PARTECIPAZIONE e CONFLITTO
The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print)
ISSN: 2035-6609 (online)
Coordinamento SIBA - University of Salento

PArtecipazione e COnflitto
http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco
ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)
ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)
PACO, Issue 17(2) 2024: 559-576
DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v17i2p559

Published 15 July, 2024

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Anti-Regime Movements in Illiberal Regimes in East-Central Europe: a Theoretical Model

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ABSTRACT:

The paper introduces an ideal type of anti-regime movements against illiberal regimes in East-Central Europe, employing the Weberian concept of the ideal type as a theoretical model. These movements aim to constrain regime building, restructure political institutions, and prevent the expansion of illiberal regimes into subsystems such as civil society, culture, and the economy. Initially focused on specific conflicts, these movements often broaden their scope over time, attracting individuals who were not directly involved in the original disputes but who seek to express general discontent with illiberal regimes. The ideal type is differentiated from counter-hegemonic and public policy movements. Empirical analysis of this ideal type is based on large-scale protest waves in Hungary and Poland. The characteristics of the anti-regime movement are shaped by historical legacies and the particular aspects of de-democratization in East-Central Europe, rooted in the democratic transition of 1989. This concept of anti-regime movements can serve as a crucial foundation for empirical research, offering insights into the differences between social movements in Western and Eastern Europe.

KEYWORDS:

East-Central Europe, Hungary, hybrid regimes, illiberal regimes, Poland, political protests, social movements

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1. Introduction

In East-Central Europe, regime building by illiberal, populist governments has been accompanied by large-scale mobilizations by social movements. In Hungary, protests against the rearrangement of political institutions have been ongoing since the new media law took effect at the end of 2010, the same year Viktor Orbán's Fidesz and the affiliated KDNP party achieved a supermajority in the elections. Notable protest waves include the 2012-2013 university student demonstrations, the 2014 internet tax protests, the 2016 teachers' protests, the 2017-2019 protests supporting the Central European University and academic freedom, the 2018 protests against the overtime law, and the 2022-2023 student and teachers' protests. In Poland, protests began in 2015 in response to threats against judicial independence following the rise of the Law and Justice party (PiS) and continued until 2020. Additionally, a series of large-scale protests throughout the country were triggered by restrictions on reproductive rights in various waves from 2016 to 2021.

While several analytical and theoretical frameworks have been developed to understand democratic backsliding and classify de-democratizing regimes in the region (see Böcskei and Hajdu 2022 for a review), significantly less theoretical attention has been given to protests and social movements against such regimes. Recently, scholars of civil society and social movements in East-Central Europe have focused on various aspects, including the creation of enemy images (Gerő et al. 2017), the political reconfiguration of civil society under illiberalism (Piotrowski 2020), and the shrinking spaces for civil society (Buzogány et al. 2022). However, a comprehensive theoretical account of protest mobilization against de-democratizing and illiberal regimes has yet to be developed.

To conceptualize a distinct genre of social movement typical in East-Central Europe, this paper presents a theoretical model of anti-regime movements based on the Weberian ideal type. The paper aims to identify and differentiate this specific type of mobilization within illiberal regimes. By establishing this ideal type, the concept of the anti-regime movement can serve as a foundation for empirical research and aid in understanding the distinctions between social movements in Western and Eastern Europe. Additionally, the paper seeks to expand the theoretical foundations of academic discourse on democratic backsliding, which has largely relied on institutionalist approaches. Finally, the paper tests the ideal type against empirical realities, using cases from Hungary and Poland.

Following this brief introduction, the next section reviews the literature on democratic backsliding, hybridization, and illiberal regimes to establish a regime concept relevant to the conceptualization of the anti-regime model. The methodological section details the application of the Weberian ideal-type process. This is followed by a definition of anti-regime movements, a comparison of the anti-regime ideal type with empirical reality, and, finally, the conclusion. For clarity, the paper uses the term 'anti-regime movements' to specifically refer to movements opposing illiberal regimes.

2. Political regimes in Hungary and Poland

It was noted as early as the 2000s that the democratic transitions in East-Central Europe faced significant challenges. In 2007, the Journal of Democracy devoted a special issue to the topic of democratic backsliding in the region. Ivan Krastev (2007) argued that the liberal consensus had ended in East-Central Europe, with populism becoming a prominent feature of politics and the masses growing angry and distrustful of the liberal elite. He highlighted phenomena such as increasing intolerance, demands for direct democracy, and the rise of charismatic leadership. In the same issue, Béla Greskovits (2007) emphasized the role of austerity measures and the neoliberal economic agenda in turning the electorate away from the liberal consensus and towards illiberal political forces. Following the pivotal 2010 election in Hungary, where Viktor Orbán achieved a twothirds supermajority for the first time, and the 2015 electoral success of the national-conservative PiS party in Poland, there was a surge in scholarly attention to the hybridization of democracy, authoritarian tendencies, and de-democratization in both countries.

