Democracy revisited? Prospects of (liberal) democracy (not only) in the East-Central Europe[1]

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Abstract: *Scholarly debate about the prospects of democracy have undergone a fundamental change in the last three decades. While the period of the 1990s might be distinguished by extensive optimism, in the 2000s we can observe a distinct change towards a more restrained perception. Furthermore, the last decade might be evaluated as pessimistic in the social sciences on the grounds of economic recession after 2008 as well other crisis in an economic, societal and political senses. The rather distinctive terms used for the expression of doubts about the pro-democratic development and consolidation, such as 'semi-consolidated', 'new' or 'young' democracy, or de-democratisation, were replaced with more dramatic expressions such as illiberal democracy, democratic backsliding, hybrid, regime, soft dictatorship and 'the light that failed', as Krastev described the recent image of East-Central Europe in an almost dystopic manner. While in the 1990s the Slovak version of democratura – Mečiarism – was perceived as the exception, in the late 2010s populist neo-illiberal regimes became the dominant shape of regimes in (East)Central Europe. This review essay presents three recent analyses of the democratic backsliding and state capture (not only) in East-Central Europe and frames this presentation into the more extensive literature review.*

Key Words: ***democracy; populism; illiberal democracy; democratic backsliding; state capture; clientelist party; East-Central Europe***

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On 8 and 9 October 2021, the coalition of two electoral alliances (Spolu/Together created by three liberal-conservative parties and PirSTAN formed by the Pirate Party and the Mayors and Independent Candidates movement) succeeded in the Czech parliamentary elections and rather surprisingly defeated the incumbent Prime Minister and political entrepreneur Andrej Babiš. Furthermore, the two left-wing parties that supported PM Babiš and his business-firm party ANO 2011, the Social Democrats and Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, did not exceed the 5 per cent electoral threshold. The departure of A. Babiš to the opposition and adieu of the radical Communist Party that left the parliament after 100 years arouses a strong wave of optimism among (some) political scientists as well as political commentators in the West as well as in anti-populist circles in East-Central Europe (ECE). The coordinated work of both 'anti-Babiš' alliances was presented as the example for the Hungarian as well as Polish opposition and generally as (another) sign of populism weakening after the defeat of US President Donald Trump.

Indeed, the optimism might quickly turn over, should it be after the spring parliamentary elections in Hungary where the unified opposition from radical right to radical left will try to defeat the role-model of national-conservative populism Viktor Orbán. Or with the next presidential elections in Czechia, organised no later than in the beginning of 2023, where Andrej Babiš will appear as the favourite. Actually, the populist Bulgarian President Rumen Radev, building his popularity on anti-corruption, anti-Western and pro-Russian stances, obtained a two-thirds majority in the direct election in late November 2021. All this shows that the celebrative addresses are understandable regarding politicians, but rather premature.

In this review essay I will assess three important and interesting contributions to the debate about the quality of democracy, democracy backsliding and related topics. Firstly, the book *Democracy Against Liberalism. Its Rise and Fall* written by Aviezer Tucker, a recognised political scientist and philosopher teaching at Harvard University that spent and spends long research stays in ECE, primarily Czechia. Such insights into ECE's politics as well as into the recent US affairs, but above all his excellent orientation in the philosophical debates on democracy present a proper starting point for his newest book (Tucker 2020). As the second book for the review essay I have chosen the work of Hungarian political scientist Attila Ágh *Declining Democracy in East-Central Europe. The Divide in the EU and the Emerging Hard Populism*. Ágh is among the most prominent ECE political scientists, his reflection of the ECE as the 'zone of big transformation' became one of the symbols of new comparative politics of the region. In his timely book (Ágh 2019) he resents the de-democratisation and democratic backsliding in (some) ECE nations after 2008. Last but not least, I present the recent book of Czech political scientist Michal Klíma entitled *Informal Politics in Post-Communist Europe, Political Parties, Clientelism*

and State Capture. This case study is embedded within the broader theoretical framework presenting the specific topology of post-Communist political actors and creation of a specific type of political regimes – in Ágh's (2019: 41) words the 'politico-neoliberal hybrid'.

The three books present different perspectives (global insight, focus on ECE within the European architecture and a case study embedded in the theoretical debate about political partisanship and party models). But it's also important what they have in common – namely the analytical quality resting in excellent knowledge as well as the rather positive tendency building up the routes from the problematic situation towards the stabilisation of democratic regimes (not only) in ECE.

Tucker focuses on the recent wave of illiberalism, presenting the term 'populist neo-illiberalism' as the key word for the analysis. As he stresses we face the 'onset of populist-driven neo-illiberalism that gradually deconstructs institutional checks and balances that has taken place in a dazingly broad scope of countries of entirely different histories and political cultures. It started in weakly liberal post-totalitarian democracies when populist illiberals won democratic elections in Hungary and Poland' (Tucker 2020: 2). Other visible and discussed examples are Donald Trump, Nárenda Modi, Jair Bolsonaro and Austrian right--wing parties.

As the main axiom for his argument he stresses that 'liberalism and democracy are quite independent' (Tucker 2020: 4) and that historically democracy was only in minor cases supplemented by liberalism ('most democracies have not been liberal' /Tucker 2020: 6/). As examples of liberal authoritarian regimes, he later presents the Austro-Hungarian Empire after 1848, and from recent regimes Singapore,[2] South Korea and Taiwan – both lastly mentioned with the tendency towards liberalism (Tucker 2020: 21).

He stresses the existence of 'three *discrete* and *continuous* rather than *binary* political dimensions that stretch between opposing poles': democracy and authoritarianism; liberalism and absolutism (illiberalism); and technocracy and populism. In his opinion, this *bikini* concept presents a more efficient tool for the classification of political regimes than the unidimensional and Manichean mechanism democracy vs. non-democracy. The specific combinations of the three mentioned dimensions form regimes in modalities that might be analysed with greater precision (Tucker 2020: 5).

