Chapter

From Populism to Illiberalism: How Central and Eastern European Countries Fell into the Illiberal Trap

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Abstract

This chapter explores the transformation of populist movements into illiberal regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. Focusing on Hungary and Poland, it tracks how elected leaders have used democratic legitimacy to erode liberal institutions and reconfigure democratic norms in exclusivist terms. While parallels exist with the American Make America Great Again movement and global right-wing populism, the chapter argues that the illiberal turn in the region is rooted in local histories and postcommunist vulnerabilities. Through institutional engineering, religious identity politics, and media capture, these regimes have normalized a new form of majoritarian governance that calls into question both the national democratic culture and the EU's normative framework.

Keywords: populism, illiberalism, central and eastern Europe, democratic backsliding, institutional erosion, Hungary, Poland

1. Introduction

The collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) was initially interpreted as the beginning of an irreversible transition toward liberal democracy. In the logic of the "third wave of democratization" [1], the new regimes were perceived as part of a global historical movement to expand pluralistic institutions and the market economy. Rapid integration into NATO and the European Union, which took place between 1999 and 2007, seemed to confirm the "external conditionality" hypothesis [2], according to which geopolitical anchoring and Western institutional support would be sufficient for democratic consolidation.

However, the optimism of the early 2000s has been contradicted by reality. By the beginning of the 2010s, clear signs of democratic backsliding had emerged: The erosion of the rule of law, the politicization of independent institutions, the capture of the media landscape, and the consolidation of the executive at the expense of checks and balances. These transformations have been conceptualized by comparative literature as forms of *competitive authoritarianism* [3] or *electoral autocratization* [4], in which the formal architecture of democracy is preserved, but its liberal norms are hollowed out.

This chapter analyzes how populism in CEE transformed into illiberalism. Populism, defined by Cas Mudde [5] and Ben Stanley [6] as a "thin ideology" based on the moralized opposition between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elites," initially functioned as a discourse of contestation of the postcommunist order and further elaborated by Pappas as a paradoxical form within liberal democracy [7], or by Urbinati as a transformation of democratic legitimacy into populist sovereignty [8]. However, once institutionalized, it became the foundation of a new logic of governance—illiberal democracy [9]. This does not abolish democracy but reinterprets it in majoritarian and exclusivist terms, justifying the centralization of power and the limitation of pluralism.

Although there are analogies with other political spaces –Fareed Zakaria [10] warned about the "rise of illiberal democracies," and the Russian case of *sovereign democracy* [11] became an alternative discursive model –the CEE trajectory has specific roots. It reflects the path dependencies of the postcommunist transition: Institutional fragility, unstable party systems, endemic corruption, and the central role of religion in defining national identities.

The contribution of this chapter is twofold. On the one hand, we offer a comparative analysis of the paradigmatic cases (Hungary and Poland), highlighting the mechanisms by which populism transformed into institutionalized illiberalism. On the other hand, we propose a more nuanced interpretation of transnational influences: Not just as simple imitations of Trumpism or the Russian model, but as a *synchronized political grammar* between different spaces, where discursive convergence and mutual validation are more important than the direct import of ideas. The chapter is structured in six sections. After an analysis of the rise of populism in CEE, we examine the transition toward institutional illiberalism, with an emphasis on Hungary and Poland. This is followed by a discussion of transnational influences, an analysis of religious identity politics, and a case study on Romania, from Partidul România Mare (PMR, Great Romania Party) to Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). Finally, we evaluate the mechanisms of democratic backsliding and discuss the prospects for democratic renewal in the region and within the European Union.

2. The rise of populism in central and eastern Europe

The central argument of this chapter is that illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe is not merely a local deviation or a delayed reaction to Western political currents. Rather, it reflects a profound tension between democratic institutions and the unresolved legacies of the postcommunist transformation. Populist movements in the region have exploited these tensions, building electoral majorities on the basis of nationalist, social-conservative, and anti-elitist discourses.

Once in power, many of these movements and leaders—especially Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary and the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland—have systematically undermined democratic checks and balances, transforming their countries into "electoral autocracies."

