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Rethinking Crises: Memory, Identity, and Social Change in Central and Eastern Europe and Beyond

Since the end of the Cold War, Central and Eastern Europe has often been imagined in “Western” political and academic discourse as an insecure, crisis-prone region requiring external “stabilization.” Since 2014, developments in Ukraine—culminating in Russia’s full-scale war of aggression—have similarly been framed as part of a prolonged systemic crisis to be managed by strong and powerful actors.

This presentation challenges that framing by arguing that the study of crisis should be rethought through its relationship to social change. Rather than treating crises only as disruptions to be contained, we can understand them as engines of discourse and events that transform identities, generate new forms of political subjectivity, and reshape collective memory. In this respect, studies of historical memory and memory politics—long central to area studies of Central and Eastern Europe—can offer important insights for crisis studies across disciplines and across countries. They show how crises unsettle dominant narratives, open space for memories to be contested and defended, and create opportunities for new identity formations.

To illustrate this argument, the presentation examines memory politics in Central and Eastern Europe in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, with a particular focus on Lithuania. It traces major discursive shifts, the emergence of new identities—including Lithuania’s vicarious identification with Ukraine—and changes in hegemonic memory regimes. Approached in this way, the study of crisis foregrounds actors previously treated as “peripheral” and helps conceptualize the decolonization of memory as a process of rejecting colonial narratives and prescribed identities.