Analysing the difference between liberalism and absolutism, Tucker (2020:7) notes: 'Liberalism can co-exist with democratic, authoritarian, and other re-

2 In another place in the book, he falsifies the comparison between the illiberal regimes in Singapore and Hungary, stressing that Singapore as prosperous technocratic liberal authoritarianism cannot be equated with populist neo-illiberal democracy in Hungary, as V. Orbán suggests. 'Singapore is rich and attracts immigrants, Hungary is the opposite. It is among the five poorest members of the EU… and its skilled and young workers try to move to more liberal countries' (Tucker 2020: 34–35).

gimes, but not with totalitarianism that can accept no institutional or legal limits. In modern societies, liberalism is manifest in the rule of law enforced by independent branches of government, such as the judiciary... *Absolutism* is the opposite of liberalism. It eschews checks and balances on the scope, size, or power of the government. Absolutism can be authoritarian as well as democratic.' As typical examples of liberal/independent institutions, institutional religion, free and independent media, education system and a central bank are mentioned at the national level, and the network of international treaties implementing the World Bank, International Monetary Fund or the European Union (cf. Söderbaum – Spandler – Pacciardi 2021). The populist politicians tend to dismantle and control such institutions. Furthermore, they prefer unmediated personalised relationships with unorganised and unstructured followers. Here the (post)modern electronic and social media (Ágh talks about the 'invasion of the "fake media" industry' /Ágh 2019: 200/) present key instruments in the hands of the followers of ancient demagogues, dictators and tribunes of the plebs (Tucker 2020: 7–8).

'Neo-illiberal democracy attempts to gradually bring about the *evisceration*, or *deconsolidation* if not *deconstruction* of liberal institutions.... The "drama" of neo-illiberal democracy consists of permanent war between the democratically elected illiberal executive and the liberal institutions designed to curb it powers, the judiciary, law enforcement agencies, the Central Bank, independent mass media, civil society, and non-governmental organizations' (Tucker 2020: 46). Such destructive activities against the liberal institutions were further strengthened during the coronavirus pandemic; Tucker (2020: 31–33) specifically depicts the attack on the independence of the judiciary in the case of Israel and Prime Minister Netanyahu, as well as the absolute dominance of executive power in Hungary. 'Democratically elected neo-illiberal governments conduct a war of attrition, not a blitz... Since the changes are piecemeal, each one may seem small, innocuous, and insignificant. Their meaning becomes obvious when put together' (Tucker 2020: 46–47). In this sense, Ágh (2019: 184), comparing the democratic backsliding in Hungary and Poland, talks about the 'masterplan' of hard populism for demolishing the democratic order. 'The similarities between Poland and Hungary are striking in two respects. First, they have applied the same masterplan to demolish liberal democracy through an authoritarian drift by the tyranny of the majority... The basic target of the illiberal turn is to blur the boundaries between the executive and judiciary powers' (Ágh 2019: 222).

Liberalism as ideology and political praxis was not embedded in ECE where we can observe the transitions without liberal institutions and civil society. 'Very fast transitions from apparent liberal democracy to neo-illiberalism indicate that the liberal roots had not sunk deep into the democratic soil before the neo-illiberal whirlwind swept them away' (Tucker 2020: 89). Here the author stresses again the role of independent liberal institutions that must not

succumb to the current political majorities, but must develop independently. Furthermore, he stresses that the liberal institutions cannot be constructed by elections (Tucker 2020: 90). As other authors also stress, the socialisation role of the EU was not fulfilled in the case of liberal institutions: 'External Europeanization has only scratched the surface in the ECE region' and since the 2000s we can observe the return or development of 'Potemkin democracies' (Ágh 2019: 33–34). The impact of Europeanisation was also definitely weakened by informal politics and old-new networks (Ágh 2019: 35).

Reflecting the tradition of ancient Greek philosophy and the moralist 'school' in the 19th century Tucker presents the tripartite division of motivations (dimensions of 'soul') between *passions, interests* and *reason* and stresses the absolutism–passions nexus: 'Liberal institutions… act as that trusted friend, to constrain political passions. *Neo—illiberalism* lifts such constraints to permit the politics of passions, populism' (Tucker 2020: 12). As populists must promise immediate gratification they are often self-destructive, above all in macro--economics, as the example of Venezuela clearly portrays. Indeed 'moderate levels of populism can be sustainable' (Tucker 2020: 15).

Tucker criticises the usual anti-elitist concept of populism as too narrow, not being able to reflect apparent plutocrats such as Berlusconi, Babiš and Trump (Tucker 2020: 9). In his perspective, technocracy is the opposite political pole to populism. Indeed, such a general notion is not supplemented by the 'exceptions' from this 'rule'. If we consider for example Czechia and the public performance of President M. Zeman and Prime Minister A. Babiš, the populist politics is combined with the idealisation of the rule of experts (not partisans, but professionals). Similarly, Polish Prime Minister M. Morawiecki is often reflected as a technocrat. Indeed, I fully agree with the conclusion that 'technocrats are just as corruptible as everybody else' (Tucker 2020: 17). The same conclusion might also be found by Ágh (2019: 201) declaring that the 'ECE political classes have organized a serving intelligentsia in their clientele as loyal experts within the government sector and around'.

Following the concept of the 'tyranny of the majority' introduced by Alexis de Tocqueville, and more generally the criticism against the un-civic democracy,[3] Tucker brings the argument against the plebiscite democracy. 'The first universal free and fair elections in human history, still limited by gender to males but, for the first time, not limited to a class by property prerequisites, or to members of particular ethnic groups, took place in France in 1848. The result was the election of Louis Napoleon as president of the Second Republic. Within half a year he abolished the democracy and the freedom of press… These results of the first universal male suffrage led the liberal Mill and Tocqueville to have second thoughts about extending the franchise to the poor' (Tucker 2020:

3 'An educated citizenship is the "infrastructure" of democracy' (Tucker 2020: 76).

42–43). As Klíma (2020: 161) stresses the direct democracy tools presented as a potential remedy by the populist politicians include the dangerous potential for even greater polarisation of societies. 'A problem emerges if *direct democracy is placed in opposition to representative democracy*, or if direct democracy poses as *the highest form of democracy*... Populists, Machiavellians and preachers of political correctness may hold up referenda as the highest democratic mechanism in order to express the will of the people. However, within the conditions of a polarised atmosphere, it may constitute a detonator within the framework of representative democracy' (Klíma 2020: 161–164). In Tucker's perspective, plebiscites 'oversimplify complex issues and appeal to the raw passions of the voters' (Tucker 2020: 151). This also happened in the case of Brexit when 'the decision to hold a neo-illiberal democratic plebiscite that would bypass the ancient British institutions and norms was prime minister David Cameron's "gambler's ruin"' (Tucker 2020: 151).

