EU Memory Politics and Europe's Forgotten Colonial Past

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Collective memory

colonialism

European integration

memory politics

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Since the 1990s, the European Union has started to enter a policy area that until then had been one of the exclusive prerogatives of the nation state: the public dealing with Europe's bloody past. Within a few years the European Parliament passed several resolutions dealing particularly with the commemoration of human rights violations that took place on the territory of the EU while the European Commission made several funding instruments available aimed at using the realm of memory as a mechanism of public sphere formation. While European efforts for transnational historical remembrance have focused almost exclusively on the Holocaust and National Socialism as well as Stalinism, the EU remains curiously quiet about the memories of imperialism and colonialism. This essay analyzes the conflictual memory constellations at the European level with the aim of explaining why European memory politics are characterized by a sustained focus on specific time periods on the one hand and amnesia on the other. By closely analyzing protocols of the European Parliament (EP), the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council and European Council meetings using frame analysis, the essay digs deep into the complex dynamics lying at the heart of memory contests within the EU and provides a differentiated view

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on the ways in which memory is continuously dislocated, via resistance, consensus-making and conflict.

Introduction

During a lecture at Regent's University in London on 18 September 2013, the then President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy said: "In Europe, we sometimes overlook the weight of recent history; how people in some parts of the world look at us" (Van Rompuy 2013). His remark sparked a vivid debate within the European Council on what is often called "Europe's forgotten past" or – in other words – Europe's role as a colonial and imperial power during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Surprisingly, debates focused very little on what Van Rompuy called the "weight of recent history" – human rights violations committed by member states of the European Union during the colonial period. Instead, many politicians commented on the fact that the historical legacy of colonial relations allows many countries to tie their criticisms of the EU and its member states to accusations of neo-colonialism that are not levelled against other actors even if these actors sometimes have similar policies.[1] What remained curiously absent in all discussions was the acknowledgment of the painful memory that had marked the relations between the EU and its former colonies for decades. It is exactly this memory that Van Rompuy refers to and that influences contemporary international relations more than many politicians are prepared to admit. This is surprising given that the EU in other contexts has been much less hesitant to address its dark past. One could argue in fact that it has built its raison d'être around the experience of oppression and coercion that many European citizens suffered during and after World War II. The memory of these experiences had profoundly marked the EU founding fathers and found their way into almost every speech given by early European actors (Sierp 2014). The proposal in 1950 by French foreign minister Robert Schuman to pool the French and German coal and steel production and thus the output of two industries necessary to make war was, on the one hand, aimed at ensuring future peaceful relations between European countries and, on the other, at raising living standards after the devastation of World War II. The latter was closely connected to a third objective that nowadays is often forgotten when talking about the Schuman Declaration: "the development of the African continent," which at the time was described as "one of its [the EU's] essential tasks" (Schuman 1950).

Europe's identity and the EU's history have been intrinsically linked to its rule over the rest of the world. As Michelle Pace and Roberto Roccu write in their introduction to this special issue: "Colonialism is silently inscribed in

the genes of the European integration project since its origins." Most European member states were still colonial powers when the European Economic Community – which turned into the EU – was founded in 1957 and some of them still had colonial possessions when they joined years later (i.e. the UK or Portugal). It is therefore all the more surprising that the memory of oppression and slavery plays a limited role outside of the type of comments quoted above. It has also not entered the European remembrance landscape to the same extent as other human rights violations: this, despite the fact that the EU, in the last decades, has become very active in using the realm of memory as a mechanism for public sphere formation (Sierp 2014). How selective and inward-looking those efforts have been becomes evident when analyzing the scope of the resolutions passed by the European Parliament and the funding instruments made available by the European Commission. All European efforts for transnational historical remembrance have focused almost exclusively on the Holocaust and National Socialism as well as Stalinism. The EU remains curiously quiet about the memories of imperialism and colonialism. Humanitarian catastrophes, civil wars and border conflicts, state collapses, terror attacks and environmental and climate catastrophes appear to the European public to have little to do with this history.

