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EDITORIAL

Freedom and the Illiberal Zeitgeist in East-Central Europe – a Conflict-Laden Relationship

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Political and economic freedoms, as well as national sovereignty, were (re)gained only after 1989 in East-Central Europe. It followed decades of struggles that regularly turned violent, such as the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, the Prague Spring of 1968, or the Romanian Revolution of 1989, to name just a few examples. Even after the fall of the communist regimes, however, these long-awaited freedoms remained elusive. They were laden with conflicts and accompanied by a long and often polarizing process of negotiating what freedom actually meant. These debates included, but were not limited to, questions of women's rights, the degree of state regulation in capitalist economies, the autonomy of the media, science, and civil society. The outcomes of these debates have varied across East-Central Europe. With recent democratic backsliding, they have often become battlegrounds where ideals of freedom clashed with an emerging illiberal zeitgeist (Ágh 2019). These conflicts are emblematic not only of regional specificities but also of broader global challenges to liberal democracy: scholars have argued that the rise of illiberalism represents a multifaceted response to the perceived failures of liberal democratic models (Deneen 2018; Holmes and Krastev 2019; Zielonka 2018), particularly against the backdrop of globalization, economic inequality, and cultural dislocation (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

1. Illiberalism and its Sources

As a concept, illiberalism differs from populism, conservatism, or authoritarianism. It emerges from within liberal systems, exploiting their internal contradictions and shortcomings. Thus, illiberalism embodies a rejection of the centrality of individual freedom, pluralism and the rule of law, while promoting the concentration of power, favoring majority rule and national sovereignty (Laruelle 2022). The term can be traced back to Fareed Zakaria's 1997 concept of "illiberal democracy", according to which young democracies, in particular, hold democratic elections but do not necessarily function as liberal democracies. As a result, democratic processes are used to achieve illiberal outcomes, undermining checks and balances and civil liberties (Zakaria 1997). In East-Central Europe, this development manifested itself in the consolidation of power of illiberal governments, particularly in Hungary since 2010 and Poland from 2015 to 2023, where media freedom, independence of (democratic) civil society and minority rights were systematically dismantled (e.g. Grzymała-Busse 2015). The research literature often attributes this to inherent weaknesses of liberalism and argues that the liberal order in East-Central Europe, 'imported' from the West after 1989, failed to meet basic social needs, especially in the aftermath of crises (Holmes and Krastev 2019). Liberalism thus became synonymous with globalization, social inequality, cultural elitism, and patronizing moralism by the West, leading to widespread disillusionment and a search for alternatives.

However, illiberalism is by no means just an East-Central European phenomenon – Brexit, the radicalization of the Republican party under Donald Trump, or the rise of far-right parties in established Western European democracies are all examples of this trend. Among many other general causes, liberalism's focus on individual autonomy can also be seen as a driver for illiberal needs, especially against the background of the increasing extension of the principle of individual autonomy to economic responsibility. This leads to the (over)burdening of individuals with the personal consequences of societal (mis)developments, particularly in times of profound social crises (such as the financial crisis of 2008, the COVID-19 pandemic, or the ongoing climate crisis) (Levine 2018). At the same time, this (by no means only) economic individualization feeds the perception that the communal and social bonds necessary for a functioning society are being undermined. From this perspective, liberalism would not only weaken traditional structures that provide a sense of community and meaning but also lead to a concentration of power in the hands of technocratic elites. Illiberalism can, therefore, be seen as a reaction to the atomization and disenchantment that liberalism is said to have fostered by emphasizing individual rights at the expense of collective identities (Deneen 2018).

2. The Context of East-Central Europe

Despite these universal causes for the rise of illiberalism, East-Central Europe also exhibits specific regional characteristics. The region is shaped by centuries of foreign rule, fragmented national identities and contested borders. The traumatic experiences of imperial power, (mostly) failed uprisings, revolutions and wars, and imposed totalitarian regimes have shaped a collective memory suspicious of external influences and interventions. This historical context has made the region particularly susceptible to narratives emphasizing national sovereignty, cultural homogeneity and the defense of traditional values as a bulwark against perceived external threats (Wandycz 2001).

This peripheral status of East-Central Europe also has an economic dimension. If the rise of emancipative values is linked to the growth of wealth and material security, then this also explains why there is fertile ground for illiberal projects in (traditionally economically underdeveloped) East-Central Europe. In regions where existential pressure remains high, as in many Central European countries, the priority of security over freedom

leads to a preference for authoritarian policies that promise stability and protection over the uncertain achievements of liberal democracy (which, moreover, has been shaken by multiple crises) (Welzel 2013).

