



Introduction: Travelling from West to East:

Think Tank Model Adaptation to Central and Eastern Europe

Think Tanks in Central and Eastern Europe

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This is an introduction to the Special Section on Think Tanks in Central and Eastern Europe. Apart from this introduction, the Section includes four articles, which explore the nature and conditions of think tanks operating in Belarus, Ukraine, Czech Republic, and Poland. Think tanks are usually understood as institutions claiming autonomy whose main aim is to influence policy making based on the social analysis they produce. The most apparent blind spot in extant think tank research is its predominant focus on the English-speaking world. We argue that by focusing on think tanks in non-Western contexts, we can better understand think tanks. When studying the diffusion of the organizational form of think tanks to new contexts, it is not enough to maintain the “sender” perspective (the formulation of the institutional characteristics of think tanks in the contexts in which they first emerged). We need to complement or even modify that perspective by also taking into account the “receiver” perspective. In other words, internationally circulated ideas and institutional patterns are always interpreted and translated in local “receiving” contexts, which coproduce, reformulate, and readjust the blueprint. Our focus in this Section is therefore on the translation and local adaptation of the think tank institution in the context of Central and Eastern Europe, a region that has undergone deep changes in a relatively short period.

Keywords: *think tanks; policy advice; Central and Eastern Europe*

This Special Section, composed of an introduction and four articles¹, explores the nature and conditions of think tanks operating in Central and Eastern Europe, an area that has not been sufficiently scrutinized in previous research.

We substantially contribute to the body of knowledge on policy advice, both theoretically and empirically.

Throughout the world, think tanks have become part of the machinery of policy making. They are usually understood as institutions claiming autonomy, whose main aim is to influence policy making based on the social analysis they produce.² Think tanks are notoriously hard to define and identify, and the differences within the group of institutions using the label of “think tank” are so vast that commonalities between them escape an untuned eye. Their claim to bridge the gap between knowledge (academia) and power (politicians and policy makers) is what unites think tanks. They accomplish this goal, more or less successfully, by conducting social research and advocacy, and the specific balance between these tasks depends on the institution under study. There is also variation with respect to how closely think tanks position themselves to various actors, such as political parties, business organizations, universities and civil society organizations. Formally part of civil society, think tanks tend to be estranged from the so-called third sector, which typically distinguishes itself as not having direct connections with formal politics.

Since the 1990s, think tanks have been growing rapidly and now number 8,100 institutions throughout the world, of which 2,219 are located in Europe.³ There are several reasons for this increase in numbers; some are more global (e.g., the information and technological revolution with the demand for formulating all kinds of information as sound bites and the increasing complexity of policy problems requiring expertise beyond the competence of policy makers), some are more local (e.g., accession to international organizations such as the EU with the accompanying demand for specific knowledge, crises of confidence in elected officials, and the rise to power of populist parties have made think tanks the go-to institutions for “independent” commentary). Today think tanks operate in practically every country in the world. In addition to increasing in number, the scope of the work of think tanks has expanded,⁴ and their methods of operating and sources of financing have changed.

The question of think tanks’ real impact on politics—one of the central issues raised in scholarship on these institutions⁵—is not easy to answer. Unsurprisingly, think tankers often overstate their impact, while politicians want to take credit for innovative ideas and successful policies. The very notion of “impact” can be problematized, referring sometimes to profound influence on policy direction, as in the case of the right-wing trend in American politics in the 1970s,⁶ and sometimes to the very fact of reaching decision makers or the public with the message congruent with a given think tank’s agenda. Think tanks develop various more or less advanced metrics and performance indicators to lure sponsors and showcase their standing.⁷ It is important to bear in mind that while outputs in terms of, for instance, reports and media appearances (which are often treated as proxies for think tanks’ impact) do signal think tank productivity, these activities tell us little about their actual impact on decision makers. Recent scholarship on think tanks discusses the paradoxical relationship between the claimed impact of think tanks and their simultaneous claim

to independence, which gives them credibility as experts. Interestingly, influence and independence are not easily aligned. Claims to independence require distancing from funders and policy makers, as well as proximity to academia, while claims to influence require a reversed positioning, with closeness to policy makers and funders and distance from academia.⁸ Irrespective of their actual level of influence, it is beyond dispute that think tanks' involvement in policy making transforms how governance is organized; it raises issues regarding the transparency, legitimacy, and accountability of these nonelected bodies, calling conventional notions of policy making and democratic theory into question.⁹ Despite their visible presence and seeming influence, think tanks are still relatively understudied. Their unclear nature, which escapes traditional classification of intermediate bodies, the variability of the tasks they perform encompassing research, consultancy, and direct civic engagement and the difficulty of assessing their influence make theorizing efforts difficult.