How can this ambivalent selective relationship towards Europe's "weight of history" – as Van Rompuy calls it – be explained? Where does the memory of colonialism emerge and where is it silenced? Which actors are involved in this process? Can it be best described by amnesia, redirection or atonement (Nicolaïdis 2015)? By analyzing the conflictual memory constellations at the European level this essay aims to explain why EU memory politics is characterized by a sustained focus on specific time periods on the one hand and amnesia on the other. In doing so it discusses the strategies followed by the EU on this matter in terms of Nicolaïdis's (2015) three approaches, amply discussed by Michelle Pace and Roberto Roccu in the introduction to this special issue. The data has been selected with a view on the main areas of memory activism within the European Union relying on the EU data repository EURLex. It uses frame analysis in order to analyze meeting protocols of the three main actors dealing with memory politics on the European level: the European Parliament, the Justice and Home Affairs Council and European Council meetings. The essay focuses on the non-final versions of documents in order to dig deep into the complex dynamics lying at the heart of memory contests within the EU. It thus provides a differentiated view on the ways in which memory is continuously dislocated, via resistance, consensus-making and conflict.

Colonialism and the European integration process: a case of redirection

Colonialism, the process of decolonization and European integration cannot be disentangled. They were very closely interwoven processes that to a certain extent depended on each other. For the early thinkers of European integration, the concept of "Eurafrique" or "Paneuropa" – a region that included Europe, Africa and some areas of the Middle East – was part of the logical continuation of the contemporary political situation in the interwar period. The new aggregation would have been able to oppose itself to Panamerica, Panrussia and Panpacifica and thus solidify the role of an alternative zone of power (von Coudenhove-Kalergi 1923; Zischka 1951; see Dechamps 2009; Hansen and Jonsson 2014 for a general overview). This way of thinking was modified after World War II with the onset of the second wave of decolonization. The six countries that formed the nucleus that later was to become the European Union were all located on the European continent. However, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and to a certain extent also Italy[2] were still colonial powers when the Rome treaties were signed in 1957 and they managed to include their colonial possessions as associated to the newly formed European Economic Community. Part IV of the EEC Treaty gave the legal basis for the association of those territories, putting into practice what Robert Schuman had announced already in 1950 as "one of its essential tasks." It was in particular France that until the 1960s nurtured the idea of "Eurafrique" by potentially linking the two continents through common institutions (Bitsch and Bossuat 2005).

With the consolidation of the European Communities, French activism in this direction waned. According to Giuliano Garavini (2013), it was in particular the liberation movements of the Third World together with the concurrent protest movements of the young and the working classes as well as the evolving neo-Marxist intellectual currents that caused a shift in European discourse. These movements did not only create space for discussions of alternative forms of cooperation but also opened the doors for a reconsideration of the damage caused to non-European nations during colonial times. However, most activities were confined to development cooperation and the strengthening of economic ties. They were largely national in character. It took until 1971 before the European Commission put forward a specific request for the launching of a common policy on cooperation and development that would go beyond national plans (Commission 1971). When analyzing the ensuing debates in the European Parliament, it becomes evident how divided the member states were over this issue. They stubbornly resisted any attempts at a joint policy of development and cooperation (European Parliament 1972), defying what Nicolaïdis (2015) called the "desire for continuity and collective management of a colonial world … slipping out of the grasp of its member states individually" (285–286). Arguably, it was only with the

2 Somalia was under Italian trusteeship until 1960.

accession of the UK, the renegotiation of the Yaoundé Agreements in 1973 and the following signing of the Lomé Convention in February 1975 that a major step forward in the creation of a real Community policy for what was labeled "the South" was made. The 1980s then marked a new shift in policy, moving away from the unconditionality of aid towards making it dependent on some form of political cooperation (Garavini 2013, 191, 256). In Nicolaïdis's (2015) terms, the process of transforming the ambitions of former colonial powers from direct inclusion of their colonial territories into the EEC towards loose cooperation can be described as "redirection." It is arguably no coincidence that this development went hand in hand with the successive enlargements of the EC: "European nations learned to redirect their ambition from without to within" (288).

