# Linking European Integration with Illiberalism: 'Laboratory' of Central-Eastern Europe[1]

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**Abstract**: *The essay discusses Central Eastern Europe as a 'laboratory' of existing, emerging as well as contained elements of illiberal backlash. The Central European countries show both challenges and resilience mechanisms in more 'extreme' conditions than the cases from Western Europe. The paper offers the connection between the domestic development of Central European states and the 'polycrisis' of European integration by linking the issue of politicisation of European integration with the emergence of illiberal politics in contemporary Europe. The goal and main argument of the paper are that there exists a nexus between illiberal Central Eastern European politicians and rising Euroscepticism in the region. The empirical research of Central Eastern European cases will help us better understand general trends of European integration politicisation.*

**Keywords:** ***Central-Eastern Europe; democratization; illiberal democracy; European integration; politicisation***

## I. Introduction

Before 1989, the politics of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) resembled a museum of unresolved issues of liberalisation and democratisation.[2] The revolution

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2 In the paper, the concept of CEE includes the member states of the EU (MS) from the region and states with candidate status. It therefore excludes most of the post-Soviet republics. Almost the same approach was used by Cianetti et al. (2018: 243–244) with less emphasis put on the role of the relation to the EU as a 'qualifier' for inclusion into the analytical group of CEE states. In this paper, Western Europe includes both EU MS and non-EU countries.

of 1989 (re-)triggered the process of liberalisation and democratisation very quickly, following the Western European institutional blueprints, although often superficially. In general, the consolidation of liberal democratic institutions often remained shallow.

Eastern Enlargement of the EU constituted another challenge reopening the questions related to the quality of democracy, democratic political culture and democratic institutions. After the economic crisis in 2008, the Europeanisation of CEE politics was rather quickly replaced with the politicisation of European integration fuelled mainly by nationalist and Eurosceptic politicians. The multiple EU crises interlinked the domestic disputes about the nature of democracy and the level of its liberal background with the politicisation of European integration.

The first argument of this paper follows the assumption of Tim Haughton and Kevin Deegan-Krause (2015, 2020) that CEE can serve as a laboratory for understanding trends that are emerging in Western Europe and other democracies. For us, CEE is a lab in which the expectations concerning EU integration are higher, the disappointment of citizens with politicians comes quicker and various populist Eurosceptic voices are louder than in Western Europe. The second main argument of the paper is that there is a connection between the regional decline of democratic standards and the specific form of politicisation of European integration in the context of multiple crises of the European Union after 2004, the year of the first wave of 'Eastern enlargement'. Derived from and based on these two arguments is a plea for more systematic comparative research going beyond the East–West divide. The paper's original contribution to the existing literature is in linking the issue of politicisation of European integration with the emergence of illiberal politics in contemporary Europe.

Therefore, the paper will first discuss the impact of 1989 and 2004 on CEE politics. An analysis of the decline of democracy will follow. Further, we will examine the relationship between illiberal democracy and European integration. The fourth part will show how the EU polycrisis exacerbated the problem. The fifth part will elaborate on the idea of CEE as a laboratory of challenges as well as resilience vis-à-vis illiberal democracy and Eurosceptic politics.

## II. The emergence of a lab in the post-1989 development

The transition to democracy in 1989 represents a turning point in CEE politics. After the breakup of communist regimes, rapid institutional changes and new impulses for Europeanisation and Westernisation set into motion the processes of democratic transition and consolidation (Beyme 1999). The 'Central European paradox' (Rupnik 1988) applied, however: the ideas, especially political ones, flow into CEE from the West, but CEE implements them under considerably different societal and economic conditions. Therefore, the legacy

of democratisation is vast but not always profoundly embedded in the fabric of society and patterns of civil political culture, both at the level of the political elite and the masses. Liberal democratic institutions are more fragile. Political parties sometimes mock the function of representation of citizens' interests and focus on patronage instead (Kopecký – Spirova 2011). Specific political culture, prone to nationalism and parochialism, is still widely shared by vast parts of the population. Politicians can quickly mobilise civil society to support un-civil policies (Navrátil – Kluknavská 2020).