The most evident blind spot in extant think tank research is its predominant focus on the English-speaking world.¹⁰ The growing but still rather scarce literature exploring think tanks beyond the West has noted effects of this weakness, underlining conceptual problems and insufficient exploration of some aspects of the think tank phenomenon. In their recent intervention, Hernando and colleagues observe that "increasingly, the traditional free-standing civil society based American or British style think tank is being outnumbered by 'hybrid' policy analysis organisations."¹¹ If we ignore the slightly problematic assumption about the existence of a pure nonhybrid think tank, our Special Section follows this line of research, sharing its attentiveness to non-Western contexts in order to better understand think tanks as such. While all think tanks are hybrids, combining a variety of tasks, ways of operating, and organizational logics, it has been observed that beyond their original habitat, think tanks exhibit functions rather atypical for traditional policy institutes. In non-Western contexts, it is even more common for think tanks to "combine policy research with other functions, such as monitoring and watchdog activities, consulting, service delivery, or grassroots advocacy."¹²

Nevertheless, all basic approaches dominating the scholarship—elitist, pluralist, and institutionalist—have been developed based on studies in the Anglo-Saxon context.¹³ In the early literature, elite theory¹⁴ pointed out that the political system is dominated by a select group of individuals and organizations with common goals. Think tanks were seen as part of networks of power and influence, that is, as elite organizations, that simply seek to translate "interests" into "expertise."¹⁵ This early approach highlighted the entwinement among different types of elites, for example, those who fund think tanks, political decision makers, and think tankers themselves. The other, pluralist perspective¹⁶ depicted think tanks as one actor among others (e.g., trade unions and other nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]) in a "marketplace of ideas," competing for the attention of the public and policy makers.¹⁷ The third perspective focuses on the institutional structure and orientation of the organizations themselves to understand what grants them influence over

policy making. For instance, Abelson stresses that think tanks vary greatly on a number of aspects, especially in terms of different priorities regarding participation in different stages of the policy cycle. He affirms that “this becomes particularly clear in comparing how think tanks function in different political systems.”¹⁸ The political context in which think tanks operate can therefore reverberate in their very nature and configuration. We can thus presume that not only various political systems but also regime types, such as democratic, hybrid, and nondemocratic regimes, will affect the shape of think tanks.

The prevalent focus of research on think tanks on the English-speaking world has resulted in definitions and theories originating from the liberal institutional setting that are customized to fit those contexts. As is clear from previous research, in terms of size, budget, influence, and visibility as well as typical ways of operating, the commonly referenced American institutions differ markedly from other policy institutes around the world.¹⁹ For example, the idiosyncrasies of the American system, such as the availability of sources of nongovernmental funding (e.g., philanthropy), a highly decentralized political system providing multiple points of access, and the weak structure of American party politics, results in the faulty expectation that all think tanks operate in similar environments. Hence, when studying the diffusion of the organizational form of think tanks to new contexts, it is not enough to maintain the “sender” perspective (the formulation of the institutional characteristics of think tanks in the contexts in which they first emerged). We need to complement or even modify that perspective by also taking into account the “receiver” perspective. In other words, internationally circulated ideas and institutional patterns are always interpreted and translated in local “receiving” contexts, which coproduce, reformulate, and readjust the blueprint. Our focus in this Section is precisely on the translation and local adaptation of the think tank institution in the context of Central and Eastern Europe. What is lost and what is found in this translation is explored in this collection of articles. We jointly investigate how think tanks in Central and Eastern Europe have been shaped by references to the West and the ideal typical Western think tank. We also consider how the Western model has been adjusted to countries in transition and how Europeanisation has influenced think tanks’ development in those countries, which are now members of the European Union (EU).