As important 'new' tool for the populist neo-illiberals Tucker suggests new media and 'unmediated politics': 'New information technologies, mostly social media, dismantled the barriers to direct communications from leader to followers. Social media reconstructed the ancient public square in cyber space, thereby weakening the power of the press to constrain politics' (Tucker 2020: 58). Furthermore, 'the populist media gives narrative form to the passions, most notably fear' (Tucker 2020: 61). As the author stresses elsewhere in the book: 'Populism is a political reflection of existential fear' (Tucker 2020: 159). Among the characteristics of populist neo-illiberals is the 'telegraphic language' ('ungrammatical sentences came to convey anti-elitist authenticity and honesty' /Tucker 2020: 63/, instrumentalised lie ('Blatant populist lying demonstrates the strong passions that generate credibility among those who trust their passions more than their senses and reason' /Tucker 2020: 67/ and 'return' from logos to myth ('Historically, before television, the narratives that contained impossible contradictions were *myths*. In the modern world we rationalize our myths' /Tucker 2020: 69/).

In Tuckers view, many democracies oscillate between liberal democracy and democratic absolutism – or illiberal democracy – that suffer from the absence of robust liberal institutions. In this 'winner takes all' system we observe the continuous changes of law based on the current majority. Furthermore, the temporary majority can also change 'the rules of democratic elections to impose the perpetual role of a minority' (Tucker 2020: 21). This oscillation is even more visible regarding the new democracies in ECE, as far as post-Communist states inherited the absence of rule of law and checks and balances, as well as a weak civil society. 'The post-Communist transplanting of liberal democracy appeared deceptively easy because it encountered no resistance, but it has no liberal social foundations either' (Tucker 2020: 22). As Cianetti, Dawson, Hanley et al (2019) presume, such a situation produced 'relatively stable but low-quality-democracy'.

One of the key problems seems to be a weak democratic civic society controlling the elite. 'The cases under consideration (ECE nations – noted by L.C.) seem to have failed to produce democracies in which citizens truly inhabit formal democratic institutions' (Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley 2019: 4–5). Similarly, Ágh (2019: 17) stresses that 'formal democratization from above has not become genuine democratization from below, such as would be necessary for the ECE population in creating the proper socio-economic conditions of participatory society as a base for mass political participation in the sustainable democratic polity' (Ágh 2019: 17).

Despite the dramatic growth in strength of populist neo-illiberal actors, Tucker rejects the equalisation of the contemporary wave of illiberalism with the 1930s ('current illiberal democracies have no militias and no employed risk loving and not just taking military veterans to man them' /Tucker 2020: 31/). Post WWI democracies were created 'without functioning liberal institutions and liberal-democratic majorities. The majorities did not respect the rights of minorities, and the minorities did not accept the verdicts of the majorities.... The war brutalized a generation of young people from peasant and working backgrounds and then gave them the right to vote... the populist passions associated with ethno-nationalism, and self-destructive economic policies led to the populist self-destruction of all the post-imperial democracies, except for Finland and Czechoslovakia' (Tucker 2020: 44). Today, the situation is different. 'Young men in economic trouble today rely on their parents more than on peers; it is not common for children to form militias with their parents, though some indeed join fringe right-wing groups, especially in Europe' (Tucker 2020: 133).

Observing the situation in some of the Western Balkans countries, with the recent development in Bosnia, one can have serious doubts about this rather positive position. Similarly, I would evaluate Tucker's presumption that the antipathy towards migrants in ECE is not related to xenophobia. When he notes that 'in Poland and the Czech Republic, non-Russian Slavs from other countries are not foreign' (Tucker 2020: 84), he does not reflect the very strong cultural prejudice, for example, against the so-called 'U-s' (Ukrainians) in Czech society. Generally, I share the opinion presented by Klíma (2020: 152, 158–161) that the 'migrant cleavage' after 2015 generated within the politics of fear used by the populist neo-illiberal presents a new and strong mobilisation tool: 'By its explosive nature it generated an atmosphere of mass alarm and thereby hurled into the political arena an emotional wave of patriotism, nationalism and xenophobia'. Securitisation related with the 'tribal atavistic reaction to perceptions of insecurity' (Tucker 2020: 132) produced a new negative quality envisaged in the nativist onset, not only in ECE.

On the other hand, I fully go along with his notion about the economic illiberalism observable in the region. To quote the author: 'Fidesz and PiS in Hungary and Poland reacted against the free market ideology of the transition

away from Communism with subsidies and government patronage' (Tucker 2020: 88). Especially in Hungary we can observe the creation of a new economic oligarchy with a national(ist) background and the 'hybrid regime' in the form of 'some kind of authoritarianism or autarchy' (Ágh 2019: 180). As the Czech historian Jan Křen (2019: 95–96) noted, in Western Europe the democratic politics was developed continually from the market economy, i.e. the economic liberalism was also continually transformed into the political liberalism. In post-Communist Europe, the process was diverse, the democracy has had to create the market. When we assume that ECE's democracy is in backslide, logically also the market was not created properly, i.e. as liberal. One of the characteristics of such economic illiberalism is also the weak entrepreneurial ecosystem and the legacy – and new form – of 'systemic use of informal rules undermining democratic institutions and rule of law' (Dimitrova in Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley 2019: 16).

Dimitrova reflects here the 'emergence of predatory rent seeking elites' asking if these are 'post-Communist', 'new' or 'mixed', including the new generations of 'post-Communist' elites. Generally, we can observe all possible combinations in ECE – while A. Babiš or R. Fico present the elites with the roots before the transition, V. Orbán surely presents a different case. While Tucker (2020: 90) assumes that 'the new political elites that ruled post-Communist countries for the first post-revolutionary twenty years were mostly technocratic, recruited from the professional classes. When populists were elected to replace technocrats, they began fighting the liberalizing institutions'. In my opinion the reality was and is much more complex and supports the evaluation made by Klíma (2020: 11–12) that the new predatory and informal nomenklatura was born from the communist legacy but also subsequently from the wild post--communist privatisation. It 'permeated into all the pores of the political sphere, the economy and social life in general'.

The economic dimension of de-democratisation presents then only one of the segments of the 'masterplan' or grand strategy 'from state capture to backsliding' in five phases or steps presented by Dimitrova (in Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley 2019: 26–27): 1) attack on the independence of constitutional courts, high judicial councils, professional civil services; media; 2) changes in formal institutions – the emergence of a new 'middle' class dependent on state jobs distributed by party patronage; 3) attack against the civil society – legal limits on NGO registration and operation, attack and new regulations on the universities and research institutions; 4) strengthening the voter's loyalty with vote buying or (economic) intimidation; 5) beliefs and citizen trust in democracy are undermined, which brings an important part of society into passivity or to the support of authoritarian measures. Here Hanley and Vachudova (in Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley 2019: 37) stress the interconnectedness of Hungarian Fidesz and Polish Law and Justice parties with the civil society.