As Ekiert and Ziblatt (2013: 92) summarised, even after the completion of a democratic transition, we can find many patterns of societal, economic and political life that correlate with those present before the communist coups d'état in the region. Yet, especially in the sphere of political institutions and party politics, rapid westernisation has functioned as a challenge turning CEE into a laboratory of political changes and a tester of the resilience of liberal democratic institutions in an environment where societal values are changing rapidly but in a shallow way.

The 2004/2007/2013 EU accessions represent another turning point in CEE. The high level of external pressure towards Europeanisation was treated almost automatically as democratisation (Grabbe 2006), connected to the prevalence of external incentives and logic of consequences rather than a logic of appropriateness (Schimmelfening – Sedelmeyer 2005). Adaptational pressures decreased after the CEE states reached the milestone of full EU membership. The pressure to comply with EU standards provoked opposition and adverse reactions from the outset: Euroscepticism (public and party), shallow Europeanisation, and illiberal democracy. For the stakeholders from candidate countries as well as for EU scholars, it might be interesting to examine this 'de-Europeanisation' in CEE more closely.

We can interpret the impact of European integration on the CEE countries as a 'shock' exposing the problem of shallow and contested Europeanisation in the context of somewhat superficial democratisation. A contest between proponents and opponents of liberal democratic institutions thus overlaps with the conflict between pro-integration and Eurosceptic political actors. Euroscepticism is rising significantly, which corresponds with the turn of pro-EU 'romanticism' to pragmatic cost-benefit calculations related (not only) to the EU budget 2021–2027 (Szczerbiak 2021). We will show that the rising Euroscepticism and illiberalism in CEE work together as a reaction to the EU polycrisis.[3] The polycrisis itself represents a trigger and a context of domestic changes at the same time.

3 The word 'polycrisis' was originally employed by Jean-Claud Juncker in 2016 to describe a situation of multiple crises which intersect with each other, starting with global financial crisis, crisis in the Eurozone, migration and the refugee crisis. While using the term, we follow Zeitlin et al. (2019). See Zachová (2022) for a survey of literature on crisis in Europe.

We assume that a relative lack of democratic experience still has effects in CEE and that the imperfection of truly internalised democratic values and institutions makes the barrier protecting democratic institutions more vulnerable than in Western Europe. Even in cases of belated or challenged democratisation (Italy, Portugal, Spain or Greece), the democratic tradition is more profound than in CEE. It does not automatically mean that Western European democracies are perfectly resilient and CEE democracies are inevitably doomed to backslide. It only helps us to understand why some CEE populist leaders screwed liberal democratic institutions more than in-many-ways-similar populist leaders did in Western Europe. Let us mention Orbán and Salvini to grasp the difference. Salvini de-liberalised migration policy, for example, but Orbán changed not only policies but also the entire institutional setting.

Moreover, nationalism and traditionalism have been mitigated by the longer EC/EU membership in the West. In CEE, nationalism and traditionalism are more assertive as strategies accompanying the CEE populism, as the success of parties like Poland's Law and Justice, Hungary's Fidesz or Estonia's EKRE shows compared to Spanish Vox, Greek Golden Dawn or *Fratelli d'Italia*. The substance of dangers for democracy and the nature of its challengers are similar both in CEE and in Western Europe. Central Eastern Europe can serve as a laboratory where the challengers are stronger, as are the dangers testing institutions of liberal democracy and the mechanisms of liberal-democratic resilience in more extreme conditions.

According to Sergio Fabbrini (2015), the Eurozone economic crisis opened a new critical juncture in the process of European integration, which had the potential to reshape the institutional architecture of the European Union as well as its policy features. In CEE, the polycrisis layering the economic crisis, the migration crisis as well as the crisis of values has created a specific 'window of opportunity' to reverse the legacies of Westernisation and Europeanisation set after the fall of communist regimes at the end of the 1980s. Thus, the polycrisis of European integration overlaps in time and in terms of value and institutional clash, with the most recent challenges to CEE politics related to EU membership. The rejection of some of the basic principles of the EU liberal democratic order in some CEE countries can no longer be explained purely by the inchoate democratic institutions and communist past. Therefore, we have to establish the relationship between the decline of democracy and politicised issues of European integration. Let us have a look at the decline of democracy first.