Only recently have scholars taken up comparative analyses of think tanks, displaying pivotal variances in local think tank communities across the globe.²⁰ It has become apparent that local opportunity structures shape the conditions for think tanks’ involvement in policy making. Moreover, the excessive exploration of the Anglo-Saxon context has resulted in only a few studies investigating the role and agency of think tanks in nondemocratic settings. Some scholars assume that think tanks are indispensable for democratic policy making and even depict them as a means of democratization.²¹ Such observations are at odds with the fact that think tanks exist in practically every country in the world,²² that is, also in nondemocratic or semidemocratic sites. The rudimentary literature on think tanks beyond liberal

democracies has struggled to overcome this innate epistemological contradiction and thus amounts to a few contributions on think tanks in Latin America²³ and Asia.²⁴ The most recent addition to this literature complements the picture with case studies from Latin America, Asia, Africa and Middle East.²⁵ Not surprisingly, these contributions stress state interference in think tank matters (often through funding or simply by allowing them to operate in exchange for compliant analyses) and problems with the notion of autonomy.

The existing literature specifically devoted to think tanks in non-Western contexts has not resolved the contradiction of translating a concept typically developed in Western liberal democracies to other contexts such as countries in transition or non-democratic regimes. The solution proposed by McGann and Shull,²⁶ who acknowledge this problem, is not sufficient. They argue for an expanded taxonomy of think tanks to alleviate the categorically formulated demand of independence as an integral part of the very definition of think tanks.²⁷ Based on various levels of independence, their taxonomy includes (1) autonomous and independent, that is, think tanks cherishing significant independence from any one interest group or donor and autonomous in their operation and funding from government; (2) quasi-independent, that is, autonomous from government but controlled by an interest group, donor, or contracting agency that provides a majority of the funding and has significant influence over think tank operations; (3) government affiliated, that is, think tanks that are a part of the formal structure of government; (4) quasi-governmental, that is, funded exclusively by government grants and contracts but not a part of the formal structure of government; (5) university affiliated, that is, a policy research center at a university; (6) political party affiliated, that is, formally affiliated with a political party; (7) corporate (for profit), that is, a for-profit public policy research organization affiliated with a corporation or merely operating on a for-profit basis. They argue that this categorization will “expand the definition of think tanks to overcome the presuppositions of a Western, Anglophone perspective—as think tanks become increasingly prominent around the world, so too does their definition necessarily expand beyond its original boundaries.”²⁸ While we agree that these categories are helpful in broadening the notion of think tanks beyond the narrow Western understanding, capturing new ways of being a think tank, they do not substantially resolve the central question this Special Section addresses: how does the institutional form of a think tank translate to new, primarily transitional and nondemocratic contexts? In addition, even though useful in evidencing the diversity of think tanks, this typology mixes various forms of independence, making such distinctions slightly confusing. For a recent voice in the discussion of how claims to independence can be studied more rigorously, see Jezierska and Sörbom, who distinguish three types of independence: economic, political, and academic.²⁹

We suggest two avenues for investigating think tanks in non-fully democratic contexts (the category is purposely kept broad, encompassing regimes stretching from autocracies to electoral democracies). The first is to construct an ideal typical

think tank. So far, such an analytical strategy has mostly leaned on the understanding of think tanks in the West, which is their best-known environment. However, the ideal type might be constructed sufficiently broadly to capture these entities both in liberal and less-liberal societies. The risk here is stretching the concept to the point of emptying it of its meaning, ignoring local peculiarities and dynamics.³⁰ The other option, instead of starting from a ready-made definition, is to look at the functions performed by think tanks in different contexts. By redirecting research on the output side of the system of influence in which think tanks are involved, we might be able to move a bit further. In nondemocratic countries, NGOs, including think tanks, are often at the center of the political realm, either as victims of repressive actions due to their international connections or critical stance or as agents in the service of those in power. In abstract terms, we can think of at least three sets of functions that think tanks might undertake in non-fully democratic contexts: (1) they become subversive agents of change against central power, hence putting themselves in a perilous position; (2) they develop innovative capacities or use their expertise unconventionally, which enables them to operate in a space that is in principle hostile; (3) they bow to the power and become organic to it, implying that their outcomes, either commissioned or not by the government, have a predominantly propagandistic intent.

