occupies a somewhat special position on the border between the European 'East' and 'West', not only due to its geography, but also its history, which was tightly connected to Central and Eastern Europe for centuries. As such, it provides researchers with geographic as well as cultural proximity and, thanks to the strong presence of CEE communities in the country, also a sense

of community and belonging. It is also for all these characteristics that Austria itself sometimes falls into the Eastern category, as interviewees themselves sometimes highlighted:

> *Austria is the West's East, as someone said*.

The flexible sense of belonging thus represents the first level of liminality, characterising the position of my interviewees – being in a borderline position which belongs to several worlds at once, connects them, moves between them, and tries not to lose them at the same time.

6.4.2 Liminality as "the condition of Eastness"

The liminality arising from the paragraphs above represents only the first of a series of different forms that its takes in researchers' experiences and journeys. Liminality can mean a lot of different things, but here, I understand it as a state of peripherality, an in-betweenness, a borderline status carrying a certain degree of isolation, but also association to multiple different entities and worlds. While it can invoke negative associations, I see liminality as holding a lot of potential, being the space for connection as well as reflection, similarly to what Martin Müller (2020, 2021) described.

So far, however, the liminal position described above was primarily based on mobility and the desire not to lose touch with one's important spaces. Although it partly touches on the Central and Eastern European origin of the interviewees, it could just as easily characterize any other group of people who move between different spaces and homes. What I will focus on now is thus the specific part of researchers' positionality stemming from their Central and Eastern Europe origin – the particular questions and struggles that their CEE origin can bring about and the resulting epistemic and social forms of liminality.

6.4.2.1 Ambiguous belonging and relation to CEE

While questions of one's positioning and relation to CEE might seem to be covered by researchers' tacit geographies and conceptions of home, they proved to carry more significance. Researchers' relations to Central and Eastern Europe went beyond finding one's place on a map – their identification with the region was fluid and shifting over time, shaped by the many, often negative, associations and meanings that the category of CEE carries. It is precisely this dimension – the ambiguous position of CEE and the ways in which researchers negotiate it – that marks their experiences as distinctly liminal.

The issue of self-identification and positioning was therefore far from clear-cut in the interviews. While some of the respondents clearly identified with the being Central and Eastern European, others had more nuanced relationships, identifying rather with their own countries or specific regional communities rather than Central and Eastern Europe as a whole. The sense of belonging into CEE was not only connected to researchers' origin but depended also on where

they did their research, what topics they worked on, what they read, or where they wanted to publish. In other words, it was also shaped by how much CEE featured in their daily research work, highlighting the connection between different dimensions of research work and perception of spaces. The question of being Central and Eastern European thus took on different, nuanced forms, showing that the sense of belonging, just as the region as a whole, cannot be easily homogenized.

The interviews also revealed the complicated paths some of the researchers took to find and build their identity and relationship to this region. One interviewee, for example, described how they originally felt no particular connection to the region, but witnessing the complaints in the German media during the pandemic about the lack of Eastern European workers harvesting German asparagus made them very attentive to the regional inequalities and the position of Eastern European workers in the west of Europe. Another researcher recounted their experience in the UK which was in turmoil due to strikes while shops were lacking basic necessities during the pandemic. This stood in clear contrast to their experience from their home country where they had simply never experienced such a lack of basic supplies.

> *There was also this interesting feeling that you come from Eastern Europe, which pretends that everything is better in the West, and then I saw that it's not better there at all, it's much worse [laughs]...*

Apart from the expectations and notions associated with the East and West of Europe (where “everything is better in the West”), this experience also shows the evolving process of researchers’ sensemaking and positioning. While neither of these researchers had felt strong associations to CEE, it was their experiences with moving abroad and seeing the differences (albeit contrary to their expectations), that strengthened their connection to the region. This process was shared by other interviewees as well, corroborating the processual and developing construction of sense of belonging. As it turned out, it was often an encounter with the material, political or epistemic asymmetries that moved researchers towards stronger identification with CEE – as one of the researchers described, their approach to CEE changed also academically, transforming from a distance and wariness into something that they felt interested and engaged in.