While real progress was made on "Europeanizing" policies aimed at tying former colonies closely to the EU's member states, a similar development regarding atonement for the crimes committed in those countries during the colonization period could not be observed. Even if the origin of the special relationship between the EC and its former colonies was in the background of most policy decisions taken in this field, the memory of human rights violations during the period of colonialism remained invisible in official statements and policy documents. The evolving political and economic ties with the former colonies of Europe seemingly eclipsed all other aspects of the historical relationship with those countries. A search in the EU documents repository EUR-Lex using the search terms "Colon*" and "Empir*" for the period 1971 (after the Commission proposed a common policy for the first time) to 2018 bring up not much more than lofty statements similar to the one by Nils Muiznieks, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights,[3] stressing that Europe must "fight the sort of afrophobia (dislike of black people)[4] that goes back to the days of colonialism and the slave trade" (Agence Europe 2017).

References to colonialism and imperialism appear mainly in the context of "environmental colonialism" or "agricultural colonialism," describing the process through which non-governmental organizations (NGOs), steered by Western governments, put pressure on developing countries to not make use of their raw materials while performing land-grabbing (Agence Europe 2015; European Parliament 2011a, 2011b). They also appear in the context of accusations of a "neo-colonialist attitude" of the EU in relation to potential new member states in the Mediterranean (Agence Europe 2018; European Parliament 2012a), past experiences of existing member states under Communism (European Parliament 2014a, 2014b, 2016) and in references to some of the EU's development policies and its neighbourhood policy (European Parliament 2011c, 2015; see also contribution by Langan and Price this special issue). It has also featured prominently in the recent Brexit debates, with the status of Gibraltar and Akrotiri and Dhekelia on the

3 The Council of Europe is of course not an EU institution but remains the point of reference for the EU when it comes to human rights issues.
4 Interesting here is the avoidance of the term "racism" as commonly used to denote "afrophobia."

island of Cyprus creating frictions between different member states (BBC 2018; Kouparanis 2017).

The term "colonialism" is clearly used – in some cases in one breath with Nazism and Fascism – as a negative reference point for other policies. In some instances, the connections made in this context can appear far-fetched, i.e. when MEPs compare the EU's austerity policy during the Greek debt crisis to a modern form of colonialism in Europe (Figueiredo 2011; Murphy 2012). What is being cut out in the process is the memory of this specific time period. By becoming a sort of negative foil against which to measure contemporary relationships with other states, recollections of the colonial period are not only redirected but also moved to an abstract level. This allows for the blending out of certain aspects, among them the human rights violations that took place in the name of the colonizers.[5]

5 The term human rights in its legal sense is of course rather new. The principal

The EU and colonial crimes: A case of amnesia

motives/justifications in the nineteenth century were (a) the general economic exploitation of the colonized populations and their territories, and oftentimes the breaking of land treaties and accords with local rulers; and (b) the assumption of Europe's civilizational superiority and its "civilizing mission."

In its Annual Human Rights Report 2002 the Council of the European Union outrightly condemns colonial crimes, stating that "some effects of colonialism which still persist today have caused immense suffering" and underlining that "any act causing such suffering must be condemned, wherever and whenever it occurred" (Council 2002, 253). Twelve years later, in 2014, it warns that the continuous remembrance of human rights violations might hamper any progress in the development of sustainable cooperation agreements (Council 2014). In the final document on the relaunch of cooperation between Africa and Europe adopted at the end of the EU–Africa summit in early April 2014, the Council suggests that

> the conflicts between African countries are for the most part overcome and that the abuse and cruelty of European colonialism is of course not forgotten, but put to one side in order to leave room for new forms of cooperation. (Council 2014)

The memory of colonial crimes is evidently classified as a potential hindrance for the further development of (economic) ties with the African continent and thus "put to one side" – a clear instance of intentional amnesia in order to "break with the past" as described by Nicolaïdis (2015).