If we return to Tucker's book, we have to stress his assumption that the prominent social group prone to the populist and neo-illiberal solutions is the lower middle class. 'Populist neo-illiberal democracy is the manifestation of the *inevitable* revolt of the lower middle classes' (Tucker 2020: 129) but not of 'those who suffer most economically. The poorest of the poor have a strong interest in supporting and expanding the welfare state, not in dismantling its liberal institutions' (Tucker 2020: 136). The strengthening of populism is then related to the high – and unfulfilled – expectations of the (lower) middle class. Let us make here the comparison with one of Ágh's main presumptions regarding the disillusion from democracy in ECE. Ágh (2019: 14) notes the revolution of 'high expectations' when the ECE populations in the 1990s 'expected a Western welfare state overnight'.

Here we can observe the visible paradox linked with the unprecedented economic growth in ECE after 1989. On the other hand, such growth was not distributed 'equally' and important analyses stress the creation of two visible economic (but also cultural/value) components. Ágh (2019:140) concludes here that the 'Central European region has produced well-developed "European" cities and an "Asian" backward countryside, being two worlds apart with different worldviews' (Ágh 2019: 140). The post 1989-transition divided ECE into two subregions, 'the *West of the East* and the *East of the East*, with their basically different and diverging histories. These rich and poor, or Europeanized and de-Europeanized, sub-regions had their long prehistory, but they have been reborn in radically new form since the transformation and post-accession crises, and seriously hit also by the global crisis.... The "West of the East" has produced some kind of Western development with a relative catching up, while the "East of the East" has declined absolutely with its waning competitiveness, high unemployment and worsening standard of living' (Ágh 2019: 53–55). Maybe such an evaluation is too dramatic and exaggerated; on the other hand, in the electoral results we can also observe the continual strengthening of this cleavage or 'relevant political distinctions between globalists and nativists, between supporters of open and closed societies, or between people from "nowhere" and people from "somewhere"' (Tucker 2020: 200). We have in mind the situation of two different worlds within one country, the 'electoral map of Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, completely "partitioned" between the East and West' (Ágh 2019: 56).

Nevertheless, the reasons for the deepening polarisation and de-democratisation are much more complex, including important cultural factors concentrated in the axiological cleavage between the 'liberals' and 'neo-illiberals'. As also Tucker stresses: '*All* the countries where neo-illiberals won democratic elections... were theoretically too rich to have had such challenges to democracy.... Obviously, there is no rational economic reason for Norwegian or Danish populist neo-illiberalism. Some suggest welfare anxiety, fear of competition over welfare transfers with poor immigrants' (Tucker 2020: 137). In the tradi-

tion of great cycles in economy, politics or societal development, he observes the recent anti-democratic wave as the set of partial cases integrated into the general phaenomenon of democratic backsliding. He stresses the snow-ball effect of populist neo-illiberalism that awoke the 'passionate archaic demons' and 'atavistic mechanism' in the form of a 'vicious cycle of economic decline, breakdown of trade and mobility, economic and political hostilities, possesses the body politics, spreads, and infects the whole world' (Tucker 2020: 131).

As the first impulse for this wave Tucker observes the development in Hungary after 2010 and above all the matter of fact that the EU-leaders missed the opportunity 'to isolate neo-illiberalism once it emerged, pre-empt its contagion, and put pressure to reverse it... Orbán's illiberalism was protected on the EU level by the ideologically proximate Bavarian Christian Democrats' (Tucker 2020: 148–149). Let us specify that Bavarian CSU is Christian-Social, but especially that also other important members of the European People's Party did not respond to the deviation from the (Christian) democratic standards by Fidesz properly and in good time. Nevertheless, the general argument presented by Tucker is correct. Ágh (2019: 219) reflects the passivity if the EU-institution as the 'Juncker paradox' when 'the autocratic and populist elites have been encouraged by the lack of EU reactions to open violations of the EU rules and values'.

Next to Orbán's dismantling of the liberal institutions of Hungary, the British plebiscite on Brexit and Trump's presidential victory present 'three pivotal events' for Tucker (2020: 147). Similarly, Klíma (2020: 5) considers the negative development trajectories and patterns, supplying also the strengthened position of 'two authoritarian powers, Russia and China', in international relations. Ágh (2019, 2021) labels such a situation with the term 'New World Order' produced by a triple (global) crisis. As continued segments of this triple crisis he presents the transition crisis in the 1990s, post-accession crisis in 2000s and global crisis in the 2010s (Ágh 2019: 15).

Thinking about the historical cycles, Tucker logically presents the expected development regarding the fall of populism based on the author, 'populism, by its very nature, is self-destructive. Neo-illiberal politicians elected by populist must play a delicate game to survive' (Tucker 2020: 155). One of the important instruments for survival is the 'tailor-made' distributions of finances: 'For example, the populist in East Europe "bought" constituencies with public funds. The Polish government instituted generous child benefits, while the Czech populist increased the salaries of teachers by 15 percent' (Tucker 2020: 112). Observing the poor economic performance of – for example – the Czech government led by A. Babiš and the tremendous growth of public debt, we can confirm this assumption. Indeed, the neo-illiberal populist regime must not be necessarily replaced by a liberal democratic one!

On the other hand, we must not forget about other types of populist performance strengthening and protecting their position. Along with economic, Tucker

also presents the 'militaristic' populist self-destruction (Tucker 2020: 112). On one hand he stresses the repeatedly weak or almost non-existent ideological framework of contemporary populist illiberalism ('Contemporary populism does not really have a philosophy of history, or even an ideology, because the closest thing it has to an ideology in anti-intellectualism' /Tucker 2020: 116/). On the other hand, he also – maybe not as insistently as other scholars – stresses the cultural factors, primarily the history politics and culture wars ('Post-totalitarian societies in Central and Eastern Europe failed to come to terms with their past.... The results are not just the recurrence of repressed and then forgotten populist and illiberal ideologies, movements, policies, and disasters, but also the repetition of tactical mistakes by those who oppose illiberalism but did not learn its history' /Tucker 2020: 74/). Later he discusses the specific popular types of nostalgia – for example the *Social democratic* 'to the golden thirty years that followed the Second World War in Europe' and specifically for ECE the *Mythical* unspecific nostalgia of populist neo-illiberals to some good and great old days. For him 'this nostalgia is too vacuous to argue against' (Tucker 2020: 157).