> *After a long time, I am actually returning to the topic of Eastern Europe, which I had previously kept my distance from because I felt that... I had to do something else so that I wouldn't be the one from Eastern Europe. But now I'm coming around to it, and I realize that maybe people like me should do research on Eastern Europe because we are able to provide that experience and get access to data and people that a researcher from America simply couldn't get.*

This experience once again speaks to the aforementioned tension between the global and the local. To borrow Tlostanova's (2012) terminology, it underscores the importance of local histories, experiences and subjectivities in the production of knowledge and illuminates a shift towards a more locally situated research. At the same time, it sheds light on the meanings associated with Central and Eastern Europe – particularly the initial feeling that one should not focus on this region academically, so as not to be perceived as "the one from Eastern Europe". The very feeling of having to distance oneself from one's origin and emphasize other aspects of one's identity thus attests to the marked positionality associated with CEE, pointing to the ambiguous othering and partial orientalization of (Central and) Eastern Europeans.

These loaded associations were evident in experiences of other interviewees, too. One researcher, for instance, shared that their colleague had once pointed out that they were in fact not as privileged as the researcher had assumed, since they belonged among less-privileged groups because of their Eastern European origin. The interviewee reflected on this experience, recounting the surprise and somewhat dissociating themselves from the Eastern European label by highlighting the Central European part: *"I say Central Europe because I always say Central Europe – Central and Eastern Europe".* Their move thus shows not only the nuances and differences in one's sense of belonging, but also the tensions in the CEE label itself. As Neumann (1999) argued, the notion of Central Europe was developed to a large part precisely due to the tensions among the countries of the so-called Eastern Europe, in an effort to distinguish themselves from Russia and the countries further east. Its mobilisation in the interview thus further illustrates Martin Müller's (2020) point about the Global East, in that the "condition of Eastness" is elusive, containing a tendency to constantly differentiate oneself from those more to the East[2].

As these examples slowly reveal, researchers shared a number of experiences that in different ways pointed to a sense of inferiority, backwardness or otherness associated with being (Central and) Eastern European. These issues were often not clear-cut, but manifested themselves in subtle ways, evidencing the range of forms and intensities in which these social phenomena appear.

> *A lot of things may not show up on the resume, but they are minor interactions or... I think that, paradoxically, being in Austria is a bigger handicap, because I applied for other jobs or grants here that didn't work out, and I think that simply being from Eastern Europe doesn't help with some people. Typically, I have a doctorate from [a city in the*

[2] The difference in my use of "East" with capital E and "east" in lower case follows the different meanings of the word – "east" referring to the geographical direction, whereas "East" signifying the cultural unit (however vague and obscure its border are).

> *CEE], which doesn't seem to be prestigious enough. So I think that this doesn't seem solid enough to some people. And then there are a whole series of various minor bizarre interactions...*

The researcher went on to describe situations in which they were asked if they could supervise thesis on Russia even though they had never done research on Russia before, or insinuations that one – especially as a woman – must work as an au-pair or be in the country with a partner, disbelieving that they worked in academia. While some researchers did not account any bad experiences associated with their origin, others said that it was a topic that they frequently shared with other CEE acquaintances, friends, and colleagues.

It was the subtleness and ambiguity of such situations that also raised doubts in some interviewees if what they experienced was actually a form of prejudice or othering, or whether their reading of the situation was wrong. This points to another aspect of the CEE liminality, namely the in-betweenness of being "White but not quite" (Kalmar, 2022, 2023). As the following quote suggests, the difference was often hard to pinpoint, but it was still felt. As the researcher described, it was the encounter with racial segregation in South Africa that made them experience the racial reading:

> *There I counted as white, but, you know, being Slavic is something a bit different. […] that self-perception is very different, but I can't tell you much why, because I didn't really resonate or understood or feel this separation. Separations and hierarchies, I guess, um, but they were certainly there, but I really can't, can't put my, uh, my finger at them.*

Such experiences thus resonate with the literature describing the ambiguous racialisation of Central and Eastern Europeans as "White but not quite" (Kalmar, 2022, 2023), being subjected to certain forms of othering and racialisation despite not being a person of colour (Lewicki, 2023; Narkowicz, 2023). As these authors demonstrate, the forms of othering that Eastern Europeans may face are often hidden and ambiguous, yet they employ the same logic, arguments, and interpretations as the racialization of people of colour. As Lewicki (2023) then points out in other words, it is the same system of classifying and distinguishing people, even if in this case it is not so clearly linked to skin colour. It is then precisely this ambiguity that makes these experiences defy clear categorization. They are thus even more susceptible to researchers' negotiation of their sense of belonging, with some tending to perceive themselves as "a victim from Eastern Europe", as one interviewee put it, while others distance themselves from such labels.