The Council's ambivalent stance corresponds in large terms to the often ambivalent, amnesic attitude of some of the former colonial powers. In France, for example, a long tradition of historiography going from Ernest Renan to Fernand Braudel and Pierre Nora explored and interpreted national identity ignoring its colonial dimension, i.e. the political anthropology under-lying the formation of a modern citizenship.[6] The most visible outcome of this

was the passing of a law in 2005 that made it compulsory for French high school teachers to include the "positive aspects" of colonialism in their teaching (Loi n 2005-158).[7] Similar tendencies can be observed in other Western countries. In a 2018 article, Lily Gardner Feldman writes: "By comparison with the Nazi past, Germany's efforts to confront its history of colonialism in Africa are in their infancy." If the acknowledgment of responsibility for colonial crimes is insufficient at the national level, it is all the more so at the pan-European level. In terms of the prerequisites for symbolic as well as factual atonement, the EU has done little in comparison to its reaction to the consequences of other wars and genocides in Europe. Neither the restitution of cultural artefacts that today decorate the museums of the Western metropolises, nor reparation payments to the descendants of the original inhabitants of colonized regions who suffered as a result of slavery or the countless massacres carried out in the course of imperial wars, have been on the EU's list of priorities to address. Were the same standards applied as with the reparation payments awarded after the two world wars, or with the entitlements of Holocaust victims and forced laborers, the sums would of course be enormous (Vuckovic 2003). This is arguably not the only reason why the EU has remained curiously quiet about the crimes of the colonial past. But it raises the question of how solid the foundations of the discourse and practice of "Normative Power Europe" (Manners 2002; Pace 2007; Staeger 2016) are on which the EU can claim its own difference in international politics. To be able to investigate this question, we need to know more about how the EU has officially dealt with its own past, or in other words, we need to know more about the EU's memory politics.

European memory politics – A case of atonement?

Since the 1990s the EU has started to become an active player in memory politics. Recognizing that European citizens cannot "fall in love with a market" – as famously observed by former Commission president Jacques Delors (1989) – European policy makers had started to increasingly invest in initiatives that had the power to develop the feeling of a common belonging. The memory of World War II and the Holocaust in their role as "negative founding myths" received special attention in this context. Within a few years the European Parliament passed several resolutions specifically addressing World War II and the murder of European Jews (in 1993, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2006, 2009). The second resolution in 1995 declared the 27th of January as a European-wide day to commemorate the Holocaust, making it, together with "Europe Day," one of the few European commemoration dates that are being celebrated transnationally. The unitary Western European

representation of World War II and the Holocaust was challenged as soon as the EU enlarged to the East in 2004. For many of the so-called "new member states," the end of World War II had not meant liberation from dictatorship but the beginning of a new period of repression. Political representatives used the different EU forms to lobby for the recognition of their suffering under Communist rule. Despite the heated discussions about the sought-after equation of all totalitarian regimes, which in the minds of many Western politicians opened the doors to revisionism and came close to a falsification of history, a second European-wide remembrance day was added in 2009. The "Day of Remembrance for the victims of all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes" was arguably more than a simple concession to the Eastern European member states. It was, to date, the most explicit positioning of the European Parliament towards the issue of memory in the EU (Sierp 2014).

While the above described processes can be classified as instances of atonement (dealing with the past through – assumed – forgiveness), it might have been precisely this limited focus on the European totalitarianisms and the thesis of the singularity of the murder of the Jews that has narrowed the overall perspective. By reducing European historical memory to Nazism, National Socialism, Fascism and Stalinism and by elevating them to the level of a negative foundation myth, incentives aimed at critically examining persisting negative stereotypes were reduced. The fact that the non-affirmative comparison between the Shoah and colonial genocide is a taboo (Leggewie 2011) ultimately underpinned a hierarchy of victims, assuming in its worst form racist stereotypes and translating into the above described form of amnesia concerning colonialism.