It was against this backdrop that the recent transition from communist authoritarian regimes to liberal democracies in the 1990s took place. It was a transition that entailed a profound transformation of all areas of social, political and economic relations along Western patterns. Although the usually harsh market reforms led to considerable increases in prosperity in the medium term, they also created substantial social and economic inequalities. Even 20 years after the Eastern enlargement of the European Union, the promise of catching up with the living standards in Western EU member states was not kept. This, in turn, led to disillusionment with the model of democracy imported after 1989, a development that manifested itself in East-Central Europe as a specific kind of counter-revolution against the liberal order (Zielonka 2018). Thus, in the former communist part of Europe, there is more to the cultural backlash, which Norris and Inglehart understand as a reaction against the shift toward post-materialist values by those threatened by these changes. In East-Central Europe, this backlash was exacerbated by the dislocation associated with rapid social and economic change and contributed to the rise of illiberalism as a moment of defense against perceived threats to national identity and cultural cohesion (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

3. Freedom in East-Central Europe's Illiberal Avant-Garde

While traditional liberalism conceptualizes freedom as the protection of individual rights from unwarranted state interference, illiberal movements in the region reinterpret freedom as a collective or state matter (it is no coincidence that, in an influential speech, Viktor Orbán did not use the term *illiberal democracy* but *illiberal state*). Freedom in this context means the right of the nation to determine its own path, free from constraints by civil liberties or the 'dictates' of supranational organizations, global markets, or cosmopolitan elites. This redefinition of freedom is not without consequences. It often leads to the subordination of individual rights to the 'will of the majority,' resulting in policies restricting the rights of marginalized groups and minorities (Scheppelle 2018). Hence, the ideological critique of liberalism that fuels the illiberal turn in East-Central Europe combines elements of nationalism, conservatism and populism with skepticism toward the cultural and economic aspects of liberalism. The tension between freedom and the illiberal zeitgeist can thus be seen as a clash between different visions of social order – one that prioritizes and protects individual autonomy and diversity, and another that values collective identity, homogeneity and security.

Nevertheless, East-Central Europe is by no means a homogeneous region (e.g. Kubik 2013). We can observe divergent experiences, processes and developments that, in specific constellations, have led to various forms of conflict between freedom and the illiberal zeitgeist. While Hungary and Poland are often highlighted as archetypal cases of illiberal democracies (Grzymała-Busse 2018), other countries in the region show varying degrees of democratic backsliding and illiberal tendencies. For example, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have also experienced democratic deconsolidation, although not to the same extent as Hungary or Poland (Bustikova and Guasti 2017). These variations underscore the importance of considering the historical, cultural, and political specificities within East-Central Europe that shape each country's illiberal turn.

Despite the wide range of potential case studies, Hungary and Poland – the poster children for the avant-garde of illiberalism – form the central focus of this special issue. On the one hand, this is a consequence of the state of research, which revolves around these two strongest cases of democratic deconsolidation when discussing recent developments in East-Central Europe (Bakker, Jolly, and Polk 2020). On the other hand, it reflects that high visibility of the interdependencies between the deep illiberalization of state and society and the restrictions on freedoms in these two countries and should, therefore, be situated at the beginning of such a scholarly investigation. The geographical focus of this special issue is mainly a consequence of the fact that

the overwhelming majority of submissions dealt with Hungary and Poland – lending credence to the points made above.

3. About the Issue

Focusing on two case countries, this special issue aims to contribute to the ongoing scholarly debate by examining the political, social and cultural dimensions of the conflict between liberties and illiberalism. It seeks to explore how the illiberal zeitgeist is redefining freedom, reshaping democratic institutions, and transforming the relationship between the individual and the state. Bringing together diverse disciplinary perspectives, the eight contributions offer a comprehensive examination of the dynamics at play in East-Central Europe's illiberal turn.

The special issue opens with a contribution from a political economy perspective by **Jakub Anusik** and **Rafał Riedel**, entitled *Capitalist backsliding? From neoliberalism to 'illiberal market economy' in Poland and Hungary*. The authors of this study examine the shift that Poland and Hungary have made from the market principles that defined their transitions after 1989 to what they call "illiberal market economies" (IME). The combination of liberal and illiberal elements creates inherent contradictions within the economic system, which, according to Anusik and Riedel, are balanced by clientelism, which acts as a "glue" and stabilizes the system by allowing the ruling party to take control of state institutions and influence sectors through patronage – usually without regard to democratic principles such as transparency. However, the authors also emphasize that these aspects reflect global trends, such as the increase in state intervention following the 2008 financial crisis and the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Important issues arise here: How much of the IME is shaped by Poland and Hungary's political systems, and how much does it reflect changes in global politics? Are Poland and Hungary paving the way in this respect, or are they simply following international trends towards greater state intervention in the economy? Anusik and Riedel consider whether analogous shifts in nations, such as the departure from liberal economic frameworks, can be labelled illiberal. In their discussion, they argue that while several Western democracies have recently experienced an increase in government intervention, states such as Poland and Hungary stand out because their institutions are more susceptible to control by authoritarian regimes than others.