6.4.2.2 Catching up with "the West"

While researchers' personal experiences with stereotypes or prejudices varied significantly, their views on how research spaces in CEE are perceived and positioned in the wider European landscape shared much more similarities. In other words, even if interviewees did not feel personally discriminated or subjected to stereotypes, they recognized the specific challenges and positionality associated with Central and Eastern European research spaces within the larger European research landscape. There were especially two issues featuring prominently in this regard and that was the feeling of having to "catch up with the West" and experiences with 'Westplaining' (Hendl, 2022), i.e. patronising from Western academics. As before, many of the perceptions and experiences expressed here escape clear boundaries. Yet they consistently, in one way or another, point to the notions of backwardness and othering assigned to CEE spaces and reveal hidden hierarchies within European spaces.

> *I remember this case of a German [political foundation] employee asking if care has already arrived to Eastern Europe. And then I remember a Hungarian feminist responding to her angrily, yes, it already left, namely to Germany. You understand? So she asked if the topic has already arrived, meaning 'are you already as far as discussing care issues and the care crisis' and, uh? That is the everyday experience of Eastern Europeans and then that the Czechs and Hungarians do the cleaning in German households of this type of women. I mean still it makes me angry of like, they want to lecture us whereas actually they live off from these inequalities.*

As this experience shows, the different hierarchies and asymmetries are deeply intertwined – they play out not only on the epistemic level, in the assumptions of cultural 'progress' and ways of knowing, but also on the material side, in the distribution of labour and resources. This connects also to the perceived differences in the material provisions described in the first section of this chapter, highlighting the different levels of support and resources that researchers in CEE have available. As mentioned before, however, such experiences of 'Westplaining' were not unique. Another researcher described that at a conference, they were criticized by Western European colleagues for using the wrong vocabulary, even though that vocabulary stemmed from local contexts and was simply used differently in their contexts. Interestingly, however, the research again raised doubts about the prejudiced nature of the remark, saying that they themselves "took it in a stride" and did not pay much attention to it.

Nonetheless, these epistemic hierarchies can also manifest in the distribution of labour within research projects. One researcher mentioned cases they witnessed of CEE academics serving mainly the purpose of gathering data while the theoretical and analytical work was held by their colleagues form the West – a dynamic that has been described elsewhere (Wöhrer, 2016),

being reminiscent of the same issues that researchers pointed between the Global North and South (Schmidt & Pröpper, 2017).

> *But it's, it is a frustration of many of my colleagues who are involved in three different international [topic] projects from Hungary, how the Germans, actually the Germans determine the theoretical frameworks of the project and the Hungarians are used, because 'it must be six countries thing and you are asked for the data'.*

These perceived and assigned positions thus further strengthen the epistemic and material hierarchies existing in European research spaces as reaffirm the position of CEE research as being backward or lagging behind. Facing these preconceptions, CEE researchers again learn to navigate and negotiate these issues through different ways – whether by adopting trending vocabulary, as I will show below, or by emphasizing their seriousness, as another interviewee described.

> *Like, what my colleagues and I often talk about is that people from Eastern Europe tend to place more emphasis on being taken seriously, so it takes you a while to get to the critical element, because you first have to build up a bit of a reputation that you're actually doing something serious <laughs>.*

According to the interviewee, these practices and strategies are often learned and internalized, becoming a sort of a norm – which again brings to mind similar practices of imitating Western structures and behaviours described by postcolonial authors (Fanon, 1952). Beside these internalized hierarchies, these experiences also speak about the attributions of epistemic authority: who is seen as a legitimate or serious knowledge-maker and whose voice is heard and amplified. In the experience of one of the interviewees, such epistemic authority, and acknowledged "seriousness", often comes with the recognition from "the West", such as through an institutional affiliation.