This is not new, of course. Historically, the vision of Europe as a homogeneous civilization as well as a geopolitical space was created by reaction to external enemies. Initially, Christian Europe was set against Islam (see Aydın-Düzgit et al. in this special issue), then the white, imperial and "civilized" Europe against a "savage" and racially "inferior" colonial world, and finally during the Cold War an economically capitalist and politically liberal-democratic West against a communist, economically backward East (Pocock 2002, 55–71). According to the philosopher Norbert Elias, the awareness of a shared European past is nothing more than the expression of the "self-consciousness of the West" (*Selbstbewußtein des Abendlandes*) that is built on the tradition of orientalism, colonialism and anti-communism that shaped the history of the continent. It expresses the

> self-assurance of peoples whose national boundaries and national identity have for centuries been so fully established that they have ceased to be the subject of any particular discussion, peoples which have long expanded outside their borders and colonized beyond them. (Elias 1994, 7)

In other words, the vision of Europe as a receptacle of civilization reunifies its different national components, beyond their specificities and antagonisms, opposing them to an external menacing world. "To a certain extent," Elias writes, "the concept of civilization plays down the differences between peoples; it emphasizes what is common to all human beings or – in the view of its bearers – should be" (1994, 7).

Whether one agrees with Elias or not, what remains is the recognition that the memory of Europeans as perpetrators of colonial crimes seems to remain excluded from this shared past. Historians have concentrated on European wars and European problems: Fascism and National Socialism, Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin. Research on those aspects of European history has by far outweighed research on colonialism despite the fact that the *EU Horizon 2020 work programme "Europe in a changing world – inclusive, innovative and reflective societies"* clearly calls for and makes – albeit limited – money available for research also into colonial legacies (Commission 2016). The EU has largely followed this pattern by concentrating its remembrance efforts for decades almost exclusively on the experience of Nazism, Fascism, National Socialism and Stalinism.

One of the most recent examples of this is the House of European History – an initiative by the European Parliament – that opened its doors in May 2017 to visitors.[8] Its way of dealing with the history and memory of colonialism has undergone several transformations from its first *Conceptual Basis* in 2008 to its current exhibition. While the 2008 *Conceptual Basis* contains a number of highly problematic statements reproducing the colonialist point of view and depicting colonialism exclusively in a positive light (Committee of Experts 2008), the revised 2013 concept provides more context. Still, it placed colonialism in the section on European "ascendancy" suggesting that colonialism was an integral and beneficial part of Europe's political and economic development (European Parliament 2013a). The final exhibition distances itself from both concepts and portrays colonialism as the dark side of Europe's ambition to rise to world power in the nineteenth century. Among other objects it features a statue of a sailor with a gun, which was created by an unknown African artist in the sixteenth century, demonstrating that the viewpoint of others with respect to Europeans has not always been flattering. The exhibition text notes: "Abuse and inequality were excused as a necessary part of 'civilising savage peoples'. The gradual ending of slavery was followed by new forms of intolerance and racism" (House of European History 2018). Despite this evident transformation of the exhibition concept, the museum director Constanze Itzel nevertheless admits in an interview with "EUROM – European Observatory of Memories" (2017) that the history and memory of colonialism does not receive sufficient attention in the museum. Considerably more space is being given, for example, to the Holocaust, which in the *Conceptual Basis* of 2013 is described as "constituting the nucleus of the

8 The House of European History is officially independent from the European institutions. However, it was an initiative by the then president of the European Parliament Hans Gert Pöttering and is funded by both the European Parliament and the European Commission.