In my opinion, here he does not reflect the situation in the regions accurately. Namely, the mythicisation of the 'golden age' and the discourse of national history as the 'glorious past that never was' (Ágh 2019: 142) related to the traditional victim and loser-nation syndrome was reinforced in ECE and also plays a very important role in the assertiveness of leading ECE's populist neo-illiberals. Let us commemorate the 'legendary' meeting of V. Orbán and J. Kaczyński in Krynica on 6 September 2016 where 'they pledged to wage a "cultural counter-revolution" against a "declining West" that allegedly wanted to "eliminate historical identities"' (Ágh 2019: 211). Furthermore, these European 'pariahs' are continually developing their position of trend-setters and role-models – let us stress the cooperation between V. Orbán and M. Salvini. The newest and apparently very ambitious project of the uniting nativist and anti-liberal streams in Europe is the *Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe* presented at the beginning of July 2021. The first place on the list of 16 signatories belongs to J. Kaczyński, while V. Orbán is listed fourth. The Declaration is the essence of the so-called culture counter-revolution and the struggle for 'Christian' Europe.

Ágh (2019: 141) reflects this development as 'fundamental reinterpretation of Europeanness in a conservative-Christian way' and construction of a polarised Orwellian world where 'we, Central Europeans represent genuine Europeanness against the declining West' and 'the honest new domestic elites protect the European population against external and internal enemies instead of the impotent and parasitic Brussels elite' (Ágh 2019: 146).

On the other hand, in this sense Tucker is fully correct when he presents the populist leader as the 'tribune of the plebs' attacking the political correctness. 'When a populist politician deliberately and nonchalantly breaks all the codes

of upper-middle-class politeness, he demonstrates to the excluded lower classes that he is on their side, while burning bridges to the elite by performing speech acts that would forever exclude the populist from the polite society' (Tucker 2020: 145). Orbán became the symbol of breaching such codes at the European level, followed recently by a growing group of other European politicians.

Let us present also the remedies Tucker offers for the struggle against the populist neo-illiberalism. As the first – and for me the most problematic – he mentions the Universal Basic Income. Considering myself liberal I cannot accept this tool as 'liberal'. Similarly, I have serious doubts about the attempts to fight against the disinformation and fake news by the legal regulation of social media. Using the metaphor from Ancient Greece, the main question for me is who is going to control the controllers? Furthermore, how and who will decide on the assumed unacceptability of contents? Or to use the opposite logic, who will decide on what is 'true'?

On the other hand, I fully agree with Tucker's emphasis on education, including the historical education: 'Knowledge of history, especially of the nasty parts, is a kind of political inoculation.... Civil mass education must include history, and not just that of the glories of the nation and its grievances against its neighbors, but histories of human folly that should not be repeated' (Tucker 2020: 167). Being rather idealistic, he further presents the idea of 'sentimental education based on Aristotelian rhetoric, philosophy, psychology, and history' that 'may train its students to deal with their passions' (Tucker 2020: 167). Such an idealistic approach is summarised in the notion that education plays the decisive role in the new liberal restoration that 'will need to reimagine this dream of secular, social, and cultural salvation through education' (Tucker 2020: 187).

Among other remedies Tucker mixes such disparate tools as more intensive lustrations and inclusion of the patriots in democratic exile, unlimited geographic mobility ('Free trade without free movement and labor mobility generates disequilibria' /Tucker 2020: 190/)[4], or more economic and social cohesion in the EU (convergence of salaries etc.). Let us mention in advance that the cohesive and social Europe (European Social Union) presents the main remedy in Ágh's reviewed book (Ágh 2019: 252). Tucker also promotes the proportional electoral systems and 'even better... the *alternative vote*' (Tucker 2020: 196–197). Finally, he returns to the liberal foundations stressing the preference for a small and cooperative state as one of the liberal priorities: 'Liberalism in any real sense wants governments to be small, efficient, and well constrained by independent institutions and civil society' (Tucker 2020: 200). I fully agree with such an inference, but must point out that some of above-mentioned remedies are in conflict with this general expectation.

4 Specifically, he focuses on retirees and the unemployed asking for their unlimited mobility without losing the benefits limited now on the national/domestic area including security (Tucker 2020: 187–190).

Tucker concludes his analysis with the notion that 'defeating Trump in the 2020 presidential elections… will marginalize neo-illiberals everywhere and generate liberal recognition. A successful liberal presidency will restore the soft power of liberalism and neo-illiberal democracies will implode as the Soviet Empire did" (Tucker 2020: 203). Indeed, the performance of the Biden administration during the first year in power indicates dramatic problems regarding the "successful performance.'

Let us conclude with the presentation of Ágh's book focusing on democratic backsliding in ECE (2019). Ágh (2019: 2–4) assumes that the 'ECE democracy finally collapsed in the 2010s' and observes the 'victory of (semi-)authoritarian regime or façade democracies'. Such a situation was caused by a set of reasons reflected as a polycrisis – rollback in Europeanisation, de-Europeanisation and de-democratisation, failure of the catching-up process, socio-economic decline, new core-periphery divide (Ágh 2019: 2–3).

In Europe-wide perspective, the ECE – and above all Central Europe – is historical periphery, dependent on the development in the West and East and mobbing historically in cycles of Westernisation and Easternisation – a state of permanent semi-modernisation (Ágh 2019: 6). He understands the in-between position of Central Europe from the Western perspective – as the periphery of the West. 'Unlike Eastern Europe, it belonged to the West European civilization accepting Western Christianity and by going through the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment and also the 19th- and 20th-century economic, social, political and cultural transformations in its own particular, controversial and belated way, but with the strong feeling of being part of "Europe"' (Ágh 2019: 11).

For Ágh, Western elites and media do not understand ECE's history. 'Westerners are often surprised by the claims for national sovereignty by the ECE populations, not realizing how young these states are, especially Slovakia and Slovenia' (Ágh 2019: 7). Furthermore, they do not understand how the national awaking was grounded in the region, i.e. often without visible interconnection with the Enlightenment ideas. So, in the 19th century, 'the rural and church actors had an important role in the ethnic revival of the autochthonous minorities in the early nation-building processes' (Ágh 2019: 8). This was also one of the reasons why the return of nativism and populist neo-illiberalism seems to be much easier than in the European West.