The challenge and contribution of this Special Section are to show how the concept of the think tank, originating from a liberal-democratic milieu, works for studies of other sociopolitical systems in which the concept is adapted and to some extent transfigured. If we consider the fact that liberal democracies no longer represent the dominant type of regime in terms of either numbers or ideological traction, the study of nonliberal contexts becomes even more important. Illiberal democracies, sometimes called electoral democracies, hybrid regimes, or competitive authoritarianism, are on the rise; according to some accounts, they even constitute the largest category of regimes across the globe.³¹ Moreover, even the quality of democracy in liberal democracies is declining.³² This situation calls for developing adequate analytical tools that will help us understand these contexts. We should obviously be careful not to risk overstretching when transferring concepts developed in the liberal world, an exercise that could result in losing the epistemological potential of the concepts. However, the cost of not addressing the phenomenon is even higher—neglecting the influence of think tanks on the politics of a large portion of the world. Moreover, we argue that phenomena linked to discursive dominance, as well as competitive and conflictual use of the expertise characteristic of democratic societies, are more readily visible in nondemocratic contexts, thus providing us with a useful laboratory for studying these processes. In other words, what we learn from ‘eccentric’ cases might turn out to be useful for developing new trajectories of research for the analysis of conventional cases, thus enriching our understanding of the phenomenon of think tanks.

While not definitely resolving the issue of how to treat the notion of think tanks out of its native context, the Special Section seeks to highlight and address some

aspects of the conceptual transfer from a particular analytical perspective. The articles gathered in this Section share a common theoretical approach to think tanks as boundary organizations.³³ This perspective theorizes think tanks as institutions operating in an interstitial social space, on the verge of other more established social fields such as academia, politics, market, media, and civil society. Medvetz and others following this tradition³⁴ claim that the interstitial position defines think tanks' specificity. It helps capture the multipositionality³⁵ of think tankers and the often contradictory identifications and expectations they face. Think tanks engage in boundary work, resorting to resources typical of adjacent fields, in which they act as translators or brokers³⁶ while they simultaneously contribute to constituting the boundaries.

We argue that through its focus on hybridity and boundary work, this theoretical framework is especially apt for studies of non-fully democratic contexts. Although this perspective also originates from the Anglo-Saxon world, it provides two important advantages over the earlier approaches, promising a more fruitful application beyond the West: (1) it allows for analyses of the activities of think tanks beyond the narrow sphere of formal politics, enabling research in less institutionalized settings, and (2) it admits a variety of concrete shapes and functions that think tanks can take at the crossroads of existing fields. Moreover, this perspective drives think tank research forward through its focus on the shared characteristics of think tanks, which allows bypassing the debates that have dominated the think tank literature for some time, namely, the engagement in classifications. As Stone concludes, "Categorizing different types of think tanks . . . has become a scholarly fetish that has detracted attention from more sophisticated analysis of the sources of power of these organizations and how they garner and wield societal influence."³⁷ The focus on think tanks as a set of particular functions performed in an interstitial space, with varying constellations of such functions, results in a more flexible framework, thus avoiding the risk of context blindness and the temptation to multiply classifications of think tanks.

The inconsistent use of the concept of think tanks and the wide range of typologies of think tanks available in the literature³⁸ have, from a methodological point of view, incentivized inductive approaches. This is a clear symptom of an epistemological fragility that can be partly blamed on the elusive and slippery nature of the object under scrutiny. Our ambition in this Special Section is to contribute to a move forward in this regard. A shared analytical framework, acknowledging think tanks as always peculiar declinations of a unique matrix, provides us with a theoretical starting point while allowing us to retain context sensitivity.

The articles gathered in this Section jointly analyze the conditions of policy advice and expertise in the context of limited liberalism of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE),³⁹ with contributions on Poland, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, and Belarus.⁴⁰ We provide the first collection of this kind, and all of the articles include original results. Jointly, we explore how and when think tanks emerged, who they are and what they (claim to) do in the empirical context of CEE, as well as how all these features differ from the default liberal and Anglo-American context.