European discourse of memory" (European Parliament 2013a, 33–35). Atonement seems to be the mechanism that applies to certain elements of the EU's history – those that have been elevated to form the EU's negative founding myth – while for others, amnesia and redirection play a greater role. Indeed, in a study requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Culture and Education, "Europe for citizens – towards the next programme generation," published in May 2018, it came to the conclusion that: "Although the past is often appealed to in official EU discourses, the difficult pasts in Europe, such as colonialism, are usually not discussed" (Pakier and Stråth 2010), with the exceptions of World War II and totalitarian regimes (Mäkinen 2018, 30).

Even if the memory of colonialism does not feature prominently in either political speeches or exhibitions on Europe, it does not mean that European politicians are completely oblivious to the evident gap in the remembrance landscape. Since the beginning of the 2000s in particular, the European Parliament repeatedly issued calls to the European Commission to make funding available for research relating to the history of slavery and colonialism (European Parliament 2007). The Remembrance strand of the Europe for Citizens programme indeed deals with memories related to totalitarian regimes but aims at "providing space for remembering also other cases of the controversial pasts." Similar to the Horizon 2020 programme discussed above, the Europe for Citizens programme displays – despite its very narrow funding base – at least the potential to go beyond the narrow focus of the memory of European totalitarianisms.

The Europe for citizens programme and the memory of colonialism

With the Commission having no legal leeway to influence national remembrance policies, it has, since 2006, concentrated its efforts on funding projects that "keep alive the memory of the victims of Nazism and Stalinism and improve the knowledge and understanding of present and future generations about what took place in the camps and other places of mass-civilian extermination, and why" (Commission 2008). Believing that an open memory culture thrives only with citizens' engagement, its aim is to mobilize grass-roots action by research institutes, museums, human rights organizations and civil society associations. During the funding period 2007–2013 it was mainly through Action 4 "Active European Remembrance" that concrete efforts were made to actively frame the emergence of European-wide memory initiatives. The next generation of the programme (2014–2020) distinguishes only among two strands: (a) "Remembrance and European Citizenship" aimed at strengthening historical remembrance and understanding of Europe's past

and (b) "Democratic Engagement and Civic Participation" aimed at engaging European citizens in the EU political process by helping them to better understand EU decision-making processes and policies. With 26 million Euros per year, it remains one of the smaller funding programmes of the European Commission.

In preparation for the second funding cycle, the lack of inclusivity when it comes to dealing with difficult pasts was a constant topic. In his draft report on the Europe for Citizens programme presented on 8/9 October 2012, MEP Hannu Takkula stressed that the following changes should be made to the Commission proposal on the second generation of the "Europe for Citizens" programme: it should be set on a dual legal base (Article 352 and Article 167 of the Lisbon Treaty) with the correct procedure then being co-decision, not consent. The overall programme budget should be increased to reflect the importance of historical memory and remembrance for European integration. And greater attention should be paid to the legacy of colonialism within the programme (Takkula 2012). The debates between Commission representatives and MEPs preceding the presentation of the report were heated and centred around the question of whether the wording of the programme text did or did not exemplify all the different totalitarian regimes and when exactly European history should be said to begin. Many MEPs considered the present focus on twentieth-century National Socialism and Bolshevism to be problematic because it makes European history a matter of the post-World War I period and reduces historical complexity by obscuring the view on broader (inter-) relations essential for the understanding of contemporary Europe (European Parliament 2012a). As Markus Prutsch, Research Administrator responsible for memory politics at the European Parliament, puts it:

> The problem of radical nationalism with all ensuing consequences (wars fought and crimes committed in the name of the nation, colonialism, etc.), for example, can be argued to be less a child of the twentieth century but the late 18th and the nineteenth century. (Prutsch 2012, 31)

Most debate contributions linked issues of the past to issues of the present, seeing a connection between rising right-wing tendencies in Europe and the evident gap in dealing with Europe's past (European Parliament 2012a). They argued that the repercussions of the colonial past are still widely felt today and manifest in manifold ways, e.g. in the struggles of former colonial powers to deal with the issue of immigration from their former colonies.