> *If I give an interview, I'm, I'm not from any Hungarian University of Szeged, so not even the capital, but some other town, [but] from Vienna, then [I] know some[thing]. So it's basically, if the West recognizes me, then it's a, a reason for being recognized in Hungary. So it's a, there is a lot of resources in this in unequal relation academically.*

As can be seen, these relations are not only present in Western European spaces, but function inside CEE spaces as well. Such hierarchies of ways of knowing therefore spread across borders, confirming the global nature of the coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo, 2012; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006). The intersection of postcolonial and Central and Eastern European experiences is ultimately illustrated by a conversation shared by one of the interviewees. Talking to their colleague from CEE, they discussed the internalized "colonial" feeling of having to "catch up with the West" and prove one's worth. In their account, they had long held the view

that Central and Eastern Europe was lagging behind and that all efforts needed to be focused on catching up with the West. Even. And although they do not share this view today, they still struggle with getting rid of this feeling internally.

> *I still feel kind of shy when I go anywhere or arrive somewhere, I always have this feeling that they are way ahead and now I have to catch up and stuff. And that what I'm doing isn't good enough […]. And, it took me a long time to somehow not overcome it, but somehow realize that it's not quite like that, that, that the – as Franz Fanon says that you first have to kill the colonizer within yourself and only then can you somehow emancipate yourself, liberate yourself and so on. So I gradually tried to kill that Western academic within me who was actually watching and evaluating my results.*

6.5 Desires & utopias

As this journey through researchers' trajectories and landscapes draws to a close, it brings up the question of researchers' next direction and their desired futures. Given the international pathways of my interviewees, this also raises the topic of possible return to their countries of origin. As the previous pages showed, researchers' perceptions of research spaces in their home countries varied considerably, and their thoughts on returning were equally diverse. Some of them were abroad only temporarily and planned to return; others had settled abroad and their return to CEE was rather hypothetical. However, the question highlighted a number of issues associated with the potential return to CEE: for some, it was the working conditions, such as the aforementioned lack of resources and capacities or lack of time for research that troubled them. Others emphasized rather the social and cultural norms as well as the forms of togetherness that made their decision to (not) move. And yet others pointed out the problems with moving into research spaces with different regimes of evaluation, which, simply by crossing borders, changed how their research work was valued and assessed.

However, national politics also played a role in these considerations. In the case of my interviewees, it was Viktor Orbán's authoritarian regime in Hungary (which, in the process of writing this thesis, had become a thing of the past – and hopefully will stay that way) and Putin's dictatorial regime in Russia that played the crucial role. As a result, some of the interviewees – especially those from Russia – did not even have the choice to return, making any discussions about coming back especially painful:

> *It's a great source of pain. […] And it pains me a lot that [my children] will not see the graves of my parents, that I probably will have to abandon our country house that is there. […] But I don't think we can go there, especially after my book is published. And it also makes me angry because it's not my choice to not go there because it's just not possible to do this anymore.*

The positive and utopian futures, on the other hand, often reflected the wishes and feelings expressed in the pages above: they were guided by the desire to combine the places one feels attached to, not having to choose between their family, friends, sense of belonging, academic career, and decent working conditions. Researchers did not necessarily need all of those to be at one place, but rather have them close and accessible, so that they were able to go back and forth and feel connected to them.

> *I would like to, kind of, to be in some way present in all these places, and, […] do some kind of academic work, […] have some kind of combined presence.*

I see these desires as an expression of their liminal position described above – of finding themselves on the border between different spaces and worlds, striving to hold on to all of them and not let them go. It is reflective of their experiences with mobility, navigating different spaces and building their landscapes.

However, researchers' utopias did not only aim at bringing their spaces closer, but also at changing them in a way that would free them from political and economic pressures as well as material and epistemic hierarchies. Reflecting the issues raised in discussions about coming back, researchers spoke about the desire to return without facing political pressures, but also about lifting the various material, social and epistemic asymmetries and hierarchies that CEE spaces are formed by and subjected to. For many of the interviewees, utopian futures included research spaces that are not constrained by a lack of resources and the constant need to compete in an unequal global academic market, but which can rather enjoy the freedom to explore local perspectives, histories and subjectivities. Recognising the connection between place and the ways research is done, most if the researchers expressed a desire for academic spaces that would allow diverse perspectives and locally grounded knowledge to flourish, rather than being flattened by hegemonic norms and material asymmetries.