The emergence of 'populist democracy' in Hungary occurred in several stages, as noted by Pappas (2014). This transformation involved shifting the Fidesz party's ideology from liberalism to a more electorally rewarding populism and fostering societal polarization by both political blocs in pre-2010 Hungary. According to Bozóki and Hegedűs (2021), the Hungarian system can be classified as a hybrid regime, as the constitutional guarantees of democracy have been systematically eroded. They refer to this subtype as an 'externally constrained hybrid regime' due to the European Union's role in constraining, supporting, and legitimizing the hybrid regime in Hungary. A unique aspect of both the Hungarian and Polish cases is that, unlike other hybrid regimes, these countries transitioned from consolidated liberal democracies to hybrid regimes. Hungary, in particular, stands out even within the analytical framework of embedded and defective democracies (Merkel et al. 2004). As Bogaards (2018) observed, Hungary is a 'diffusely defective' democracy with moderate flaws across a range of domains, including the electoral system, civil rights, and horizontal accountability. In the Polish case, researchers and analysts have noted restrictions on freedom of speech and civil society (Moder 2019), while the structural reasons for the conservative shift in Poland include the liberal democratic political system's failure to address economic and social problems from the transition (Benedikter and Karolewski 2016). Growing political polarization, driven by latent social conflicts, has led to public support for conservative changes to the social system (Horonziak 2022). The two countries are often analyzed together in terms of the structural conditions of democratic backsliding (Bernhard 2021), authoritarian neoliberalism (Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa 2021), state capture, political patronalism (Sata and Karolewski 2020), and challenges to the constitutional order (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała 2019).

Culture is a crucial domain in the regime-building process. The cultural policy of the Orbán governments aimed to reinvigorate the cultural and political symbols of the interwar period (Bozóki 2016). Since 2010, memory politics have become a prominent tool for legitimizing the Orbán regime, sparking what is referred to as a "culture war" (Ágh 2016). This culture war involves constant references to Christian heritage and contrasts between Islam and Christianity (Kürti 2020), as well as attacks on academic freedom (Enyedi 2022). Simultaneously, the concept of 'gender ideology' has been used as a basis for anti-liberal cultural and family policies (Takács et al. 2022). The Orbán governments have also politically instrumentalized culture to legitimize the regime and exercise political patronage (Kristóf 2021). Similarly, 'anti-genderism' and conservative family policies are central to the politics of the PiS party in Poland (Gwiazda 2021). Illiberal regimes are aligning with the claims and collective action frames of the global right-wing anti-gender movement (Graff and Korolczuk 2022). In Poland, the PiS introduced educational reforms designed to promote patriotic history education, viewed as a tool of 'cultural soft power' (Żuk 2018). Nevertheless, as demonstrated by Żuk and Żuk (2019), the Catholic Church – an important ally of the PiS party – exerts significant influence on cultural issues and beyond.

According to Körösényi and his colleagues, the theoretical framework of hybridization does not adequately describe the Hungarian regime. They contrast their concept of plebiscitary leader democracy with the hybridization literature (Körösényi et al. 2020). They argue that, unlike hybridization, the concept of plebiscitary leader democracy is non-normative and is rooted in the realistic school of political science, drawing on Max Weber's sociology. Moreover, plebiscitary leader democracy is an ideal type designed not to classify regimes or measure their deviation from liberal democracy, but to understand individual cases. They also emphasize that plebiscitary leader democracy is not a static concept but focuses on political action, leadership, and agency, which are flexible and dynamic. Finally, the hybrid regime framework relies on a concept of institutional legitimacy and thus fails to recognize the importance of Weberian charismatic legitimacy beyond legal-rational legitimacy (Körösényi et al. 2020).

The plebiscitary leader democracy developed by Körösényi and his colleagues is grounded in the regime concept articulated by Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek (1998). By examining the political and political science literature from the 1940s, the authors detailed the nature of regimes and regime changes in American politics. They argue that regime building is primarily an elite-driven process of political engineering, which involves the reorganization and rearrangement of governmental institutions. It also includes the establishment of linkages between institutions and commitments, which are reflected in norms, public discourses, decision-making modes, and policy patterns. This institutional rearrangement is preceded by the dismantling of former institutions, a process that emerging elites often facilitate, sometimes with the support of social movements.

The concept of anti-regime movements is akin to Körösényi et al.'s plebiscitary leader democracy, as both are Weberian ideal types. This model helps to understand and differentiate protests and social movements in East-Central Europe within the context of democratic backsliding, distinguishing them from other domestic and international mobilization campaigns. In this theoretical framework, similar to Orren and Skowronek's concept, the regime is viewed as a process of rearranging political institutions, public discourse, hegemonic culture, and social and economic relations within the country. These areas of regime expansion were identified in the aforementioned studies. Consequently, anti-regime movements aim to counteract the regime's expansion in critical domains such as polity, culture, and the economy.