This transformation did not occur in isolation. While comparisons with the American Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement or Western "culture wars" are tempting, they risk oversimplifying the endogenous dynamics of illiberalism in CEE. As the academic editor of this volume points out, it is historically inaccurate to suggest that Orbán or Kaczyński were inspired by Donald Trump, whose presidency only began in 2017, years after the "constitutional revolution" of Fidesz in 2010 and

the rise of PiS in 2015. Similarly, the assumption that religious identity politics in CEE were imported from the American left's emphasis on minority rights ignores the long-standing role of religion in shaping national identities in the region.

This chapter, therefore, adopts a more nuanced comparative approach. It recognizes the convergent evolution of illiberal politics on both sides of the Atlantic but emphasizes that the CEE variant emerged from a distinct postcommunist context: Characterized by institutional fragility, weak party systems, persistent inequality, and disillusionment with liberal modernization. This reflects what Rupnik has called the 'democracy fatigue' that enabled populist backlash in the region [12]. The ideological overlaps between CEE illiberalism and global right-wing populism—on topics such as immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, gender ideology, and national sovereignty—should be understood as synchronizations, not as direct borrowings.

To support this argument, the chapter unfolds in six sections:

- An overview of the rise of populist parties and leaders in CEE after 2000, with a focus on the interaction between economic dislocation and political frustration.
- Analysis of the gradual transition from populist rhetoric to institutional illiberalism, with a focus on the cases of Hungary and Poland.
- An examination of the nature of transnational influences, distinguishing between ideological inspiration and structural convergence.
- A discussion of the role of religion and identity politics in legitimizing illiberal regimes.
- An analysis of the institutional mechanisms of democratic erosion.
- Reflections on the implications of this trajectory for democratic resilience in the region and beyond.

The rise of populism in CEE must be understood in the context of the postcommunist transitions of the 1990s and the disillusionment that followed. While the first years after 1989 were marked by optimism about liberal democracy and market reforms, the results were uneven. Economic difficulties, institutional weakness, and widespread corruption created fertile ground for anti-system movements. Populist leaders positioned themselves as authentic representatives of the "real people" against internal elites and externally imposed models of governance.

In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's *Fidesz* transformed from a liberal youth party into a national-conservative force that exploited the dissatisfaction generated by the global financial crisis and the socialist government's mismanagement. Its victory in 2010 marked the beginning of a new phase of majoritarian politics, anchored in an anti-liberal discourse. In Poland, PiS capitalized on similar feelings, promising national renewal, moral order, and wealth redistribution, culminating in its electoral victory in 2015.

Populism in the region took different forms—civic nationalism, ethnic exclusion, and religious conservatism—depending on the national context. In Slovakia, parties like SMER Socialna Demokratia (Social Democratic Direction), Slovak Social Democratic Party adopted left-wing populist rhetoric, while in Bulgaria, *Ataka* promoted xenophobic and anti-Turkish narratives. Despite these variations, most

populist movements in CEE shared a common core: Hostility to liberal pluralism, skepticism toward international institutions, and a Manichean vision of politics as a struggle between the pure people and the corrupt elites. Comparable trajectories of competitive authoritarianism have been observed in the Western Balkans [13].

The success of populism in CEE is also linked to the weakness of party systems and the personalization of power. In fragile civil societies with a low level of civic trust, many voters were attracted to charismatic leaders who promised to bypass bureaucracy and "get things done." These dynamics created the conditions for the consolidation of power, which later evolved into illiberalism.

3. From populism to illiberalism

Populism in Central and Eastern Europe did not remain limited to rhetorical appeals or protest movements. In several cases, once in power, populist parties evolved into governing coalitions or dominant parties that reshaped democratic institutions to consolidate their position.

This process of transformation—from populism to illiberalism—was gradual and often legalistic, relying on the language of majoritarian democracy and national sovereignty.

In Hungary, Fidesz used its two-thirds parliamentary majority obtained in 2010 to rewrite the Constitution, limit the powers of the Constitutional Court, and centralize control over the media. This constitutional engineering allowed for the consolidation of a dominant party system under the disguise of legal and electoral legitimacy. In Poland, PiS followed a similar path, undermining the independence of the judiciary system and capturing the public media, constantly invoking the "will of the people."

The transition to illiberalism was often justified as a correction of the "excesses" of postcommunist liberalism, including what populist leaders presented as the domination of foreign capital, cosmopolitan elites, and unelected and publicly unaccountable judges. Such narratives allowed governments to present the undermining of institutions as a patriotic act of democratic renewal.