> *Like all of these like places would still be different but maybe there would be like more space for all this difference and maybe the difference wouldn't just due to like lack of funds. You know, because when you look at, especially if you look at institutional practices, for example in Croatian academia, some of them are cultural, like about how people are used to doing research, and, you know, expectations of research, but a lot of them are just political economy, a lot of them are just about, how much you have to teach, how much money you get for research, how much money you get for fieldwork, umm. So I wish that the, the differences could be like, more just of this, these like cultural, we're used to doing it this way rather than, than, than money, basically. So yeah, if we could have a world without money, that would be great.*

7 Discussion

What comes through this long exploration might seem like a paradox: on the one hand, Central and Eastern European spaces lacking many material structures and resources, and in this regard “lagging behind” the research spaces in Western Europe, but, on the other, resisting and denouncing such “lagging behind” narratives as stereotypes and prejudices. Although it might seem contradictory at first glance, there is a significant difference. While the former describes the material conditions (that have epistemic and social consequences), which are mostly tied to the economic and political situation in the particular countries, the latter assumes a normative framework, reproducing the very cultural prejudices and modernisation stereotypes that re-enact and reaffirm Central and Eastern European semi-peripheral position – always catching up, but never quite arriving.

The ways in which these complex interconnections manifested themselves in the researchers’ experiences and their movements within European spaces took multiple different forms. In what follows, I will therefore summarise how researchers made sense of and constructed their research landscapes and, in doing so, highlight how these complicated relations impacted them and what researchers made of them.

The first layer that I located in researchers’ landscapes were the perceptions of restrictions and affordances that they observed in their spaces. These basic structures, that I termed ‘social and material foundations’, in many ways laid the base for researchers’ further sensemaking and navigation. As mentioned before, this layer to a large degree reflects the nature of academic work today. Short-term contracts, dependence on project-based work, increased competition for scarce positions and resources, as well as the general neoliberalisation of research form the basic conditions within which almost all researchers operate, regardless of where they are located (Fochler & de Rijcke, 2017; Franssen & de Rijcke, 2019; Power, 1999; Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003). What differentiated Central and Eastern European spaces, however, was the intensity with researchers experienced these material (and resulting social) conditions in their home countries – whether it was lower salaries, heavier teaching loads, weaker research infrastructure, or missing resources (both temporal and financial). To reiterate, however, it was then the combination of these factors, rather than any single one in isolation, that stood behind the particular strain that researchers described when talking about their local academic environments.

The differentiation that emerges at this layer is therefore primarily material: it is less about epistemic difference and more about the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities that shape what kind of research is possible, and for whom. In this sense, the features of CEE spaces described above are not in unique, but simply more pronounced and interconnected

versions of the pressures that neoliberal logics and academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) exert everywhere.

In this sense, the findings corroborate the existing literature on the nature of contemporary academic work (e.g. Fochler et al., 2016; Franssen & de Rijcke, 2019; Ylijoki & Mäntylä, 2003) and the struggles of early-career researchers (e.g. Haddow & Hammarfelt, 2019; Wöhrer, 2014a). My contribution to this scholarship then lies primarily in the comparison of how differently these dynamics and modes of governing are experienced across different places and how differently they are perceived in Central and Eastern Europe.

Nonetheless, these material and social foundations also have epistemic consequences. As stated before, the teaching overload and subsequent lack of research time, missing resources and general precarity affects what kind of research is done and how. While this was not at the forefront of the interviews, some of the interviewees mentioned it in the passing, explaining why research from the region can sometimes be perceived as less "developed" or being of lower quality. The intertwinement of the material and social with the epistemic is thus clearly visible here and points to the troubled tension mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. These phenomena were thus most evident in the narratives of "catching up" and "lagging behind", which implicitly assumed that research conducted in CEE is somehow worse that one conducted in the West. In this regard, researchers' experiences confirm the argument grounded in postcolonial and post-socialist intersections (Koobak et al., 2021; Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006; Silova et al., 2017; Tlostanova, 2012) that highlights the specific forms of prejudices against CEE and link them to systems of racism and coloniality of knowledge. Again, this connection is not about a simple equation to how these systems treat people of colour and regions outside of Europe; rather, it is about revealing the different forms and shapes that these hierarchies and modes of ordering take, pointing to their omnipresent and pervasive nature.