Ágh (2019: 4) points to the clear strategy of ECE nations' elite in the post--accession and more in the post-accession crisis of the 2000s and even more during the global crisis in the 2010s 'to build up a nativist identity politics by blaming "Brussels" for all the problems in their own countries'. The catching--up process is presented as unsuccessful as far as the old EU member states did not accept the new members as fully equal. The ECE nations became European, but within another Europe than was expected. 'Basically, the cultural identity in ECE – a firm commitment of ECE populations to being proud European citizens,

which is reflected in history as an attachment to European values – has been in contrast to an alienation from Europe in terms of several EU policies because of the relative failure of the catching-up process within the EU' (Ágh 2019: 22). Within the concept of differentiated integration, ECE became the 'Periphery-2' next to the older 'Periphery-1 (South)'. The EU-spatial framework also includes two cores – Core-1: West-Continental and Core-2: Nordic EU and 'the ECE region has become the direct semi-periphery of Core-1' (Ágh 2019: 44–46). To the negative stances towards the EU/West in the ECE the fact that the region was 'seriously hit by the global crisis, more seriously than the South' (Ágh 2019: 116) also has to be figured in. Last but not least, after 2015 the creation of the New World Order led to the desecuritisation of ECE (Ágh 2019: 98).

All this produced a new round of sovereignty-based conflict that 'has been the long-standing basic frame of ECE political communication, with regular offensives against "enemies", culminating in a hate campaign during the refugee crisis. In this recent stage the historical trajectory of populism from above with its basically cultural and nativist profile, identity politics gets the upper hand. Paternalistic elite populism has introduced an economic nationalism discourse with a strong anti-EU rhetoric' (Ágh 2019: 121). Such conclusions are fully in scope with other recent observations (cf. Söderbaum – Spandler – Pacciardi 2021). All this leads to the very paradoxical situation where 'the ECE governments demand assistance from the EU but refuse to comply with European rules and values' (Ágh 2019: 206).

As regards the development of domestic politics in (some) ECE countries, Ágh proposes the term 'politico-neoliberal hybrid' labelling the de-democratised nations such as Hungary and Poland. This hybrid was created in two phases. 'In the first, state-managed neoliberalism, it was a rising combination of the traditional strong, overwhelming state with the new crony capitalism and dependent development.... The second stage has created a much more mature form of state-coordinated neoliberalism, represented by the autocratic politico--business elites, producing extreme forms of hard populism from above or velvet dictatorships with a democratic façade' (Ágh 2019: 41). An important component of these populist neo-illiberal regimes with growing importance presents the history politics and culture war against liberalism, globalisation, Communism and post-Communism foreigners, migrants etc. 'The new populist regimes have pushed all social and political conflicts into the cultural realm of identity crisis, elevating them from social reality to a mythical meta-level of true patriots and amoral traitors, in the fashionable dual terms of Carl Schmitt.... National-socialist populism has offered certain "ideological drugs" as a fake recompense to the population for the failure of the high expectations' (Ágh 2019: 162–163).

As a political scientist, Ágh devotes specific attention to the political parties as the key actors of transition, but also the post-transition period. He assumes

that 'the ECE parties are not yet ready for multi-actor and multilevel democracy… and were much more politically and ideologically than policy oriented' (Ágh 2019: 80–81). He stresses that the ECEs 'sofa' parties did not grow up from visible social groups: 'ECE political parties without social embeddedness or genuine roots in civil society have penetrated all "private" segments for their fine--tuning in governance' (Ágh 2019: 86). As regards party populism, he stresses the paradox of parties created in the top-down mode, but successfully playing the role of the representatives of 'the people': 'Paradoxically, in the construct of rising hard populism from above, the new mainstream ECE parties proved to be elitist and populist at the same time' (Ágh 2019: 152). In this sense, Klíma (2020: xvii) stresses the birth of a new 'set of political parties – predominantly elite-dominated protest parties'.

Specifically, Ágh focuses on the party transformation and creation of second party system(s) in the region in the last decade. Here he introduces a new term 'Golem parties' describing the parties that 'created efficient country-size corruption networks based on public procurement and EU transfers. The key issue is that the Golem parties have penetrated to all social sectors through their informal networks, including politics, the economy, civil society and the media' (Ágh 2019: 170). These Golem parties implemented the masterplans(s) described earlier and removed the checks and balances, continued backsliding from the governance to government, aggressive majority pushes the legislative power 'working under direct pressure of governments', continuous takeover in judicial power, 'above all appropriating the Constitutional Court; restrictions on the NGOs and increasing colonization of civil society" (Ágh 2019: 178–180).

Ágh denies the idea that the ECE democracies reached the state of consolidated democracy. In his opinion, this was a mistaken position reflecting the transformation only on the surface. In Ágh's opinion the evaluations of ECE democracies relied on impropriate and misleading data including the self--presentation of the leading political actors: 'The ECE political class has acted as special type of "comprador class" in the neoliberal hybrid; therefore fake reports and hybrid theories with an amalgam of neoliberalism and nationalism have been characteristic of the self-portrayal of the ECE national political systems and governments in the 2010s' (Ágh 2019: 201). He summarised that already 'in the early 2010s it became clear that consolidation had not been reached by the new democracies, and as a result the ECE democracy literature switched to the term of "deconsolidation"' (Ágh 2019: 199). Here he follows the logic of Cianetti, Dawson and Hanley (2019: 5) stressing that backsliding 'assumes a prior period of successful democratisation'.

Within the European framework, Ágh put forward as one of the decisive factors for the negative development (not only) in ECE and strengthening populist neo-illiberalism the crisis of the welfare state: 'The transition from a welfare to a well-being universe has taken place in the last few decades in most developed

countries' (Ágh 2019: 234). We can observe here the nostalgia reflected also in Tucker's book and named *Social Democratic*. Regarding ECE, Ágh specifically stresses the 'lost decade for human progress' after 2008 (Ágh 2019: 246) and even more the visible and in some national cases dramatic departure of even millions to the West. In consensus with I. Krastev (2019) he notes that 'the deepest de-Europeanization process is the growing distance, both absolute and relative, between East and West in civilization terms, when talented and ambitious people leave the ECE region to become individually genuine European citizens' (Ágh 2019: 246).

Despite the negative evaluation of recent development, similarly to Tucker Ágh also remains positive and offers remedies against populism and illiberalism. He hopes for a democracy renewal based in grass-root level activities and generation exchange: 'First, enhanced socio-political cohesion through the personal links between East and West of the millions of Easterners living in the West, who can initiate and support fundamental changes in the east; second, the historical learning process of the ECE populations with the entry of a new, democratically socialized generation; and, third, the internal tensions within the socio-economic, political and cultural system of authoritarian populism and its increasing external confrontations with EU institutions' (Ágh 2019: 258). He believes that 'people have recognized that "the emperor is naked"' and 'the inner crisis of the authoritarian system has generated mass resistance against the ruling hard populist parties among the ECE populations' (Ágh 2019: 259). The awakening of dissatisfied civil society might be observed in the grassroots movements that 'have appeared in the eruption of popular anger at mass demonstrations and in social media, so in some ways it is a return to the period of "movements" in the 1990s' (ibid).