All selected cases share a state-socialist history and a relatively recent experience of transition to a new socio-politico-economic system. Nevertheless, they witness quite different levels of economic development, liberalization, and democratization. In all four countries, think tanks took root and flourished in the early 1990s; however, they have developed quite distinctively depending on the political, economic, and social transformations and cultural milieu of their hosting countries. While some of these countries, especially Poland and the Czech Republic, resemble Western opportunity structures for policy advice to some extent, those similarities are less evident in countries such as Belarus and Ukraine. Even in Central Europe, there are still significant differences with respect to the West that deserve further attention, for example, the lack of a tradition of philanthropy that directly influences chances for “independent” funding, while the seemingly radical differences emerging in Eastern Europe actually reveal some similarities with their Western counterparts on closer inspection. Our Section thus contributes to the field through a nuanced exploration of the think tank phenomenon in a context that most often escapes scholarly attention.

The articles follow three main avenues of research. The first deals with the conditions in each country that favor or hinder the diffusion of think tanks. We acknowledge that history and political, economic, and cultural features are essential elements in understanding the nature of think tanks and the role they can play in these contexts. At the same time, international actors can have a crucial role in promoting local think tank development. All four cases clearly show that initially, think tanks “filled the knowledge vacuum” left by the fall of state socialism, becoming “agents of policy fashion.”⁴¹ The second common theme considers think tanks’ positioning in the sociopolitical landscape. How think tanks can influence societies and what segments of the decision-making process they are most able to affect is dependent on existing opportunity structures. The gamut of think tank positioning stretches between the role of opposition to government solutions, serving as a transmission belt between society and government, to the function of complacent supporters of central power. The third theme the Special Section explores is think tanks’ contribution to policy development. Although isolating the net contribution of think tanks is very difficult, we investigate what form think tanks’ engagement in different policy fields takes in both the national and international arenas. The following articles are included in the Special Section.

The first article, entitled “Genesis of a Social Space: Think Tanks in Belarus 1992-1995,” is written by Maria Bigday and examines think tanks through the prism of a specific social space whose emergence is ascribable to both transnational processes and local social structures. Four processes are identified as shaping the institutionalization of the first think tanks in Belarus, which were founded as tools for the “de-sovietization” of science and the “democratization” of politics in the early 1990s: (1) the destabilization of relations between science and politics spurred by the Soviet perestroika since 1986, (2) the autonomization of national elites and the political field in Belarus following the collapse of the Soviet Union,

(3) the transformation of the labor market, including the crisis of state-owned research and academia, which ejected a large number of well-educated professionals, and (4) the intensification of transnational exchanges and the legitimization of references to Western practices. To systematically analyze these processes, a four-dimensional model is proposed consisting of the following: the configuration of relations between science and politics; the position of the think tank space in the field of power; the professional logics of career or competition; and the transnational diffusion of resources and their local appropriation.

In their article, “Think Tanks in a Limited Access Order: The Case of Ukraine,” Oleksandra Keudel and Olena Carbou argue that think tanks in non-fully democratic regimes exhibit distinctive features that are different from the original concept that emerged within the US context. Departing from this empirical observation, they investigate the sources of organizational power of think tanks in Ukraine as a case of a limited access order (LAO), a social order in which privileged individuals maintain discretionary access to societal resources, functions, and institutions. Thomas Medvetz’s analytical concept of a “boundary organization” allows the authors to highlight the hybridity and flexibility of think tanks and leads to a better understanding of the methods think tanks use to gain political access in an LAO. An analysis of interviews with senior representatives of nongovernmental think tanks in Ukraine in 2016–2017 demonstrates that Ukrainian think tanks are resourceful and find indirect ways to influence politics. These think tanks publish their reports in the media and deliver assessments of Ukraine’s international commitments to the country’s donors, thereby indirectly influencing the policy process in the country. They also comply with the expectations of a boundary organization, accumulating and converting economic, academic, and media capital into political capital using advocacy and networking as conversion tools. One important difference between the expectations of Medvetz’s framework and the findings presented in this article is that political capital seems to be the goal of think tanks’ activity, while the three other types are used merely instrumentally.