This article examines how Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary has restructured the country's media landscape to increase control and undermine democratic principles. Using Hungary as an example of how populist governments influence public discourse, **István Benedek** argues that this shift reflects more general authoritarian patterns, using changes in media laws to their advantage while also using state advertising to support pro-government media outlets as part of a strategic plan to consolidate political power under the guise of diverse media coverage. In this highly polarized environment, it is increasingly difficult for citizens to monitor the actions of the government, as they have limited access to neutral information. The Orbán regime thus maintains its power through multiple interventions in the media landscape, influencing public discourse, suppressing critical opinions, and discrediting political opponents.

The following article also focuses on media coverage. **Eszter Kirs** examines the ways in which state-controlled media in Hungary target and undermine youth resistance movements within the country's illiberal political framework. Her study focuses on two protests. The 2018 demonstrations against the expulsion of the Central European University, and the 2020 protests for the autonomy of the University of Theatre and Film Arts. Kirs examines how the media used rhetorical tactics to discredit these movements. Through an analysis of state media content, she uncovers key strategies, including biased news coverage, highlighting protesters' allegedly deviant behavior, mocking protest activities, and portraying protesters as mere puppets manipulated by foreign or domestic adversaries. According to Kirs, these methods of marginalization should be seen as

tactics that undermine opposing views in Hungary by diverting attention from the issues raised by protesters to how they are portrayed as a threat to the country as a whole; such public discourse contributes to widening divisions in society while reinforcing the narrative promoted by the illiberal regime that portrays dissent as not only misguided but also potentially dangerous. The article illustrates how authoritarian governments use the media to maintain power and presents an example of how media manipulation intersects with political influence and youth opposition in Hungary.

In their article, **Dorota Szelewa** and **Dorottya Szikra** analyze how the illiberal governments of Poland and Hungary are using the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to reinforce their anti-equality and anti-LGBTQI+ policies. During the state of emergency, both governments took measures that directly affected the reproductive rights of women and the LGBTQI+ community. In both cases, these policies were presented as measures to protect traditional families, using gendered nationalist rhetoric: the Hungarian Fidesz party emphasized the protection of children, and the Polish PiS party emphasized the protection of life from the moment of conception. Szelew and Szikra argue that these policies go beyond what is usually called “benevolent sexism” and instead lead to aggressive and exclusionary measures – thereby reinforcing patriarchal and authoritarian rule. These measures have sparked a vibrant feminist countermovement in Polish society, while the response of Hungarian civil society has been limited due to the country’s already weakened democratic institutions. The article provides a critical insight into how illiberal regimes can use crisis situations to further entrench discriminatory gender policies.

In his paper, **Márton Gerő** examines the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the context of political polarization and democratic backsliding in Hungary, Poland and Israel. Gerő argues that although civil society is traditionally seen as a bulwark against authoritarianism, it is often drawn into the political conflict itself. Based on interviews with activists and staff of various CSOs, the author shows how civil society actors in these countries can, intentionally or not, exacerbate political polarization. On the one hand, Gerő demonstrates how CSOs that are critical of the government, especially those that promote human rights or democracy, are increasingly under pressure and attack. These organizations are often labeled as foreign agents or enemies of the state, which undermines their legitimacy and increases polarization. On the other hand, pro-government or right-wing organizations often ally themselves with illiberal regimes, receive state support and contribute to polarization through their actions. In all three countries examined here, civil society actors play this dual role: they resist the erosion of democracy, but their engagement can also inadvertently deepen social divisions.

The next paper is **Anna Radiukiewicz**, **Alan Żukowski**, and **Joshua K. Dubrow’s** *The Polish Government’s Response to COVID-19 Protests: Restrictions and Contradictions in “Moments of Madness”*. This paper examines the Polish government’s response to street protests during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on how the crisis created opportunities for the government to restrict civil liberties. Drawing on Zolberg’s “moments of madness” thesis, the authors argue that moments of crisis allow both citizens and governments to perceive a shift in the political landscape where anything seems possible – including radical shifts in institutional power. Through a detailed analysis of legal measures and public statements by Polish government officials, Radiukiewicz, Żukowski and Dubrow show how the PiS government implemented social distancing measures recommended by the European Union and the World Health Organization, while simultaneously framing protesters as a public health threat. These restrictions were often imposed by government decree, bypassing regular legislative processes and disproportionately targeting political opponents. The authors highlight the contradictions in the government’s stance: while presenting itself as a defender of public health and civil liberties, it simultaneously undermined the constitutional rights of protesters and labelled them as irresponsible threats to public safety. This paper offers a critical examination of the tensions between public health measures and the erosion of democratic freedoms during the pandemic in Poland, contributing to broader discussions of democratic regression and authoritarianism in crisis contexts.