3. Method of the Weberian ideal type

As outlined in the section above, the concept of anti-regime movements is modeled on the Weberian ideal type but aims to conceptualize a specific social phenomenon: protests and social movements designed to contain regime building. Ideal or pure types are constructed by analytically emphasizing certain elements of observed reality. They are neither hypotheses nor mere descriptions but serve to formulate hypotheses and provide frameworks for description (Weber 1949). According to Weber, the formulation of ideal types is essential for social scientists because social phenomena can have multiple facets, yet sociological analysis must provide precise meanings (Weber 1978). Ideal types function as heuristic tools, helping to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant elements of social reality for a clearer understanding of the issue (Engerman 2000). For researchers, the ideal type enables a focus on individual cases, as its purpose is not to define general laws but to offer a framework for understanding specific phenomena (Psathas 2005).

While the ideal type is not a direct description of social reality, it has empirical roots, as its purpose is to filter relevant elements from the constant flow of reality in order to understand and conceptualize the focus of the inquiry. The development of the ideal type is grounded in the observation of empirical reality, and it is simultaneously compared to that reality to highlight specific features (Psathas 2005). However, applying the ideal type requires certain assumptions. A key aspect of Weber's method is 'adequacy on the level of meaning,' which means that the meaning and the action must correspond (Swedberg 2018). This prerequisite implies further assumptions: that the actor acts rationally, has complete information, is aware of their actions, and does not make mistakes (Weber 1978). Although these assumptions may seem unrealistic, they are necessary to derive the concept from the flow of events. These assumptions allow for the alignment of the actor's motivation and the effect of their actions, which creates the 'causal adequacy' of the ideal type, another requirement by Weber (Swedberg 2018). Finally, the ideal type should be tested against empirical reality to assess the feasibility of the model.

Based on the application of the Weberian ideal type in social science inquiry, the next section will conceptualize the ideal type of anti-regime movements. This conceptualization will emphasize certain features of the ideal type, drawing on the general characteristics of movements opposing governments in de-democratizing countries in East-Central Europe. Additionally, anti-regime movements will be distinguished from other types of social movements, particularly counter-hegemonic and public policy movements, using relevant literature. Following this conceptual framework, the ideal type will be tested against case studies from Hungary and Poland, including two cases from each country: the protests for academic freedom in Hungary (2017-2019), the 2022-2023 education protests in Hungary, the Polish justice reform protests (2015-2020), and the women's movement in Poland (2016-2021).

The selection criteria for the case studies were mobilization campaigns under illiberal regimes that featured multiple protest events and significant resonance in the public sphere. The specific issue of each protest cycle is not crucial, as the concept of anti-regime movements is not tied to any particular issue. The goal is to assess the ideal type using empirical cases, hence the selection of two cases per country. One of the key features of anti-regime movements is their ability to expand by attracting additional participants; therefore, the case studies focus on the banners and chants used by protesters. In all four cases, the mobilizations responded to threats against institutions or previously guaranteed rights posed by the expanding regime. Each protest wave initially began with a focused conflict but later expanded to reflect broader societal opposition to the regime in question.

4. The ideal type of the anti-regime movement

Anti-regime movements in illiberal regimes aim to contain the expansion of de-democratizing regimes and the reorganization of political institutions. These movements often start with a specific issue, such as freedom of education, academic freedom, or reproductive rights. However, protesters may not always be directly involved in the initial conflict; rather, they seek to express their general discontent with the regime through acts of social resistance. Anti-regime movements have a national scope, and their expansion can be achieved by mobilizing outraged and discontented groups, linking them together in a broader effort.

The empirical reality of anti-regime movements involves social movements in regimes experiencing democratic backsliding. These movements aim to restrict the regime's expansion and the reconfiguration of political institutions. Since the early 2010s, social movements in Hungary and Poland have been organized not only to effect changes in public policy or to support specific social groups but also to express broader dissatisfaction with the political systems. In this context, the political regime is understood, according to Orren and Skowronek's definition, as a category that is narrower than a constitutional system but broader than a government. It encompasses state and social relations, the separation of powers, social and political coalitions, and dominant political paradigms (Körösényi et al. 2020).

Anti-regime movements in illiberal regimes are reactive, with their primary goal being to restrict the regime's expansion and the takeover and reorganization of political institutions and domains. These movements operate on a national scale, as regime building occurs within the national framework. The logic of protest is to authentically demonstrate social opposition to regime building, underscoring the importance of highlighting the social groups affected by these changes. The expansion of the movement can be facilitated by involving more affected social groups, achieved through the extension of collective action frames (Snow et al. 1986). This expanded frame fosters the development of a shared identity among participants. The anti-political legacy of politics in East-Central Europe is reflected in the significant role of civil society and morality in the opposition (Glenn 2003).