Although they preserved the formal architecture of democracy—elections, parliaments, constitutions—illiberal regimes hollowed out liberal norms. The rule of law became selective, checks and balances mechanisms were weakened, and the space for civil society and dissident voices was restricted. The essence of this transformation does not lie in open authoritarianism but in the repurposing of democratic institutions to serve a majoritarian and exclusivist logic, often combining nationalism, traditionalism, and the expansion of executive power.

This drift from populism to illiberalism marks a structural shift in the political order of the region. It shows how democratic backsliding can occur without a formal regime collapse and how the legitimizing force of electoral mandates can be used to dismantle the very foundations of constitutional democracy.

4. Transnational influences: Between inspiration and convergence

Although illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe is often interpreted through the lens of internal political developments, its development must also be placed in a transnational context. Populist movements in the region have interacted with broader ideological currents, learning from and aligning with similar actors abroad.

However, these influences had less to do with direct imitation and more with a convergence that could be described as a *synchronized political grammar*, shaped by global discontent—often induced through hybrid warfare or social media—regarding the status quo.

One of the most widespread assumptions is that illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe was inspired by the American MAGA movement. However, this narrative does not withstand a rigorous chronological check. Viktor Orbán's illiberal project began long before Trump's election in 2016, with constitutional changes underway in Hungary since 2010. Similarly, PiS initiated its anti-liberal institutional reforms in 2015, based on a national-conservative vision anchored in Polish history and the moral authority of Catholicism.

However, once Trumpism emerged as a global reference point, there was mutual validation. Orbán was invited as a keynote speaker at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in 2022 and organized a European variant of this event in Budapest in 2022, 2023, and 2024, and PiS leaders expressed their support for the conservative realignments in the USA. These interactions reflect a common opposition to globalism, liberal cosmopolitanism, and supranational governance, rather than a hierarchical flow of ideological influence.

Beyond the USA, other transnational connections have played a certain role. The Russian model of "sovereign democracy," the role of traditionalist NGOs such as CitizenGo, and the political alliances in the European Parliament from 2019 (*Identity and Democracy and European Conservatives and Reformists*), followed by those in 2024 (*Patriots for Europe, European Conservatives and Reformists, and Europe of Sovereign Nations*), have provided discursive and logistical support. Hungary and Poland have, in turn, become attractive models of illiberal governance for far-right movements across Europe.

The digital ecosystem has amplified these transnational interactions. Social media, encrypted messaging platforms, and YouTube channels have allowed for the rapid spread of ideological narratives—from anti-LGBTQ+ conspiracies to anti-EU rhetoric—bypassing traditional media and regulatory oversight.

The result is not the importation of a foreign model but the formation of a transnational space of illiberal resonance, where actors mutually reinforce their discourses about cultural sovereignty, religious revival, and national self-determination. This global illiberal imaginary allows local leaders to place their authoritarian drift within a broader battle for the "soul of the West."

5. Religious identity politics: European roots, not imported scenarios

5.1 Religion, nation, and the politics of symbolic boundaries

Religious identity politics in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are often explained through the lens of foreign ideological influences—be it American evangelicalism, Russian orthodoxy, or a reaction against Islam—but such interpretations overlook the profound European genealogy of religious nationalism.

In the nineteenth century, the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Churches served as engines of national consolidation, especially in multiethnic empires such as Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Tsarist Russia. These institutions became part of what Pierre Bourdieu called the field of power, providing symbolic capital to nationalist movements by claiming cultural authenticity and moral authority [14].

After 1989, the postcommunist relaunch of national sovereignty provided fertile ground for the reactivation of these symbolic systems. Religion re-entered the public sphere not primarily as a form of spiritual revival but as an instrument of post-secular governance [15], defining who belongs to the community and under what cultural conditions.

5.2 Comparative overview of religious identity politics

This comparative perspective shows both the diversity and convergence of politico-religious arrangements in the region. Although the theological content is often minimal, the symbolic function of religion as an identity marker is central (**Table 1**).

5.3 Poland: Ethno-Catholicism and the hegemony of moral order

Poland offers perhaps the clearest example of religion functioning as a hegemonic identity regime. The narrative of Polak-katolik (Polish = Catholic) precedes communism and has survived the pressures of secularization in the twentieth century.

Since PiS's electoral victory in 2015, Catholicism has been elevated from the status of a cultural tradition to that of a normative architecture. The Church exercises considerable influence over legislation on abortion, sexuality, and education [16, 17].