The activism of the European Parliament was not without effect. In the end, the proposed amendments added "colonialism" in four instances to the text by the Commission and now reads: "to keep alive the memory of the crimes committed under totalitarian regimes, such as Nazism and Stalinism,

as well as those committed through colonialism" (European Parliament 2012b). With its sustained focus on the future direction of the Europe for Citizens Programme, the European Parliament on the one hand cemented its role as main mnemonic actor in the EU landscape. On the other it set a precedent for the inclusion of colonialism also in other contexts. The proposed amendments (European Parliament 2013b) to the draft report on "Historical memory in education and in culture in the EU" (Migalski 2013) added colonialism in eight instances, now reading for example:

> The history of Europe is inextricably linked with tragedy and the experience of various forms of totalitarianism, such as Stalinism, National Socialism, Fascism, colonialism, slavery, imperialism and other criminal systems which brought death and unimaginable suffering to millions of Europeans. (11)

It also added the phrase: "The EU considers Colonialism and Imperialism as part of European historical memory, together with the dictatorial regimes and all crimes against humanity that have caused the deaths of human beings throughout the history of Europe" (44). The question remains, however, to what extent we observe an instance of "symbolic politics" (Edelman 1985) aimed at conveying a specific message without real consequences or whether we can distinguish a real paradigm shift from amnesia and redirection towards a form of atonement that goes beyond mere rhetoric and includes also the memory of colonialism with all its consequences.

The memory of colonialism – Uniting or Dividing?

When analyzing the debates and discussions in the different policy forums and the policy documents that resulted from them, it is striking to see that the stark differences between East and West European MEPs that had dominated almost all debates on European memory politics before 2009, ignited by the question of equivalence of totalitarian regimes, did not play a role in the more recent debates. Controversy remained confined to the question of when European history starts and whether a more comprehensive approach "beyond Nazism/Stalinism" might result in a "nationalization" of the issues addressed. It seems as if all controversy concerning the direction of EU remembrance policies had subsided after 23 August, which had been declared as European Remembrance Day. For the Central and Eastern European states, this step had meant nothing less than the official recognition of their experiences of suffering under Communism and the assurance of full membership within the Union. It had arguably lessened any pressure to question the Commission's further remembrance activities and created space for the concentration on other "shared pasts." Indeed, within both the Parliament and the Commission the idea that the memories of colonialism and imperialism – in

the wide sense of the meaning – are no less "European" than the Holocaust started to gain ground in the past eight years. The main argument put forward by both institutions in this context is that essentially all European countries and nations have histories that have been shaped by and are closely interconnected through colonialism and imperialism: be it that at certain moments in history they exercised the role of colonial and/or imperial power, either inside or outside of Europe, or that they themselves were under hegemonic foreign rule by another (European) power (Commission 2011; Prutsch 2012). Indeed, several member states still have colonial possessions: Great Britain has Gibraltar and parts of Cyprus, and Denmark has the Faroe Islands and Greenland. In addition, France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain have several overseas territories, linked to the EU as "Outermost Regions" (ORs) or "Overseas Countries and Territories" (OCTs).[9]

9 I.e. the French DOM and TOM, Aruba, Curaçao, Sint Maarten and the islands of Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba, Madeira, Azores, Ceuta, Mellila, to name just a few.

The extent to which the memory of colonialism can nevertheless divide as much as unite is being exemplified by its use in debates that deal with seemingly different topics. Colonialism can be used to blackmail certain countries: "We must also draw conclusions from the fact that historically, some Member States, particularly the old colonial powers, gave priority to their national interests rather than those of the local citizens or the European Union" (Färm 2011, 287). Responses to such generalizing criticism could take on a very personal tone, e.g. when Antonio Tajani, the then Vice President of the Commission, justified the Commission's proposal for a new development policy by saying:

> With regard to international policy, I wish to reassure you – and I regret that Ms Matiasand and Ms Figueiredo are not in the Chamber at present – that I have no intention of pursuing neocolonial policies in Africa. I come from a country that was the first to apologise to Africa for the mistakes made and the atrocities committed during the colonial era. (Tajani 2011, 40)

Tajani's comment is emblematic for the EU's ambivalent relationship with the memory of colonialism. While a general realization of the importance of this history in all its facets seems to have albeit lately but slowly entered public consciousness, the ambitions of the EU at the level of memory politics seem to stay behind concrete efforts to actively commemorate the crimes and atrocities committed during the colonial period. A real paradigm shift can thus only be discerned on the level of intentions as exemplified by the debates in the different policy forums, and less on the level of substantial policy initiatives (i.e. the introduction of a day of remembrance for the victims of colonialism).

The answer to the question of why this is the case might be found by looking back at European integration history and the very beginning of the relationship between what today is the EU and its former colonies. As we

have seen above, European development policies have historically followed the priorities of single nation-states – the former colonial powers – directing their support towards the countries of their choice. As a result, the EU stayed out of most issues connected to the often painful process of decolonization. The answer by the Commission after repeated calls by various MEPs on the Commission to intervene on issues concerning the British colony of Gibraltar is exemplary for this attitude: "The Commission would like to remind the Honourable Member, as it has done on several occasions in the past, that the issue of Gibraltar is a matter of exclusive national sovereignty, where it has no power to intervene" (European Parliament 2008). The idea that the relationship with current or former colonies is a matter of "exclusive national sovereignty" is a clear instance of redirection and seems to have translated also into the way the memory of the experience of colonialism is being dealt with. As much as the European level often offers "the chance to go beyond the limitations of national histories" (Settele 2015, 406), this seems not yet to be the case when it comes to dealing with Europe's legacy of colonialism.

Conclusion

Going back to the conceptual framework by Nicolaïdis that informs this special issue (see introduction by Michelle Pace and Roberto Roccu), it becomes evident that European Union strategies for dealing with the colonial past of its member states can be best described as a mixture of amnesia, redirection and atonement, with amnesia and redirection clearly being the dominant mode. This is largely in line with the findings of the other contributors of this special issue and raises important questions about the weakness of the "Normative Power Europe" (Manners 2002; Pace 2007; Staeger 2016) discourse often used by the EU to claim its own difference in international politics (see introduction by Michelle Pace and Roberto Roccu in this special issue). The reason of why the EU has failed to "adequately gauge the weight of the colonial legacy of some of the EU's member states on the EU's external relations" might lie in its inability to remember and/or its conscious choice to forget this legacy. This neglect potentially opens doors to the recreation, consolidation and deepening of the asymmetries and hierarchies produced by former European colonial empires aptly described by the other contributions in this special issue.

At the same time the findings also suggest something else, namely that the EU has only limited power to develop and disseminate a specific narrative of atonement for the crimes committed under colonialism as long as its memory is used by its member states to divide rather than unite. Despite the potential

of the colonial past to become part of an overarching European collective memory able to contribute to the strengthening of European political identity, steps taken by the European institutions in this direction have been minimal so far. Ironically, it was the argumentative back-and-forth, aggressive resistance, conflict and the need for consensus-making in the different policy forums dealing with the next generation of EU funding programmes that hampered a more vigorous inclusion of colonialism in the European memory landscape going beyond a mere demonstration of intention. Interesting in this context is that most efforts made thus far have been initiated primarily by the European Parliament, representing the only democratically elected institution at the EU level.

The key for understanding the reasons for this development lies in the constraining dissensus in EU politics that is characteristic of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (dealing with the past). The example of memory politics regarding Nazism and Stalinism shows how important the elaboration at the national level was before it could be addressed in a more comprehensive and encompassing way also at a European level. Maybe it is simply a question of time before the EU's approach to its colonial past can be described with other words than "amnesia" or "redirection" and will move more towards the direction of "atonement."

Acknowledgments

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