Anti-regime movements often start with a narrower focus, addressing issues such as the culture war, political centralization, education, academic freedom, and reproductive rights. These topics are typically characterized as liberal issues, related to fundamental rights and freedoms rather than material claims. At the same time, these mobilizations may attract participants who were not originally involved in the specific conflict but wish to express their broader dissatisfaction with the regime. For example, data from protest surveys in Hungary show that participants in the 2018 opposition campaign rallies had previously engaged in large-scale protests critical of the government. This includes the teachers' protests organized in 2016 and the CEU protests in 2017, which are detailed in the case study section. At the opposition parties' rallies, 68 percent of respondents reported having attended the teachers' protest, and 66 percent had participated in the CEU protest (Mikecz 2023). Thus, while some participants are directly involved due to specific grievances, others join to express their general discontent with the regime.

Anti-regime movements share some similarities with populist movements, which have been rising on both the left (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019) and the right (Berbuir 2015; Muis and Immerzeel 2017) sides of the political spectrum in the recent decade. Conceptually, populist movements aim to represent the entire social body rather than just a narrow social group. They reject consultations with decision-makers on specific policy issues, focusing instead on changing the entire system and reshaping sovereignty (Aslanidis 2017). However, anti-regime movements are reactive and are rooted in the principles of liberal democracy. This distinguishes them from color revolutions in the post-Soviet region, which took place in nations with hybrid or authoritarian regimes rather than fully democratic ones. In contrast, the illiberal regimes in Hungary and Poland represent a regression from a previously democratic state.

Regimes also seek to establish cultural hegemony, aiming to control cultural practices, social norms, values, and social attitudes. Scholars of counter-hegemonic movements, however, focus on left-wing struggles against global capitalist hegemony (Carroll and Ratner 2010). These counter-hegemonic movements are critical of the dominant political and economic systems and seek to transform the broader framework of capitalism. Examples include the global justice movement from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the early 2010s. In contrast, anti-regime movements in East-Central Europe differ from counter-hegemonic movements. They do not target the global economic system but focus on national governments and political leaders as the primary agents of regime building. Additionally, counter-hegemonic movements often extend through global networks of local movements, whereas anti-regime movements are primarily concerned with national-level issues.

A general dissatisfaction with the regime, framed within a national context, distinguishes anti-regime movements from public policy movements. Public policy movements, on the other hand, address narrower grievances related to specific policies rather than the regime as a whole, although their actions can sometimes be situated within a broader context (Ishkanian 2022). In these movements, participants are directly involved in specific conflicts, protests focus on policy-related claims, and the movement's expansion is facilitated through the formation of policy coalitions. These social movements become part of the public policy process, making demands on policymakers (Meyer et al. 2005). The success of such demands often hinges on the political opportunities and resources available to the movements (Andrews 2001). In the 'movement society' concept, social movements are considered permanent actors in public policy advocacy (Rucht and Neidhardt 2002). According to David Aberle's (1966) classic movement typology, public policy movements can be classified as reformist, with limited goals affecting a broad group, while anti-regime movements are revolutionary, seeking radical change and impacting many.

The above-mentioned features of anti-regime movements and their differences to counter-hegemonic and public policy movements are displayed in table 1:

Table 1 – Comparison of anti-regime movements with counter-hegemonic and public policy movements

	anti-regime movements in illiberal regimes	*counter-hegemonic movements*	*public policy movements*
aim of the movement	containing regime expansion	counter-hegemonic struggle	making a policy demand
scope of action	national	global	scope of the policy maker's authority
involvement of participants	indirect / direct	indirect / direct	direct
protest logic	demonstrating social resistance to the regime	transformative politics	expressing policy claims
means of extending the movement	linking discontents	globalization from below, global civil society	building public policy coalitions

Source: Author

5. Anti-regime movements in Hungary and Poland

5.1 Protests for academic freedom in Hungary in 2017-2019

In March 2017, the Hungarian government passed a law mandating that universities offering degrees in Hungary outside the European Economic Area under a licensing agreement must also have a campus and training in their home country (Joób 2017). This legislation, which significantly impacted several universities, notably affected the Central European University (CEU). Known in the media as the 'lex-CEU,' the law was enacted in April 2017 through an expedited procedure. Although CEU had arranged to launch a joint course with Bard College in New York State, the Hungarian government did not sign the cooperation agreement with New York State after negotiations. Consequently, CEU moved its English-language courses to Vienna starting in September 2019. A wave of protests against the legislation began in April 2017, with 40,000 to 45,000 people attending a demonstration on April 9, according to the Jacobs method (Mikecz 2017). During the protest, participants chanted 'Dictator' in reference to Viktor Orbán. Chants and banners framed academic freedom in terms of freedom and democracy, with slogans such as 'Free country, free education' and 'Science is not a liberal conspiracy.' A speaker from the 'I'd Like to Teach' movement called for an end to dictatorship and a stand for freedom (Sarkadi 2017).