With his paper *Anti-Regime Movements in Illiberal Regimes in East-Central Europe: a Theoretical Model*, **Dániel Mikecz** offers an interesting theoretical reflection. He constructs a Weberian ideal type of anti-regime movements, focusing on the protests that have emerged in opposition to illiberal regimes in Hungary and Poland. Mikecz analyzes waves of protests in both countries, showing how these movements began as responses to specific conflicts - such as threats to academic freedom or changes in labor law - but gradually expanded their focus to express broader societal dissatisfaction with illiberal regimes. Mikecz argues that these movements form in response to the dismantling of democratic institutions. As they grow, they evolve from addressing narrower issues of rights and freedoms to broader anti-systemic movements that unite different social groups. His analysis shows that anti-regime protests in Hungary and Poland attract individuals who may not have been directly involved in the initial conflicts, but who are drawn in by a shared dissatisfaction with the authoritarian tendencies of the regimes. The paper contrasts anti-regime movements with other forms of social mobilization, such as counter-hegemonic or public policy movements, and argues that anti-regime protests have a distinct focus on resisting the expansion of illiberalism rather than merely advocating for policy changes. Mikecz's theoretical model offers valuable insights into the dynamics of political resistance in de-democratizing contexts and provides a framework for understanding how these movements challenge illiberal regimes and contribute to broader struggles for democracy in East-Central Europe.

In the final article of the special issue, **Kristóf Nagy** examines the role of the Hungarian Academy of Arts (HAA) in promoting the ideological project of Viktor Orbán's government from the perspective of Antonio Gramsci's common sense. Nagy analyzes the emergence and development of the HAA as a central institution of the Orbán regime and argues that the contradictions within the Academy's ideological orientation and economic policies do not indicate instability, but rather reflect deeper tensions within the political economy of authoritarian capitalism. Although many of its members express anti-capitalist beliefs, particularly criticizing the exploitation of local artists by global capitalism, they simultaneously support a regime that is deeply intertwined with global capital accumulation. The rhetoric of the HAA unites these contradictory views and provides an exemplary illustration of how illiberal regimes use diverse and often conflicting ideological elements to preserve their rule. Through ethnographic research and an analysis of the academy's public communications, Nagy demonstrates how HAA members contribute to the normalization and legitimization of Orbán's regime. In doing so, the study provides important insights into the cultural aspects of illiberal rule and a more nuanced view of how intellectual and artistic elites participate in and shape authoritarian regimes.

4. Concluding Remarks on Further Perspectives on the Conflict-Laden Future of Freedom and Illiberalism

The special issue makes clear that the contrast between freedom and illiberalism in East-Central Europe is a complex relationship and already points to possible gaps in research. While the articles focus on Hungary and Poland, other countries in the region and beyond should also be considered for future research (Márton Gerő goes a step further by including the Israeli government and the conflict it has triggered over judicial reform in his comparison). Further comparative studies in different political, cultural, and historical contexts could contribute to a better understanding of the broader dynamics at play in the global rise of illiberalism, but also help to sharpen the East-Central European specifics (as Anusik and Riedel do, describing the developments in Poland and Hungary as a distinct phenomenon against the global trend of increasing state intervention in the aftermath of the financial crises or the COVID-19 pandemic). For future research, however, it is equally important to engage with the experiences and perspectives of those who paradoxically gain (e.g. economic) freedoms under illiberal governments. Kristóf Nagy, for example, focuses not on the "victims" but on the beneficiaries of Viktor Orbán's regime. How the processes of power appropriation unfold and what role

these new elites play in the stability of illiberal projects is a so far often neglected topic that urgently needs to be examined in more detail. This applies not only to the actors in the cultural and art scenes described by Nagy, but also to all other areas of society, such as the media or academia. Wherever the rights of certain groups are restricted, others gain influence. But regardless of the specific gaps in research, the illiberalization of our societies is an issue of relevance that will be with us for the foreseeable future. As the region under discussion continues to suffer from economic uncertainty, (perceived) cultural estrangement, and rapid social change, the balance between individual freedoms and collective security will continue to be contested against the backdrop of a global trend away from liberal democracy.

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