To come back to researchers' landscapes, what I have outlined above sets their foundations. The second layer of their landscapes consists of researchers' movement and negotiation of these norms and values – namely, how they navigated these environments, what strategies they used to negotiate them, and what orientation marks and spatial conceptions guided their movement. As I highlighted, despite the relatively limited agency that contemporary academia offers to postdocs, the researchers I talked to did not simply accept the prevalent uncertainty and precarity but actively navigated and negotiated these conditions and built spaces of their own. They created their little safe corners, built networks for support or maintained "a back door" as a backup plan. Mapping these steps and especially researchers' ways of describing them thus further highlighted the prevailing precarity and limited agency but also revealed the multitude of strategies and ways of coping with them. As such, it further supported the arguments put forward by Vik Loveday (2018b, 2018a) about researchers' mobilizations of

narratives of luck and happenstances as a way of countering their limited agency and precarity. However, while Loveday's arguments focus on the precarity of researchers, the ways in which my interviewees navigated the discourse about mobility and success arguably attested rather to their proactive, agential position, refusing the hero narratives of excellence and exceptionalism that often dominate the discourse around academic success (Davies & Pham, 2023). In the context of individualized precarity (Franssen & de Rijcke, 2019), these counter-narratives attest to researchers' active moulding and negotiation of their research spaces as well as mobility decisions.

The navigation strategies that I examined here had a second aspect, however. That concerned researchers' spatial conceptions, orientation points as well as meanings associated with particular locations – what I called here tacit geographies (Felt, 2009). While researchers' spatial conceptions revealed several layers, two notions were especially relevant for the discussion here: the meanings of "the international" and the tension between the global and local. "The international" proved to have multiple meanings: from "exciting" and "more valuable" to "Western", especially the US and the UK. What researchers associated with and imagined under the *international* therefore revealed what and who represented the "global design" (Mignolo, 2012), i.e. the universalising culture and role-model that sets the standards and norms, standing in the opposition to *the local*. Although researchers negotiated and often openly resisted these meanings, their persistence across interviews shows how deeply embedded these normative regimes are in the everyday functioning of academic life and imagination. The meanings of *the international* can thus be read as evidence of the coloniality of knowledge (Quijano, 2000), symbolising the epistemic hierarchies as well as centres and peripheries (Wöhrer, 2016).

At the same time, *the international,* in its original meaning as that across borders, symbolises a powerful and important aspect of research work since international contacts, research stays, or conferences represent valued assets in academic evaluations. In this way, it is an inevitable and required part of research work that is often further strengthened by the theories, debates, and questions that one deals with (Wöhrer, 2016). Researchers' experiences therefore sometimes resembled the tension between the "global" and the "local" described also by Law and Lin (2017) where Lin "[felt] that his head is full of Euro-American theory and knowledge while his body inhabits Taiwan" (p. 215). Such disconnect between what theories, lens and concepts one is using, and the material one engages with thus further illustrates the epistemic tension between the global and local.

These spatial conceptions ultimately pointed to the third and last layer of researchers' landscapes – that is their own sense of belonging and relation of Central and Eastern Europe. In many ways, this layer is the most fluid and intangible of them. It consists of the liminal

experiences that emerge from moving back and forth between different (personal, political, as well as geographic) worlds as well as the ambiguous sense of belonging and a desire to hold onto multiple places and identities at once. Simultaneously, it encompasses the different notions and meanings that the category of Central and Eastern Europe carries – such as the narratives of lagging behind and having to catch up. As it turned out, researchers' ambiguous sense of belonging did not only stem from their mobility trajectories – although these played a significant role as well – but also from their imaginations of what being Eastern European meant. This manifested either through distancing oneself from the label by emphasizing the Central European aspect or through a sense of solidarity with the struggles of other Eastern Europeans within Western European spaces. And, as it turned out, it also sometimes impacted the topics that researchers engaged with, whether positively, as in engaging with CEE as a topic as a result of the shared solidarity and perceived asymmetry, or negatively, in the feeling that one needs to distance oneself from it to prevent being identified through it.