During the protest wave, radical right-wing counter-protesters also mobilized, though they did not articulate specific demands (Lakner 2017). The initial April protests were organized by the group Oktatási Szabadság / Freedom for Education, while subsequent protests in 2018 were organized by Oktatói Hálózat (Educational Network) and the political parties Politics Can Be Different (LMP) and Momentum (LMP – Hungary's Green Party 2018; Mandiner 2018). Social media posts calling for participation framed the conflict as an attack by the Hungarian government on democratic, free debate, as well as on the freedom of science and education, highlighting fears about the suppression of critical thinking (Oktatási Szabadságot / Freedom for Education 2017). Throughout the protest cycle, additional issues emerged, including the government's enactment of a law requiring mandatory registration for NGOs receiving foreign funding during this period.

Beyond the CEU protests, another significant protest wave aimed at safeguarding the independence of the research institutes of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS). The HAS, a prominent national research institution in Hungary, was founded in 1825 during the reform era, a period of national awakening. It is commonly taught in Hungarian schools that Count István Széchenyi, a notable statesman in Hungarian history, donated a year's income from his estates to establish the HAS. During the Sovietization of Hungary in the 1950s, research institutions were created under the academy's control. Consequently, even after the democratic transition, these important research institutions remained independent from universities.

After the 2018 general election, the fourth Orbán government overhauled the budgetary financing system for academic research. In June 2018, a new proposal suggested that instead of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (HAS), the Ministry of Innovation and Technology would be responsible for allocating funds to research institutions and projects (Kolozsi 2018). Previously, the HAS received funds directly from the national budget, with allocations made based on decisions by research boards. The new regulation increased government influence over research by centralizing fund distribution under the Ministry. Additionally, the Hungarian government expressed intentions to place HAS research institutions under direct government control.

In February 2019, the Academic Workers' Forum, a social movement organization established in 2018, organized a protest where demonstrators formed a human chain around the HAS headquarters in Budapest to symbolically protect the institution (Német 2019). In March, another rally took place with several hundred participants as HAS leadership engaged in negotiations with government representatives (Fábián 2019). This rally also passed by the CEU building. After the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, it was leaked that the government planned to transfer research institutions from the HAS to a new research network under direct government control (Kolozsi 2019). This decision sparked further protests. On June 2, 2019, the Academic Workers' Forum organized a large demonstration, drawing several thousand participants. A speaker at the event compared the Hungarian regime to other illiberal regimes that have persecuted scientists (Nagy and Presinszky 2019). Despite these protests, in July, the Hungarian National Assembly, with its Fidesz-KDNP majority, passed a new law transferring control of research institutions away from the HAS.

5.2 The 2022-2023 education protests in Hungary

The 2022-2023 education protest wave began with teachers' unions announcing an indefinite strike starting March 16, 2022, to pressure the government for higher salaries. However, in the context of coronavirus emergency legislation, the government issued a decree mandating that teachers must continue to supervise students in the classroom and maintain a minimum number of working hours, even during a strike (Domány 2022). This decree effectively undermined the strike's coercive power. The restriction on the right to strike itself became a new grievance, leading to the addition of a demand for the 'fundamental right to strike' to the teachers' agenda.

The restriction on the right to strike also affected the form of protest. Teachers, in response to the decree, chose not to return to work as a form of civil disobedience, in addition to participating in the legal strike. According to the Civic Platform for Public Education, approximately 6,300 teachers from 320 educational institutions out of about 145,000 nationwide ceased working (HVG 2022). Photos of teachers protesting in schools were widely shared on social media, highlighting their individual risk-taking and aligning with the protest logic of bearing witness (della Porta and Diani 2020). Despite the restrictions, the strike proceeded, accompanied by various protest actions. Students joined in solidarity demonstrations starting in March 2022, and the protest wave continued into the autumn following the April 2022 elections with large-scale demonstrations. In the fall, renewed protests by teachers included both legal strikes and acts of civil disobedience. During a major education protest on September 2, 2022, participants chanted the slogan of previous protests, 'Free country, free education!' and introduced a new rallying cry, 'Pay our teachers!'

Banners highlighted the consequences of the decreasing number of teachers with messages such as ‘Who will teach tomorrow?’ and emphasized the importance of students as the future of the country (Haszán 2022).

After the elections, public education was transferred to the Ministry of the Interior, placing Minister Sándor Pintér as the new focal point for protest demands. In response, the Ministry enacted retaliatory measures, dismissing teachers in October and December for participating in the illegal walkout. Ironically, these actions fueled further mobilization. In October 2022, students continued to support teachers, forming human chain demonstrations that extended several kilometers through the capital on October 5. The protest wave gained additional momentum with the introduction of a proposed law, known as the Status Law, which sought to abolish teachers’ civil servant status and impose a new evaluation system and work schedule. On October 23, a significant protest event was held on the national holiday commemorating the 1956 uprising, drawing tens of thousands of participants. Chants directly criticized the government with slogans such as ‘Dirty Fidesz!’ and ‘Orbán, get out!’ Banners emphasized the importance of the right to strike, proclaiming: ‘Strike is a fundamental right!’ (Mészáros 2022). The event saw participation from various civil society organizations and unions, and the oppositional mayor of Budapest delivered a speech.