## III. The decline of democracy

Doubts about the quality of democracy and trends towards the de-democratisation of CEE are not new (Bustikova – Guasti 2017: 170–171). Jacques Rupnik (2007) summarised the most critical challenges, such as the non-linear paths towards

democratic consolidation, populist backlashes, an incomplete transformation of civic culture, lack of genuinely independent media, inchoate institutions of liberal checks and balances as well as emerging nationalist Eurosceptic strategies related to the shrinking influence of the enlarged EU on the domestic politics of new members. Rupnik and Zielonka (2013) showed that the economic crisis exacerbated the problems of CEE democracies, turning 'democratic fatigue' into a severe danger of authoritarian turn, however, in quite diverse ways and to quite various extents in different CEE countries. Democratic backsliding has been one of the hottest issues discussed among area specialists dealing with the politics of the region (Bakke – Sitter 2022; Cianetti et al. 2018; Enyedy 2020; Hanley – Vachudova 2018; Lorenz – Anders 2021; Rupnik 2017; Vachudova 2020). To make a broad term of democratic backsliding (Bermeo 2016: 5) more precise, we work with the concept of illiberal democracy (Zakaria 2003) in this paper. The reason is that there is not a democratic procedure at stake in the region. Examples in CEE show that the liberal component that is necessary to prevent the perversion of democracy into a purely plebiscitary machine serving as a façade for soft dictators is even more in danger.

No matter what we call it, the problem with democracies that once looked fairly consolidated and now are challenged by different sorts of strong-hand governance remains to be treated seriously both by the academic community and citizens and politicians in the region. Vast literature covers particular case studies, typically Poland (Sadurski 2019) and Hungary (Körösényi et al. 2020; Kovács – Trencsényi 2020; Magyar 2016; Pap 2018). Comparative texts have been on the rise in the last couple of years. They cover the entire region (Cianetti et al. 2018) or at least the Visegrád Group's states (Bakke – Sitter 2022; Guasti and Bustikova 2023). Attila Ágh's (2019) book places the CEE challenge of illiberal democracy into global and European economic and political processes. Most of the authors show quite a wide scope of these processes, as well as patterns of emergence and stabilisation of illiberal elements, politicians, ideologies and institutions.

Nancy Bermeo (2016) recognised the illiberal and anti-democratic turn as a global phenomenon. As Jan Zielonka (2018) showed, the current set of crises (to which we can add the coronavirus pandemic crisis – Guasti 2020) has a destructive potential vis-à-vis liberal democratic values and institutions on the European scale. The mechanisms and the particular combination of independent variables on which the deterioration of the liberal component depends might be different, of course. The CEE lab can serve as a regional microcosm of existing, emerging and contained elements of illiberal backlash. Jacques Rupnik (2017: 70) concluded that 'although we face the rise of populist nationalist parties elsewhere in Europe, only in East-Central Europe are they in power'. But this no longer holds true. Let us mention the brief but intensive intermezzo of Salvini's *Lega* in Conte's first government or the participation of FPÖ in the

Austrian governments of 2000–2005 and 2017–2019. Rupnik (2017: 83) is, of course, correct in that the nationalist–populist parties are more successful in CEE. It is, however, no longer an 'East-Central European aberration'.

The CEE lab offers a sample of variations broad enough to show not only macro-trends (role of rising inequities, nationalism, populism, etc.) but also the subtler mechanisms through which illiberal politicians are gaining momentum. András Körösényi et al. (2020) explained the nature of Orbán's regime through the lens of the concept of Plebiscitary Leader Democracy, based on Max Weber's *Führerdemokratie*. It represents a specific mixture that 'is democratic in *form* but authoritarian in *substance*' (Körösényi et al. 2020: 148, emphasis in original). Orbán reached the level and scope of political leadership comparable with strong authoritarian leaders of the contemporary world, such as Putin, Erdoğan or Bolsonaro. It might be, however, interesting to compare his leadership style with some historical leaders in CEE (Miklos Horthy) and Western Europe (Charles de Gaulle), or with some other global leaders tending to plebiscitary modes of governance without necessarily showing authoritarian features, such as Boris Johnson, Matteo Salvini, Alexis Tsipras, Marine Le Pen, Pablo Iglesias or even Emmanuel Macron. Studying Jarosław Kaczyński, Andrej Babiš, Robert Fico or Janez Janša can help us to understand institutions and mechanisms preventing Orbán's 'quality' of authoritarian leadership. It shows that the CEE lab is essential for scholars of leadership as well as comparatively oriented historians of politics.