The liminality accompanying researchers' sense of belonging as well as the position of Central and Eastern Europe was ultimately visible in the experiences of exclusion or othering that interviewees described. Some researchers experienced prejudice against CEE as a striking and important feature of their academic lives; others barely registered it or did not consider it as something that affected them in any significant way. As I argue, the ambiguity itself is revealing, confirming the ambiguous positioning and the argument about Eastern Europeans being "Other, but not quite" (M. Müller, 2020) and "White, but not quite" (Kalmar, 2022).

Building on the literature conceptualising Central and Eastern European ambiguous, semi-peripheral position (Kalmar, 2023; Lewicki, 2023; M. Müller, 2020) and on the concept of the Global East , I interpret these experiences as manifestations of three different levels of liminality that researchers from CEE experience in their movement throughout European research spaces. One is related to the notion of home and belonging that is tied to researchers' mobility and relates to them being tied to different places, communities and metaphorical worlds. It is this ambiguous position of being on the verge of different worlds and wanting to connect them that also resonated strongly in researchers' utopian futures. The second level of liminality is researchers' relation to Central and Eastern Europe. Here, being Central and Eastern European emerges not as something given, but as a category of belonging that researchers actively construct, question, and sometimes resist. The third and last level of liminality refers to the ambiguous experiences with stereotypes, prejudice and othering that stem from the CEE label which often defy clear-cut categories and easy interpretations. It includes the experiences with outright discrimination as well as the feeling of inadequacy and having to prove one's worth. This is also where the narrative of "catching up" and "lagging

behind" comes back, this time as normative assumption that researchers encounter in the research spaces but sometimes also inside themselves.

Putting all of these insights together, this research confirms the previous insights about the "East" and "West" being flexible, performative and context-based categories that create particular orders of value, yet their categories remain vague and implied (Felt, 2009). In many aspects, what I have shown here only confirms previous findings, whether it is about the working conditions in contemporary academic settings, their effects on research work, the way researchers navigate and negotiate their movement, or the associations and meanings associated with Central and Eastern European labels. In my perspective, the combination of the different strands of research represents a novel contribution in itself, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how European research is experienced by people from CEE. What I see as more significant addition to the existing debates, however, is the differentiation between the various forms of liminality that researchers from CEE specifically experience.

Ultimately, these considerations of liminality bring back the discussion to the theoretical debates on postcolonial and postsocialist relations and on the global hierarchies of knowledge. Considering all of the above, I would argue that the liminality of Central and Eastern European spaces represents one of the points of rupture that Mignolo (2012) and others (e.g. Lugones, 2010) describe as the spaces where the resistance to coloniality can grow from. Although this thesis is far from decolonial, I believe that the double position of CEE as belonging to both the *global* and *local*, sitting in-between the European core and its peripheries, offers a place of defiance and breaking away from the binary choices and global dichotomies. The very definition of the region as well as its troubled history on the margins of different empires problematizes the dividing lines and homogenous attributions of privilege and precarity. Central and Eastern Europe is thus a reminder of the dynamic and heterogeneous character of the European research landscape, bringing attention to its many (semi)peripheries and forgotten corners as well as internal differences and asymmetries.

8 Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out to explore how social science researchers from Central and Eastern Europe experience, navigate, and negotiate research spaces in Europe. I did so by reconstructing their individual research landscapes, tracing their pathways, comparing their experiences of different research spaces and mapping their navigation strategies as well as negotiations of sense of belonging. What emerged were three interconnected layers of researchers' landscapes that together capture the particular position of CEE researchers in European academia.

The first layer was mostly material, referring to the social and material affordances and restrictions that researchers observed when moving through their different research spaces. The issues that differentiated Central and Eastern European spaces in researchers' perceptions mostly concerned teaching overload, low salaries, lack of research time, or insufficient infrastructure – reflecting global trends in academic governance and assessment of research work but manifesting with particular intensity or in specific constellations. The second layer of researchers' landscapes focused on researchers' navigation and negotiation strategies, highlighting their sense of agency and active moulding of research spaces. The third and final layer then consisted of researchers' (negotiated and flexible) sense of belonging and their relation to CEE. This layer also revealed three different levels of liminality that researchers' experiences encompass: the ambiguous feeling of home, the uncertain identification with being CEE, and the experiences of being seen and approached as a person from CEE.