While the wave of protests against public education continued into 2023, the liberal Momentum party took a symbolic action by dismantling a fence that had obstructed journalists from approaching politicians en route to the Carmelite monastery, which houses the Prime Minister’s Office. In late April 2023, student protesters against the Status Law, framed by demonstrators as a ‘revenge law,’ joined Momentum in this act of defiance. The demonstration culminated in the dismantling of the fence at the Prime Minister’s Office, prompting a police response with tear gas (Kovács-Czinkóczi 2023). The use of tear gas against students further fueled the protest wave. After a brief lull during the end-of-school-year period in early summer 2023, protests resumed in the autumn, during the period of the manuscript’s closure.

The protests on the teachers’ side were organized by several key groups, including the Teachers’ Union, the Teachers’ Democratic Union, and the I’d Like to Teach group. On the students’ side, protests were spearheaded by the previously established student movement ADOM, along with newly formed groups such as Students for Teachers, Grund, the United Student Front, and NoÁr, a group founded by an actor. The student protests frequently featured the song ‘We Are Grund’ from the play *The Boys of Paul Street*. Symbolically, the checkered shirt, a recurring emblem from the 2016 teachers’ protests, made a return, while the exclamation mark in a circle, promoted by the NoÁr group, emerged as a new trademark of the movement.

5.3 The Polish justice reform protest wave in 2015-2020

After the Polish right-wing, national-conservative party Law and Justice (PiS) won the 2015 general elections, the new Sejm (the lower house of the Polish parliament) refused to accept the new constitutional judges due to procedural irregularities. These judges had been appointed by the previous legislative majority (Wiącek 2021). On November 19, the PiS majority appointed new constitutional judges, but only two of them were recognized as legally elected by the President of the Constitutional Tribunal. This led to a constitutional crisis in Poland, characterized by new regulations imposed by the Sejm on the Constitutional Tribunal’s decision-making process and the prime minister’s office’s rejection of publishing the Tribunal’s decisions.

On December 12, 2015, tens of thousands demonstrated against the nomination of new judges in Warsaw during the ‘Citizens for Democracy’ march. Participants waved Polish and EU flags (The Guardian 2015). Protesters chanted slogans equating the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal with democracy, such as ‘Free judge, free Poland, freedom, equality, democracy.’ According to a Civic Platform MP, the protest aimed to defend democracy, fundamental rights, and a modern, civic Poland. A liberal politician characterized the conflict as an attack on freedom (Polsat News 2015). The following day, tens of thousands of pro-government supporters also marched through Warsaw to back the new PiS government (Reuters 2015). The protests against the government, organized by the Committee for the Defence of Democracy, continued throughout the week in Warsaw and other Polish cities (BBC News 2015).

The conflicts between the judiciary and the PiS government persisted in subsequent years. The PiS sought to alter the nomination process for the National Council of the Judiciary, which is responsible for appointing judges and overseeing ethical matters. Under the existing system, 15 of the council's 25 members were selected by judges themselves. However, in 2017, the PiS-majority legislature passed a new Act that would have granted the Sejm the authority to appoint these 15 members directly (Macy and Duncan 2020). Additionally, the Sejm enacted a new law concerning the Supreme Court, which proposed lowering the mandatory retirement age for judges. Although this bill was later amended, the judicial reforms implemented by the PiS prompted a reaction from the European Union, which considered invoking Article 7 to suspend certain rights of the member state. These judicial reforms also ignited a new wave of protests.

On July 16, 2017, around 4,500 people gathered in front of the Polish parliament in Warsaw to protest against the PiS government's judicial reforms. The demonstrations escalated in the following days, with larger crowds assembling at the presidential palace, urging President Andrzej Duda to veto the controversial bill. President Duda complied with their demands on July 24, 2017, by vetoing the bill (BBC News 2017). Despite this, protests persisted into 2018, particularly as the new retirement law came into effect in July. At one of these rallies, former President Lech Wałęsa denounced the PiS politicians as criminals attacking Poland's democratic foundations. Amnesty International's Secretary General condemned the PiS reforms as an assault on the core principle of judicial independence. A legal scholar also criticized the reforms, arguing that they undermined Poland's position within the EU and risked aligning the country more closely with Russia (Bruździak-Gębura 2018).