Country	Dominant religion	Political role of religion	Main political actors	Major conflicts	Transnational links
Poland	Catholicism	Ethno-nationalist hegemony	PiS, Catholic Church	LGBTQ+ rights, abortion	Global conservative Catholic networks
Hungary	Catholicism, Calvinism	Civilizational Christianity	Fidesz, state–Church alliance	Migration, gender, and EU norms	Alignment with Poland, Serbia
Romania	Orthodox Christianity	Moral populism, Orthodox nationalism	ROC (Orthodox Church), nationalist parties	LGBTQ+ rights, religious education	Pan-Orthodox diplomacy, tensions with the Russian Church
Croatia	Catholicism	Mnemonic nationalism, anti-gender	HDZ, Catholic Church	Gender ideology, war memory	Connections with Ordo Iuris, CitizenGo
Slovakia	Catholicism	Conservative bioethics, selective secularism	OĽaNO, KDH	Reproductive rights	Occasional links with Polish pro-life networks
Czechia	Mostly secular	Symbolic invocation of Christianity	SPD, far-right actors	Anti-Islam, EU skepticism	Growing European identitarianism
Slovenia	Catholicism	Fluctuating influence, conservative activism	SDS, Church-affiliated NGOs	Education, gender issues	Coordination with Croatian and Italian movements

Table 1.
Comparative overview of religious identity politics in Central and Eastern Europe.

This identity configuration exerts what Bourdieu would call symbolic violence—the imposition of a dominant cultural framework that seems natural or neutral, but which structurally excludes dissenting or nonnormative identities. Such mechanisms also resonate with Bourdieu and Passeron's analysis of cultural reproduction in education and society [18]. The PiS–Church alliance normalized homophobic discourse and introduced "LGBT-free zones," effectively sacralizing the boundaries of national belonging [19].

5.4 Hungary: Post-secular authoritarianism and civilizational Christianity

Hungary under Viktor Orbán offers a paradigmatic case of civilizational Christianity as an instrument of illiberal governance. Since 2010, the Fidesz government has promoted the narrative of an "illiberal democracy" [9], in which Christianity functions not as a personal faith but as a collective identity wall against Western decadence, multiculturalism, and migration [20].

The Hungarian Constitution of 2011 opens with a reference to the "role of Christianity in preserving the nation," institutionalizing religious identity in the very grammar of the constitutional order. State subsidies for Catholic and Protestant denominations have increased significantly, and the Churches are encouraged to support government narratives about family, migration, and gender [21].

This framework produces what Bhambra [22] would call normative hybridity: Religion is not autonomous but intertwined with authoritarian populism, resulting in a "Christian democracy" that excludes Muslims, Roma, LGBTQ+ people, and left-wing intellectuals.

5.5 Romania: Orthodox conservatism and the re-nationalization of morality

In Romania, the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) emerged from communism with increased symbolic legitimacy, presenting itself both as a victim and as a spiritual savior of the nation. Post-1989 governments have cultivated a tacit concordat with the Church, offering it access to public funds, education, and media in exchange for moral support in electoral campaigns and referenda [23].

The 2018 referendum to constitutionally define marriage only as a union "between a man and a woman"—although invalidated due to low turnout—showed the capacity of BOR and its affiliated NGOs (such as the Coalition for Family) to mobilize on identity issues [24]. This moral populism relies on anxieties about "EU-imposed liberalism," using religious rhetoric to defend the "natural order" and "Romanian values."

The proximity of BOR to nationalist actors fuels a discourse of Orthodox exceptionalism, presenting Romania as a "spiritual fortress" in a decadent European context, using rhetoric that resonates throughout the Balkan and post-Soviet space [25].

5.6 Croatia: Religion, war memory, and biopolitical governance

In Croatia, Catholicism has been a central component of national identity since the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. The post-independence period saw the rise of the Catholic Church as both a moral authority and a mnemonic actor, influencing the historical memory of the "Homeland War" and the Ustasha legacy [26].

School textbooks, official holidays, and Church sermons often reproduce a moralized nationalist history, legitimizing ethnic exclusion through sacralized narratives [27].

The Church also plays an active role in establishing biopolitical norms, especially concerning family, gender, and reproduction. Campaigns against the ratification of the Istanbul Convention were presented as battles against "gender ideology" and "anti-Christian Europe," using tactics like those in Poland and Hungary [28].