The contribution of this research lies not only in its detailed analysis of how researchers from Central and Eastern Europe perceive and navigate the European research spaces, but also, and more importantly, in the distinction between the various types of liminality that these researchers encounter in their movement. Besides these findings, the thesis provides avenues for further research that could deepen and illuminate more aspects of European research as well as the CEE positionality, from the differences in social and material affordances and restrictions within European research to their impact on research production. Considering the number of limitations that this thesis has, further research could also explore the topics present here in further depth. First, the sample was limited to postdoctoral researchers from four countries – Czechia, Croatia, Hungary, and Russia – which necessarily constrains the scope of the findings. The experiences of researchers at different career stages, including more senior academics, may look quite different and would surely enrich the findings. Similarly, the material asymmetries identified here would benefit from more systematic and in-depth investigation. Future research could thus expand the scope to include researchers from a wider range of CEE countries and career level and map the perception of restrictions and affordances across European research spaces. A separate strand of research could also explore how the notions of European East and West are perceived by researchers from the West of Europe.

The findings of this study have implications on several levels – at the level of management of higher education institutions, they underline the importance of robust research infrastructure, adequate funding, and a more balanced distribution of teaching and research time. More broadly, they point to the detrimental effects of quantified research assessment: measuring output through quantity alone penalises researchers working under constrained conditions, raising competitiveness and individualising risk in environments that are already under strain.

This also includes the importance of fostering collaborative social norms and providing meaningful institutional support. Similarly, the conclusions highlight the need for funding agencies and European research policy to account for the structural asymmetries and differences within European research spaces and attend to the specific constellations of problems researchers encounter in different local contexts, rather than applying uniform expectations and solutions to heterogeneous situations.

The questions of epistemic hierarchies and normative preconceptions escape any clear solutions, however. Here, the responsibility falls on researchers and any knowledge producers themselves in engaging seriously with CEE scholarship, preventing asymmetries in the division of academic labour between gathering data and generating theory, and making space for locally situated knowledge. This thesis thus echoes the call made by Tlostanova and Mignolo (2006) and others to engage with local histories and subjectivities rather than constantly strive to prove one's worth on the global stage. Shedding light on the peripheries and shadows of European research spaces is only the start.

I started this text by describing my own experience with moving between the imaginations of "East" and "West", trying to find my own place between them. These broad, abstract discussions translated into my life through a feeling of being torn between Vienna and Prague. The many times I travelled from one city to the other, I thought about the different worlds that the cities represented for me and about my desire to be part of both of them, which seemed simply impossible. Now, as I am finishing these pages, I am again on a train from Prague to Vienna – except this time, it's only for a short trip before returning back to Prague, which is now my full-time home.

As the train set off, I felt the familiar sensation that I have experienced so many times in the past three or four years – the strange satisfaction of moving while sitting still and seeing the world go by behind the window. I remembered how often I had been watching Prague from the train on the same route, thinking that this city was my home and feeling somewhat sad to be leaving again. This time, as I was watching the urban landscape go by, I realized that, all of a sudden, it was the journey to Vienna that felt like coming home. The same feeling but in the opposite direction. Through this routine journey, the distance was becoming smaller, the journey more casual, the difference less prominent. As I am trying to decipher all this, I realize how many times the notion of home has shifted for me in the last years; not only semantically, but geographically, too, as the places where I located my home changed so many times throughout this

time. It is clear to me now that these shifting meanings, feelings and associations are just one way of me trying to bridge these different worlds and not letting go of either of them.

While I am extremely lucky to be able to cross the borders so easily and have these two homes only few hours away, I think of this sensation as also somewhat symbolic of the navigation and negotiation that my interviewees described. Partly, it as an integral part of moving and mobility. But to some degree, I also think of it as illustrative of Central and Eastern European lived experiences – being on the verge, always striving to catch up but never quite managing to do so. I am again remembering how many times I have compared myself and the place where I lived to "the West", feeling like we are all lagging behind somehow. This time however, I am also thinking about and relating to what one of the interviewees said about 'killing the Western academic inside' and letting go of the constant sense of inadequacy and need to catch up. As I am realizing now on my train journey – and as one of the interviewees also pointed out – it is perhaps time to not linger on catching up and holding on to something out of reach but rather cherish the things at hand and appreciate their local uniqueness and particularities. Sitting in the train, I realize that both places – and both worlds – are my home now, each in a different way, and there is no need to change either of them.

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