The third wave of judiciary protests in Poland began in December 2019 with the introduction of the Supreme Court Disciplinary Chamber law. This controversial legislation established a new body that had the power to impose fines or dismiss judges who criticized the judiciary reforms or questioned the legality of newly appointed judges (Macy and Duncan 2020). The legislation prompted widespread public dissent, leading to the 'Judges Today – You Tomorrow' demonstrations on December 18, 2019, which took place in major cities across Poland before the Sejm debated the bill (Crisis24 2019). The protests continued into 2020 and 2021, with a significant initiative launched from June to August 2021. The 'Tour de KonstytucjaPL,' organized by lawyers and activists, aimed to educate citizens about the significance of the constitution. This initiative involved traveling through 80 towns to raise awareness and garner support for judicial independence (Crisis24 2021).

5.4 Women's movement in Poland in 2016-2021

Various waves of women's protests have followed the proposed tightening of abortion regulations since 2016. The governing PiS party endorsed an abortion ban proposed by the conservative Ordo Iuris legal think tank and the Stop Abortion coalition in April 2016 (Cienski 2016). According to this proposal, abortion would have been permitted only in cases where the woman's life was in danger. However, the existing abortion law was already strict by European standards. The law, which came into effect in 1993, permitted termination only if the fetus's or the mother's health was in serious danger, or if the pregnancy was the result of rape or incest. The 2016 proposal sought to ban all abortions except those necessary to save the woman's life. Under this proposal, women undergoing an abortion could have faced up to five years in prison, and doctors could also have been prosecuted. The conservative Stop Abortion coalition collected 450,000 signatures, while a counter-initiative gathered 250,000 signatures. Although the counter-initiative met the minimum requirement of

100,000 signatures to be discussed as a citizens' initiative in the legislature, it was ultimately rejected (Szelegieniec 2018).

A protest had already been organized by the Razem party when the Sejm discussed the proposal on September 22, 2016 (Wnp.pl 2016). Women protested on the streets and on social media, wearing black dresses, which is why the protest wave was named 'Black Protest.' Protests were held in Polish towns later in September, and a major campaign known as the All-Poland Women's Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet) took place on October 3, 2016. The idea to organize a one-day strike for women came from Krystyna Janda, a well-known Polish actress, who was inspired by the 1975 Icelandic women's strike (Szelegieniec 2018). By calling the event a 'strike,' the material nature of the issue was emphasized (Kubisa and Rakowska 2018), as abortion restrictions have especially affected working-class women since the 1980s, who also had less political capital to protest (Chełstowska 2011; Majewska 2020). The economic dimension appears in the intersectionality of the protest wave as well (Król and Pustułka 2018).

Large-scale protests were held on October 3, 2016, and according to various estimates, between 100,000 and 250,000 people marched in around 150 rallies in Poland and 60 abroad (Szelegieniec 2018; Turok-Squire 2021). The mobilization was bolstered by social media and personalized action frames (Korolczuk 2016). People also skipped work or school; beyond young women, other groups in Polish society, including soccer fans, supported the protests (Grzymala-Busse 2020). Protests were organized in smaller settlements as well, where, despite the more closed political opportunity structure, activists could mobilize by relying on their social capital and different communication strategies (Piotrowski and Muszel 2022). That day was remembered as Black Monday and became a significant event for the Polish women's movement. Coat hangers were brought to the protest as a symbol of illegal and dangerous pregnancy terminations, while umbrellas became a symbol of the protests due to the rainy weather. The black robe was used by protesters during the events organized by Razem as a symbol of mourning (O'Malley 2016). As women protested not only in major cities but also in smaller settlements, the PiS party dropped the plan to tighten abortion regulations (Davies 2016).

At the All-Poland Women's Strike (Black Monday) on October 3, 2016, the focus was on the marches and the physical presence of participants, with less emphasis on speeches by politicians or social movement leaders. Protest chants and banners highlighted the importance of women's reproductive rights with slogans such as 'I have the right to choose,' 'My body, my business,' and 'Your law violates our rights.' In many cases, the Catholic Church was identified as an adversary, with chants like 'My uterus is not a chapel,' 'Today we are on strike, tomorrow we will leave! You will be left alone! Priests with hooligans!' and 'We want doctors, not missionaries!' Furthermore, banners and chants drew attention to the situation of women in Poland with phrases such as 'Let's stop women's hell,' 'No woman, no kraj' (where 'kraj' means country in Polish and reads like the English word cry), and 'You are building women's hell,' and highlighted the agency of women with slogans like 'The revolution is female' (Onet Wiadomości 2016).

After another – again unsuccessful – attempt to further tighten abortion law through a citizens' legislative initiative, the so-far biggest women's protest wave emerged later in 2020 after the Polish Constitutional Tribunal ruled that the existing abortion regulations were unconstitutional. According to the struck-down clause, termination of pregnancy was permissible in cases of severe fetal deformity, which accounted for 98% of all legal abortions in Poland. Following the 2019 election, 119 MPs from conservative, right-wing parties submitted a referral to the Constitutional Tribunal to assess the constitutional conformity of the 1993 abortion law, which allowed termination in cases of a high probability of serious fetal disability (European Centre for Law and Justice 2020a). Controversy arose from the fact that two former MPs who had signed the petition subsequently assumed positions as judges on the Constitutional Tribunal. These cases were referred to as 'eugenic abortion' by Polish conservatives in public discourse (Szelegieniec 2018). The Constitutional

Tribunal ruled that life should be protected at all stages from conception, even against health concerns (European Centre for Law and Justice 2020b).