While Tucker and Ágh discuss the prospects of democracy at the global level, Klíma focuses in his book primarily on the case study – Czechia. Nevertheless, in his book we can also observe an effort to propose more general results in two different areas – the regional (ECE, but also EU/West), and the party development and its reflection in political science and political theory. The key term for his analysis is the 'state capture', i.e. the process of weakening the checks and balances mechanisms as well as limiting pluralism in political and economic competition. In his interpretation, both these negative mechanisms are interconnected under the umbrella of clientelism as 'a form of post-communist social organisation that evolves in a state-centred manner' (Klíma 2020: 18).

In the first part of his book, Klíma presents the recent debate about the new party model(s), such as media parties, business-firm parties, entrepreneurial parties, brokerage parties, or exploitative parties (Klíma 2020: 23). Indeed, as he stresses it is not necessary that the process of dismantling and state capture, and/or democratic backsliding must be linked to this new party model. In that sense, his notion on recent development in Hungary and Poland ('In contem-

porary Poland and Hungary, a dismantling of the fundamental pillars of liberal democracy is taking place under the reign of single-party governments' /Klíma 2020: 7/) commemorates Ágh's previously discussed term 'Golem party'.

Searching for the similarities among the ideologically, but also in size, very different political parties in ECE Klíma presents the concept of the 'clientelist parties' that he later analyses in the example of Czechia. More generally, Klíma assumes that: 1) On a national level, a new social cleavage was determined in the form of the... conflict line between non-transparent clientelist networks and outraged civil society; 2 On the level of the party system, such a socio-political cleavage was manifested as a sharp division between the 'old' established clientelised parties and the 'new' protest subjects with an anti-clientelist and anti-corruption appeal (Klíma 2020: 103).

Such new subjects might represent a real alternative, but also the continuation and even strengthening of the negative potential in party politics. As the example of the latter, the 'extraordinary *"oligarchical" entrepreneurial project* of the *Movement ANO 2011,* established by Andrej Babiš', is presented, the project that 'can potentially establish a *larger stage of clientelism in the sense of oligarchisation of the entire political system*, i.e. *the state capture in its pure version*' (Klíma 2020: 120–121). Such an opinion might be confronted with the results presented by Cianetti, Dawson and Hanley (2019: 7, 9). The authors present the terms anti-establishment parties and 'anti-corruption parties' describing a small influential group of oligarchical billionaires; such operationalisation perfectly meets the main profile of Babiš's entrepreneurial project. On the other hand, they also stress that Czech democracy did not erode with having Babiš in power, but earlier: 'Interpenetration of corrupt informal business interests and traditional parties had already degraded Czech democracy into a hybrid regime long before the rise of the billionaire Babiš' (Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley 2019: 8). Indeed, such interpretation is current also in Klíma's work. Let us look at Dimitrova's comment (in Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley 2019: 23) that the EU--funds paradoxically helped to protect the existing business-political network in ECE. Hungary is presented as the most visible example, but we should not forget how the 'management' of the financial sources from EU-funds transformed the big Czech parties ODS and ČSSD into the 'federations of the cohesion regions' where the regional bosses became extremely strong and the party leaders either weak or the 'boss of the bosses'.

As regards the state-capture in Czechia, in his opinion 'the main role was played by *captor firms* representing a small set of new large corporations and powerful state or semi-state enterprises' (Klíma 2020: 21). He is stressing the specific party capture from below and from above, further analysing both segments. As regards the from below party capture, he punctually analyses how the almost memberless parties might be seized by small groups of 'clients'. The party capture from below is than an 'incremental process of party privatisation

by non-transparent small and medium-sized companies'. One of the key strategies is the 'recruitment of fake or paid party members', i.e. the phenomenon of so-called 'whalers' who recruit the 'dead souls' or 'paid members' (Klíma 2020: 31–38). Such a reality then produces the situation of divided loyalties between their own party and the particular non-transparent business presented in the phenomenon of 'political businessman', 'regional and national bosses and oligarchs', 'grey eminences, pimps or political puppet masters' or 'godfathers' (Klíma 2020: 14–17; 50–52). What is important is the hidden continuity of at least some part of this clientelist network with the pre-1989 situation and important actors of the grey economy system in Communist Czechoslovakia – the parasitic matrix of black marketeers, former secret police members, snitchers, communist nomenklatura cadres, staying close to the edges of organised crime (Klíma 2020: 49).

As regards the party capture or '*Informal party colonisation "from above*"', it 'was conducted discretely by director-generals and direct owners of the largest companies'. The pro-business parties or party factions were created cooperating with approximately ten big companies/businessman. As a result we can observe the '*progressive cartelisation* in individual sectors of economy' that 'occurred as a consequence of the conclusion of the 1998–2002 "Opposition Agreement", which in reality was rather a cartel between the ODS and ČSSD' (Klíma 2020: 63–66). Exactly this 'hidden silent great coalition' as Klíma labelled the cooperation of two catch-all parties after 1998, fully started the process of state capture, as previously detected by Cianetti, Dawson and Hanley.

Klíma reflects the earthquake elections in 2010 through the prism of new 'anti-corruption' parties. Specifically, he focuses on the 'security and surveillance potential' related with the new party Public Affairs led by the owner of the biggest private security firm in the land Vít Bárta (firm ABL). Among the tools used by the party we can find spying on politicians, illegal monitoring phone calls of influential figures, leaks of information, etc. (Klíma 2020: 96–98). Furthermore, Public Affairs also became the first 'media party' in Czechia, when the known journalist Radek John was selected by Bárta as the party chair.

Indeed, the Public Affairs party collapsed shortly after its electoral success in 2010 and short attendance in the coalition government. From a more general point of view, the experience with its success and failure became an important impulse for the new, more successful and stable business-firm project of A. Babiš – the movement ANO 2011 – the party of managers with tiny-membership and strong personal and organisational overlaps with the Agrofert Holding owned by A. Babiš. Babiš's holding also includes an important and influential media section. 'Furthermore, in the media sphere Babiš has attempted to extend his influence also to public television' (Klíma 2020: 139–144).