5.7 Religion as an indigenous political resource, not as an imported ideology

The re-politicization of religion in Central and Eastern Europe cannot be understood solely as an effect of external influences—be they Russian or American. Rather, it reflects a structural return to indigenous traditions of moral sovereignty, rooted in the nineteenth century, when the Churches became central actors in building nations. From Catholic Poland to Orthodox Romania or post-Yugoslav Croatia, the alliance between religion and collective identity has provided a symbolic vocabulary that survived both communism and the post-1989 transition.

This genealogy shows that religious identity politics are not recent "imports" but indigenous resources for political legitimation. In Poland, ethno-Catholicism provided the moral hegemony necessary for the PiS project; in Hungary, civilizational Christianity became the foundation of Orbán's "illiberal democracy;" in Romania, BOR played the role of a moral arbiter and a vector of identity mobilization in campaigns such as the 2018 family referendum. These examples indicate a historical continuity, not an ideological transplant.

Functionally, religious identity politics act as cultural technologies of exclusion. Using moral vocabulary –" natural order," "Christian values," "protecting the family"—illiberal regimes draw boundaries between "real citizens" and "the others": Sexual minorities, marginalized ethnic groups, secular dissidents. In this sense, religion is not just a belief but a tool for defining the political community, operating what Pierre Bourdieu [14] would call symbolic violence: the naturalization of a cultural order that excludes difference. This dynamic can be better understood through Casanova's notion of 'public religions in the modern world' [29].

At the same time, these dynamics highlight the unresolved tensions between European secular modernity and the symbolic sovereignty of CEE nations. On the one hand, there is the normative pressure of the European Union to respect pluralism, minority rights, and secular neutrality; on the other, there is the appeal to religious traditions as a source of political and moral legitimacy. The result is post-secular governance [15], in which religion does not return as pure faith but as a marker of political belonging.

Thus, religious identity politics in CEE must be recognized as indigenous manifestations of the historical alliance between Church, nation, and identity, but reinterpreted in the current context of populism and illiberalism. They function as bridges between the national past and the political present, between memory and strategy, between the symbolic and the institutional. Understanding these dynamics, therefore, requires not only comparative political analysis but also a critical reflection on Europe's religious legacies and how they shape the democratic future of the region.

6. The case of Romania: From PRM to AUR: Reconfigured national-communism

The trajectory of far-right populism in Romania reflects both continuities with the interwar and postcommunist nationalist tradition and specific institutional dynamics of democratic consolidation after 1989. Unlike its neighbors in Central

Europe, Romania did not experience an early transition to illiberalism. For more than a decade, mainstream parties avoided openly embracing nationalist extremism, and Romania seemed an exception in the regional populist wave.

This perception changed radically with the entry into Parliament in 2020 of *Alliance for the Union of Romanians* (AUR), a radical nationalist party with clear illiberal and identitarian tendencies.

6.1 The legacy of national-communism and post-1989 hybrid politics

The revival of the far-right in Romania cannot be understood without addressing the legacy of National-Communism—a mixture of Ceaușescu's state-autarchic ideology and nationalist exceptionalism. Unlike Hungary or Poland, where communism was heavily supervised by Moscow, Romania enjoyed relative autonomy after 1958, which allowed the regime to instrumentalize nationalism as a central pillar of legitimacy.

This National-Communist matrix shaped public discourse and prepared the ground for political actors to reactivate the rhetoric of Romanian moral superiority, cultural purity, and geopolitical victimization after 1989.

The Greater Romania Party (PRM), founded by Corneliu Vadim Tudor, embodied this continuity. Combining Orthodox traditionalism, anti-Semitism, and authoritarian nostalgia, PRM reached its peak in 2000, when its presidential candidate obtained over 28% of the vote. However, Romania's integration into NATO (2004) and the EU (2007) gradually marginalized explicit extremist narratives, and PRM disappeared from the political forefront.

6.2 The emergence of AUR: Religion, resentment, and digital radicalism

The rise of AUR in 2020 marked a new phase of Romanian illiberalism. Initially formed by the convergence of two ultra-conservative groups—one focused on religious traditionalism (related to the 2018 family referendum) and the other on unionist nationalism (promoting the union with the Republic of Moldova)—AUR capitalized on the dissatisfaction with the restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The party presented these measures as attacks on religious freedom and national identity, mobilizing especially through Orthodox networks and social media platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, and TikTok.