The ruling sparked immediate protests despite the coronavirus lockdown measures (PAP 2020). Demonstrations continued in the following days in October, with tens of thousands of protesters participating in Polish towns, including Gdańsk, Łódź, Warszawa, and Wrocław. Protesters sprayed the slogan '#Women'sHell' on the outside of churches. A nationwide women's strike was held on October 28, 2020, with 400,000 protesters participating in 400 towns. In Warsaw, 100,000 demonstrated, according to news sources (Davies 2020). The scale of the campaign was even larger than the Black Monday protests in 2016 and 2018. In November 2020, demonstrations continued with violent reactions from the police. On November 18, law enforcement used tear gas during a rally in Warsaw, and an MP was also sprayed by the police (Gera 2020).

5.5 Findings of the case studies

The aim of empirically confronting the ideal type is to assess the feasibility of the concept. As the overview of the cases demonstrates, the basic features of the observed movements align with those of the anti-regime ideal type. In all four instances, the mobilization was reactive, aimed at protecting institutions (Central European University, Hungarian Academy of Sciences) or previously guaranteed rights (independence of judges, right to abortion in certain cases, academic freedom, teachers' right to strike) from an expanding regime. The initial conflict of each protest wave was narrow but later broadened. The CEU and HAS protests initially focused on the status of the respective institutions but later expanded to include the protection of academic freedom. The education protests began with demands for higher wages for teachers and evolved to address issues of teachers' autonomy and students' future. In Poland, the independence of judges was framed as a matter of the rule of law, liberal democracy, and even the country's EU membership. The women's movement criticized not only the restriction of abortion but also the influence of the Catholic Church in politics.

The extension of the conflict created opportunities for others to join the protests, which was most evident in the academic freedom protests – an issue that directly affects a relatively small segment of society. Solidarity events were organized in other countries for both the academic freedom movement in Hungary and the women's movement in Poland; however, the demands were primarily directed at the national governments, which were identified as the main adversaries. The extension of the conflict and the demonstration of broader social opposition to the regime were evident during the academic freedom protests, particularly when the issue of mandatory registration for foreign-funded NGOs was included. During the education protests, civil society groups and unions from other sectors also joined, indicating a wider social resistance. Additionally, opposition politicians and political parties participated in the protest wave, underscoring the general anti-regime nature of the protests. However, in such cases, politicians are often accused of exploiting the protests for visibility.

6. Conclusions

The paper establishes the ideal type of anti-regime movements against illiberal regimes in East-Central Europe as a theoretical model, based on the Weberian concept of the ideal type. Anti-regime movements aim to counteract regime building, the reorganization of political institutions, and the expansion of the illiberal regime into subsystems such as civil society, culture, and the economy. These movements have a national focus and typically begin with a narrower initial conflict, which is later extended. As the conflict broadens, individuals who are not directly affected by the original issue can join the movement to express their general discontent with the illiberal regime. The extension of the movement thus demonstrates widespread social resistance against regime building. Empirical comparisons of the anti-regime concept with large-scale protest waves in Hungary and Poland show that such mobilizations indeed seek to broaden the original conflict and create a broad-based opposition to regime building.

Anti-regime movements differ from counter-hegemonic and public policy movements in that counter-hegemonic movements aim not to contain the expansion of an illiberal regime within a national context but to change the neoliberal capitalist order on a global scale. Movements such as the global justice movement were present in the region; however, they did not receive the same level of public support as they did in Western countries or the Global South. Public policy movements have more limited goals compared to anti-regime movements and do not seek to challenge the regime itself. Nevertheless, due to the expansion of illiberal regimes, public policy movements may evolve into anti-regime struggles.

The anti-regime movement is a distinct category that accounts for the historical heritage and features of the de-democratization process in the region. This concept is largely rooted in the 1989 democratic transition, which established a consensus on the institutions of liberal democracy that the anti-regime movement seeks to protect. Another unique aspect of the East-Central European context is the anti-political legacy, which views civil society as a guarantor of stable democracy. The anti-regime movement concept can serve as a foundation for empirical research, contributing to an understanding of the differences between social movements in Western and Eastern Europe. It also highlights the absence of material claims and the focus on civil and political rights in protests against illiberal regimes. Although the concept is based on East-Central European experiences, the emergence of illiberal regimes in previously consolidated democracies suggests that movements resembling the ideal type of the anti-regime movement might appear beyond East-Central Europe.

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