Klíma concludes labelling Babiš as a 'new political predator' (Klíma 2020: 139). As Hanley and Vachudova (in Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley 2019: 44–47)

contribute, Babiš introduced an oligarchic version of politics seeing 'little or no role for direct citizen input into either policymaking or broader democratic governance. What Babiš brings to Czech politics is a kind of "anti-politics" that celebrates the concentration of power in the hands of businesspeople, "experts" or managers.... Babiš characterises democracy as a struggle between elites'. Babiš moved Czech politics towards a 'populist democracy' rooted in 'populist ideology'. 'ANO's rise is not underpinned by a grandiose illiberal nationalism and typically seeks to co-opt opponents from a position of strength'(ibid: 34–39).

Let us confront these general comments on ANO 2011 with the interesting and analytically profound chapter focusing on the oligarchisation of Czech politics (Balík et al 2019: 268–285).[5] The book was also published in English two years earlier (Balík et al 2017), but in the Czech version the 'decisive' period of state capture after the ANO 2011 win in the parliamentary elections in October 2017 and under the Prime Minister Babiš is also looked at. The authors stress that the English version was written between 2014 and 2016, when Andrej Babiš and his ANO 2011 party first joined the government coalition as the second largest party after the 2013 parliamentary elections. Indeed, the Czech edition also reviews the development after October 2017, when not only did ANO 2011 win in the parliamentary elections, but the second largest party had more than two times fewer votes than the new and only big party in Czechia. The mentioned chapter analyses the olicharisation tendencies and legacies in/from the 1990s, but especially the acceleration of monopolisation tendencies after 2013. Special attention is devoted to the media market, where only a few owners might be found, and almost all of them interconnected with politics. Furthermore, the analysis shows the direct financial penetration of businessman into the political parties. Naturally, up to now the peak is the ANO 2011 party, being often labelled an entrepreneurial party or directly as the political vehicle of A. Babiš' business activities. Nevertheless, the strong interconnection of political parties and businessmen or business groups became the endemic feature of Czech politics, including next to the parties the traditionally strong 'Prague castle' (President and the actors surrounding him). Last but not least, the analysis also includes the policy level, i.e. it depicts the most important policies where the business activities overlap with politics or even worse – determine the politics (agriculture and food production,[6] forestry, health care, power industry and finances.

5 The book was also published in English two years earlier (Balíte et al 2017), but in the Czech version the 'decisive' period of state capture after the ANO 2011 win in the parliamentary elections in October 2017 and under the Prime Minister Babiš is also reflected.

6 Let us add that since the beginning of his political engagement A. Babiš, the biggest Czech businessman in this sector, stresses the necessity of food autarky and the COVID19 pandemic in Spring 2020 again strengthened his emphasis on the issue.

When we read the report about the rapid oligarchisation of the Czech economy and strengthening the business-politics nexus, the relatively positive picture of Czechia in comparison with Hungary or Poland (as presented by Hanley and Vachudova) befogs. Maybe the contemporary Czech politics dominated by the duopoly of A. Babiš and M. Zeman is not developing the 'nationalised monopolies' controlled by the ruling party, as we can observe in Hungary, but the political competition seems to be limited or even determined by the business competition or agreements about the share of the market. Here we fully agree with Klíma (2020: 109) saying that 'the Czech Republic manifests accompanying features of insufficient democracy... only a minimal framework for democracy in ensured'.

Conclusion

As emphasised by Hanley and Vachudova (in Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley 2019: 34, the 'narrative of progress in the region (ECE – quoted by L.C.) is dead'. Hungary and Poland are among the early-starters of democratisation and in the group of Central European nations declared as (semi)consolidated democracies at the eve of millennium. The success story of ECE as a democratised, Europeanised and socialised region was intensified with the EU-access of ten post-Communist countries in 2004/2007. Nevertheless, such an 'optimistic picture of democratisation in ECE needs revising.... The new dynamics of democratic backsliding are best illustrated by the one-time democratic front-runners Hungary and Poland' (Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley 2019: 2).

While the emerging paradigm of 'democratic backsliding' 'has focused disproportionately on the two most dramatic cases: Hungary and Poland and on the symptoms – executive aggrandisement and illiberal nationalism – that are most characteristic of the trajectories of those states' (Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley 2019: 1), further analysis – should it be case studies or comparisons – showed the 'regional' aspect where the consolidated democracy might be regarded as the exception rather than the rule. This sceptical portrayal is the most important characteristics shared by all three authors and their reviewed books.

Poland and Hungary must not be equalised with the East-Central European regions, but the Polish and Hungarian cases also determine the way we think about the region and the problematic tendencies within ECE. The result is that 'the debate on democratic backsliding has revolved around the scenario of an illiberal populist party winning an absolute parliamentary majority and embarking on a conservative-nationalist project' (Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley 2019: 3). Nevertheless, the studies included in the book (Czechia by S. Hanley an, M.A.Vachudova; Estonia and Latvia by L. Cianetti; the chapter analysing the elite-citizen interactions in ECE by A.L.Dimitrova) showed that 'in CEE systemic threats to democracy have come less from electorally dominant illiberal parties

capturing society and the state, than illiberal interest in society and predatory elites capturing mainstream parties.... The entrenchment of private interests in the state and in party politics may represent an alternative route to backsliding in states such as the Czech Republic and Slovenia with fragmented party systems and/or where a strong socially conservative right is weak or absent' (Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley 2019: 7).

This picture of democratic backsliding in ECE brought the authors to the distinction between two (ideal)types of backsliding regimes: 1) network-type dominant coalition, consisting of businessmen and politicians formally belonging to different parties (Bulgaria, Romania); 2) ideological party-type dominant coalition consisting of politicians from one political party in power and associated businessmen (Hungary, Poland) (Dimitrova in Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley 2019: 22). Czechia has to be included in the first group, as well as Slovakia, while Slovenia and Croatia are still balancing between both types.

When we mentioned the electoral result from the 2021 parliamentary elections in Czechia as a prospective change in the country's politics development, the most important sign of success of the 'anti-Babiš' coalition would be the renewal of checks and balances and independent liberal institutions, as well as the matter of fact that the new government will not continue within the clientelist networks that existed before 2013. Such a transformation was also promised in Slovakia when R. Fico was forced by civic protests to leave the office of the prime minister; but the recent development does not evince visible differences in the quality of governance. Not only because of this fact, we can expect the discussions about the 'regional disposition' for illiberal democracies or even 'soft authoritarian' regimes in ECE also in the next years.

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