What differentiated AUR from previous far-right formations was its hybrid ideological construction: A mixture of Orthodox fundamentalism, anti-globalism, pandemic libertarianism, and moderate historical revisionism. It presented itself both as a defender of faith and the nation and as a representative of the "common man" against a corrupt and Westernized elite.

This flexibility allowed it to build alliances with a part of the diaspora and gain significant online traction without mainstream media exposure.

6.3 From radicalization to strategic moderation and back

Once in Parliament, AUR went through a period of internal fragmentation. The exclusion of Diana Șoșoacă and other radical voices in 2021 marked an attempt at strategic moderation, aimed at improving the party's international image and facilitating dialog with actors such as Giorgia Meloni's *Fratelli d'Italia* or *PiS* in Poland.

However, this change came at the cost of alienating its radical core. In the 2024 presidential elections, leader George Simion failed to enter the second round,

being eclipsed by more extreme candidates, such as Șoșoacă herself. The balance between electoral normalization and movement radicalism continues to define AUR's trajectory. Although it tempered its Euroscepticism and adopted a more refined communication style after 2022, the party later returned to harsh nationalist rhetoric, aligning with the broader trends of cultural protectionism and Christian traditionalism in CEE.

6.4 A Romanian model of illiberalism?

AUR does not represent just the revival of nationalist populism but also the continuation of an illiberal line already experienced in Romania, from the attempts of the Partidul Social Democrat (Social Democratic Party of Romania) under Liviu Dragnea (2017–2019) to the compromises made by mainstream parties in the face of religious and conservative pressures. The controversial changes to the justice laws and the attacks on the rule of law during the Dragnea period were only a visible episode of a deeper temptation that crosses the entire political spectrum.

This tendency is clearly seen in the broad agreement in 2015 between the main parliamentary parties and the *Coalition for Family* to support the constitutional amendment for the restrictive definition of marriage. It is also found in the 2019 law banning gender education, adopted with the almost unanimous support of the political class (except for Uniunea Salvați România (Save Romania Union, USR)) and finally rejected by the Constitutional Court. And this recurrent tendency returns today in the ambiguities of President Nicușor Dan toward the law on combating extremism, where a rhetoric of "prudence" hides the risk of relativizing historical memory and tolerating radical discourses.

AUR capitalizes on these breaches, but it is not the only vector of Romanian illiberalism. In parallel, there is also a *technocratic illiberalism* practiced at the local level, exemplified by Ilie Bolojan, where austerity and the reduction of public participation are justified by economic and managerial arguments. However, under this facade of efficiency hides a deeply anti-deliberative vision that subordinates local democracy to a logic of "firm decision," of authoritarian inspiration.

Therefore, the illiberal temptation in Romania is not the monopoly of AUR but crosses the entire political scene: From the drifts of the PSD in the Dragnea era, to the compromises of mainstream parties with the conservative agenda, to the ambiguities of President Dan and the austerity of the Bolojan government. The Romanian particularity lies not in a consolidated illiberal regime, but in a recurrent and polymorphous illiberalism that appears cyclically, in different forms, but with the same effect: the erosion of pluralism, the restriction of civic space, and the redefinition of democracy as exclusivist and managerial governance.

7. The mechanisms of democratic backsliding

The erosion of liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe did not occur through sudden regime changes or coups, but through gradual legal and institutional reforms that shifted the balance of power in favor of the governing parties. These reforms were often presented as corrective measures—meant to restore justice, fight corruption, or protect national sovereignty—but, in practice, they weakened institutional autonomy, pluralism, and the rule of law.

Below are the main mechanisms used by illiberal regimes to consolidate their power under a democratic facade.

7.1 Politicization of the judiciary

In Hungary and Poland, the judiciary was an early target of illiberal consolidation. In Hungary, Fidesz lowered the mandatory retirement age for judges, which allowed for the replacement of experienced ones with political loyalists. The power of the Constitutional Court was limited, and appointments were centralized.

In Poland, PiS restructured the National Council of the Judiciary and the Supreme Court, allowing for political intervention in appointments and disciplinary procedures. These actions compromised the principle of judicial independence—the cornerstone of constitutional democracy.