The third article by Katarzyna Jeziarska is a contribution about Polish think tanks. “Dangling in a Vacuum: A Presentation of Polish Think Tanks in Political Life” explores the image and reputation of think tanks in their reciprocal relation to their environment. The aim is to unravel the logic of think tanks’ institutional identity formation in the Polish context in the first stage of think tank development in the country, that is, between 1989 and 2015. How did Polish think tanks present themselves, and how were they (re)presented by others? To answer these questions, the Goffmanian microsociological framework and positioning theory are adapted to a study of institutions. The analysis of original interview and media data reveals that Polish think tanks projected an image and were perceived by the media as weak. The author argues that this image of and reputation for weakness should primarily be explained by think tanks’ and the media’s perception of the political field, which confines the possible identity and positioning of think tanks.


The final contribution to our Section is “Agents of Europeanization: Think Tanks Discussing the Refugee Crisis in the Czech Republic” by Markéta Klásková and Ondřej Čiřař. The article investigates the role of think tanks in the process of the Europeanization of national public spheres. To address this question, the article explores the performance of think tanks in the immigration debate in the Czech Republic. Employing political claims analysis and treating think tanks as boundary organizations active in multiple fields, the authors compare levels of Europeanization of political claims made by think tanks with those of other actors. The data set includes 2,374 political claims made through public TV broadcasting in the time period from April 2015 to March 2016. According to the quantitative data, Czech think tanks chose the discursive strategy of Europeanization more often than any other actor represented. Thus, think tanks have the potential to support the process of Europeanization of national public spheres. However, their representation in media coverage is relatively low. The results also demonstrate that think tanks should be treated as their own type of organization since their strategy deviates from that of other civil society organizations, whose claims-making largely remains at the national level.

In this collection of articles, which study countries that have undergone pervasive changes during a relatively limited time since 1989, we point out the most sensitive issues think tanks operating in transforming societies might face, including problems securing long-term financing without compromising the perception of independence from funders (national and international), instability of the political system and short-sightedness of political elites, and recognizability and access to decision makers and the public sphere. These factors all hamper the chances of organizational development of individual think tanks and the construction of a vibrant space of think tanks, thereby limiting the role these organizations can play in Central and Eastern Europe. The articles clearly demonstrate that while often seconded by international actors (NGOs and foundations), the studied think tanks are deeply ingrained in the local social and institutional environment. As intermediary organizations think tanks’ shapes and chances of impact depend on the strength of the fields they mediate between (politics, market, academia, civil society), that is, the stability of the political regime.

As discussed above, the original framework of Medvetz attempted to resolve the divide between two earlier approaches in the study of think tanks, elitist and pluralist. Instead of treating think tanks as part of an integrated power elite or one actor among many in a pluralist public sphere, Medvetz put forth a Bourdieusian reading of these institutions as constituting an interstitial space between other fields. As such they engage in boundary work, translating, bridging and mediating between these fields through conversion of capitals central for each of the fields. Think tanks are simultaneously immersed in politics, media, and academia, and they mark their difference with respect to each of them. By emphasizing think tanks’ intrinsically relational character, focus is brought to the specific constellations of these fields in a given context. The four contributions to this Special Section prove the usefulness of this

theoretical perspective to settings outside the West. Importantly, our articles expand the theoretical approach in several ways. First, the case studies underline the importance of yet another field that was not sufficiently discussed in the original framework. Think tanks in Central and Eastern Europe are also part of and use the specific resources and logics of civil society. By appearing as institutions working for the public good, at times even engaging in community projects, they benefit from the relatively positive reputation of civil society organizations in these contexts. This reputation grants them legitimacy, which can be converted to access to policy makers and the public sphere. Second, we also contribute by extending the “boundary work” perspective by exploring the implications of think tanks’ interstitial position for their institutional identity. The conclusion is that the relative fixation or “maturity” of the more established fields shapes the possibilities and limitations of think tanks’ ability to successfully project a distinct identity and perform their functions. Finally, the Special Section stresses the importance of international connections, both for the establishment of the think tank space in a context where it did not previously exist and for sustaining it. The “think tank” label is itself a form of capital, and transnational linkages (in terms of funding and networks as well as discursive engagement) are important assets distinguishing think tanks from other actors they compete with in the local power game.

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Notes

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29. Jezierska and Sörbom, "Proximity and Distance."

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40. The articles were presented at a workshop, "Think Tanks in Europe in a Comparative Perspective," organized in September 2017 by Katarzyna Jezierska and the Centre for European Research at the University of Gothenburg, with the financial support from the Swedish Foundation for Humanities and Social Sciences (grant no F16-1293:1).

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