7.2 Manipulation of the electoral system

Another key mechanism is the modification of electoral rules to favor the incumbent. In Hungary, Fidesz redrew constituencies (gerrymandering), introduced a "winner takes more" system, and reduced the number of parliamentarians—all with the effect of maximizing control over Parliament, even with less than 50% of the popular vote.

State media massively favored the governing party in campaigns, while opposition parties faced legal and financial constraints.

Although elections continue to take place, the conditions are fundamentally asymmetric. Freedom House downgraded Hungary to "partly free" status [30], and the V-Dem project now classifies it as an "electoral autocracy" [31].

7.3 Capture of the media landscape

Control of information is essential for any regime that wants to consolidate its legitimacy, and the experience of Central and Eastern Europe shows that the erosion of democracy often begins by restructuring the media space. The free press, perceived as an obstacle to the government's discursive hegemony, has been gradually subordinated through a combination of legal pressures, financial mechanisms, and delegitimization strategies. Illiberal regimes in the region have applied three types of instruments:

- *Institutional capture*, whereby regulatory authorities (audiovisual councils, communication agencies) are populated with political loyalists;
- *Economic capture*, by directing state advertising revenue to friendly institutions and discouraging independent investors;
- *Ownership capture*, by encouraging government-affiliated oligarchs to buy independent publications, turning media pluralism into a facade.

The Polish and Hungarian examples are paradigmatic. In Poland, public television (TVP) was transformed into an electoral propaganda channel for PiS, and campaigns to demonize the opposition or minorities were presented as "objective information." In Hungary, over 500 media outlets were merged into a single trust (KESMA), controlled by Fidesz affiliates, creating an unprecedented concentration of media

power. Independent voices survive, but they operate under constant pressure—legal, financial, and reputational—and their access to the general public is limited.

In other states in the region, including Romania and Bulgaria, media capture has not occurred through institutional monopoly, but through *a mixture of oligarchizing and tabloidization*. Media owners are often dependent on state contracts, which favor self-censorship and alignment with dominant discourses. In Romania, news television has become the main ground for polarization, with some channels being associated with powerful political or economic groups, and the digital space, which is freer, has been invaded by disinformation campaigns and propaganda networks connected to hybrid warfare.

This capture does not mean the disappearance of the independent press, but a systematic reduction of its social impact. Critical voices remain active online or in specialized niches, but they lose access to the general public and are constantly stigmatized as "foreign agents" or "mercenaries of external interests." In this way, formal pluralism coexists with discursive hegemony, a paradox that defines the illiberal model: The free press exists, but it is marginalized, delegitimized, and lacks the resources to compete with the government's media apparatus.

7.4 Delegitimization of dissent

Opposition parties, NGOs, academia, and civil activists have been the target of delegitimization campaigns. They have been labeled as "foreign agents," "Soros-funded," or "unpatriotic."

Laws have been proposed or adopted that regulate the activity of NGOs (following the model of Russian legislation on "foreign agents"), even if some were later overturned by European courts.

This strategy creates a moral division between the "true people"—aligned with the governing party—and a perceived "external enemy" acting against the national interest. The result: The space for democratic deliberation narrows, and repression is justified in the name of protecting sovereignty.

7.5 Institutional redundancy and the rise of executive power

Illiberal regimes maintain the form of liberal institutions—parliaments, courts, ombudsmen—but hollow them out of power through executive dominance. Parliament becomes a "rubber stamp," constitutional control is reduced to symbolic gestures, and oversight institutions are politicized or underfunded.

This creates a "hyper-executive" state where decisions are concentrated in the hands of the party leader or a small circle, with a minimal level of public accountability.

8. The future of democracy in central and Eastern Europe

The illiberal turn in Central and Eastern Europe represents one of the most profound political transformations of the post-1989 era. Far from being a temporary deviation or a purely reactionary response, it has reconfigured the terms of democratic legitimacy, replacing pluralistic and liberal conceptions of democracy with majoritarian, identitarian, and sovereigntist logics of governance.

By tracing the trajectory from populist insurgency to institutional illiberalism, the chapter has shown not only how elected governments can use the rhetoric of popular

sovereignty to gradually dismantle the liberal-democratic framework but also why these processes are difficult to reverse.

Courts are politicized, electoral systems are recalibrated, media landscapes are captured, and dissent is delegitimized—all under the cover of democratic mandates. Illiberalism does not abolish democracy but redefines it in exclusivist and hierarchical terms, privileging "real citizens" at the expense of minorities, civil society, or critical institutions.

However, as argued in sections 4 and 5, this transformation cannot be understood solely through the lens of transnational imitation. Even if illiberal regimes in CEE share affinities with global right-wing populism—including MAGA-style nationalism, religious revival, and anti-globalist rhetoric—their roots lie in internal historical experiences, postcommunist trajectory dependencies, and long-standing anxieties about sovereignty and identity. Overlaps with American or Russian models reflect strategic synchronizations rather than direct ideological imports.

At the same time, the illiberal model has begun to radiate outward, influencing political actors across Europe and beyond. Its relative success in combining electoral legitimacy with authoritarian governance offers an attractive template for politicians seeking to erode liberal constraints without abandoning democratic appearances. This model represents a structural challenge not only to the normative cohesion of the European Union but also to the very grammar of democratic politics in the twenty-first century.

8.1 The chances for democratic renewal

The decisive question for the region is whether and to what extent Central and Eastern European democracies can still be regenerated after a decade of institutional erosion. Although the formal architecture of democracy—elections, constitutions, parliaments—remains standing, the normative foundations have been severely weakened. Legal reforms alone cannot reverse illiberal consolidation, because what has been lost is not just a set of rules but the collective trust in their legitimacy.

Democratic renewal requires, first and foremost, a reconstruction of political culture. In a context where populism and identity politics have delegitimized pluralism, there is a need to recover the values of dialog and compromise. This cannot be done only through political elites, but through a reconnection of institutions with citizens and through a renewed civic education, capable of counteracting authoritarian and conspiratorial narratives.

Secondly, renewal depends on the revitalization of civil society and the independent media space. NGOs, civic movements, and independent journalists remain the main actors capable of resisting illiberal trends. But without financial support and legal protection, these initiatives risk being marginalized. Paradoxically, it is civil society—which pushed for democratic transition in the 1990s—that has become the favorite target of populist regimes, being stigmatized as "foreign agents" or "unpatriotic."

Finally, any discussion of the chances of democratic renewal is incomplete without the supranational dimension. The European Union remains the main normative and institutional framework for protection, but its conditionality mechanisms have often proven insufficient or delayed. The case of Hungary showed the limits of Article 7 procedures, while Poland demonstrated that financial sanctions could have only a partial effect. However, new instruments—such as the conditionality of European funds on the observance of the rule of law—offer a more robust framework. Democratic renewal in CEE depends on the EU's ability to combine external pressure with positive support for internal reformers.

Thus, the chances for democratic renewal are not reduced to a simple institutional "reset." They involve a profound cultural and societal reconstruction, anchored in civic education and the consolidation of pluralism, supplemented by effective European conditionality mechanisms. If these three levels—internal, societal, and supranational—manage to articulate, democracy in the region can regain its resilience. Otherwise, illiberalism risks becoming not just a temporary deviation but a normal form of Central and Eastern European politics.

8.2 The fundamental lesson of the transition from populism to illiberalism

The CEE experience reminds us that democracy is not self-sustaining. It must be institutionalized, defended, and continuously reimagined, especially in contexts where the traumas of transition, inequality, and geopolitical insecurity remain active.

Populism will continue to be a force in the region—as in other parts of the world—but its trajectory does not have to inevitably lead to illiberalism. The challenge lies in articulating a democratic populism, based on inclusion, transparency, and social justice, capable of regaining popular energy without sacrificing the fundamental principles of democracy.

The trajectory of Central and Eastern Europe shows that illiberalism is not reduced to a temporary deviation from democracy, but to a systematic process of redefining political legitimacy. Populism has provided the Manichean language, and anti-gender policies have offered the cultural mobilization tool by which majorities can imagine themselves as victims of an imposed modernity. In Poland, Hungary, and Romania, this strategy has consolidated dominant parties, restricted pluralism, and created new forms of symbolic exclusion. In this sense, what seemed like a moral dispute over gender has transformed into a central vector of illiberalism, confirming recent observations that anti-gender policies are more than a simple "backlash": They are a laboratory for reshaping democratic regimes into authoritarian forms [24]. Ignoring these developments means accepting the normalization of a hollowed out democracy—a showcase democracy, where slogans like "Down with the Government!" become a symptom of an increasingly polarized and delegitimized public space.

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