Zsolt Enyedi (2020) showed convincingly that important particularities of ideological and discursive frames accompany the authoritarian turn in CEE politics. First, a unique strain of memory politics manifests as a combination of victimhood and self-confidence. Conservatives and populists blame the West for abandoning the alleged values of its civilisation and replacing them with the values of gender, migrants and sexual minorities, which are forcefully imposed on the CEE region. In the same vein, CEE is allegedly the saviour of Europe, carrying on the traditions left behind by the West. Second, old-fashioned mutual regional nationalist hatreds were transformed into 'cross-nationalism' and a general CEE hatred against the West.[4] Third, there is a massive attack against migrants.[5] Fourth, the 'good' state is pitted against 'bad' civil society, subverting allegedly traditional values of local culture and serving foreign interests. Fifth, radical right discourse is incorporated into the political mainstream. And finally, although it might be surprising for all who consider Europe a vanguard of secularisation, Christianity is misused politically, again typically with anti-Western resentments. Enyedi (2020: 374) stressed that because of these 'authoritarian

4 Rise of nationalist tendencies, however, is a global phenomenon, albeit neither uniform nor universal (Bieber 2018).

5 Anti-migrant rhetoric could be found in the West too (Fennema 1997); the difference is in scope and contamination of mainstream discourse with anti-migrant rhetoric.

innovations', the divide between East and West is widening compared to the situation just a decade ago. More important is his discussion of the possibility of Easternisation of the West. If we look at the ideological repertoire of Western radical right parties and (streams within) conservative parties, we can find all these 'innovations' to some extent safe from the anti-western resentments, of course. Sometimes we can find all this framed in anti-Eastern resentments, as the successful Leave campaign showed in the Brexit referendum, despite the pro-British stances of CEE politicians (Brusenbauch Meislova 2019: 1265–1267).

The value of the CEE Lab for academic (as well as policy-relevant) research in helping to maintain the resilience of liberal democracy via the understanding of illiberal discourses might prove of crucial importance and one of the main contributions of area specialists on CEE to the general debate about the state of contemporary European democracy.

Assessment of CEE can help us to understand the patterns of emergence and persistence of illiberal politicians, parties and governments, the crucial role of ethnopopulism as a successful electoral strategy, as well as the tactic of power concentration allowing control of the polity beyond the limits of liberal checks and balances (Vachudova 2020). The study of CEE helps us to understand the seductive combination of radical right ideological innovations (Enyedi 2020) often manifested as the 'problems' with minority accommodation (Buštíková 2020). We must mention the role of the specific implementation of neo-liberal economic reforms in CEE (Ther 2014), together with the role played by particular relations between the economic power of local oligarchs and the sphere of politics (Cianetti et al. 2018: 248–250).

Such issues of domestic politics have, however, another dimension stemming from the membership of CEE countries in the EU. For the study of EU politics, it is essential to understand the general decline of the EU's 'transformative power' executed through the mechanism of conditionality (Bochsler – Juon 2020) as well as the 'subversive' role of the intergovernmental character of the EU that compromises the agency of the European Commission against democratic backsliding (Kelemen 2020). Therefore, we have to examine the role of the EU in the process of decline of democracy in CEE.

## IV. When the decline of democracy hits the EU

Let us start with an example of how we can connect area specialisation on CEE with general issues of comparative politics. Peter Mair (2013: 17–44) discussed the dramatic decline of traditional forms of political involvement in Western democracies, such as higher net and gross volatility or the weakening of party membership. The point here is not to demonstrate that the level of party membership is lower in CEE (Biezen et al. 2011) or that the volatility is higher (Gherghina 2015), although both arguments hold. Mair's (2013) central idea

is that the space and scope of traditional party-driven democratic politics are hollowing out in Western democracies due to the increasing stress on expert rule and decision-making procedures beyond the range of popular democratic monitoring. Party government is waning; de-politicisation is the prevailing trend, as is the increasing detachment of elites from the masses. The role of the EU, according to Mair, is crucial here, although it is mainly negative because the specific features of European governance exacerbate the trends summarised above: In the EU, 'decisions can be taken by political elites with more or less a free hand' (Mair 2013: 108–109) and 'a political system… cannot adequately be reached or accessed by means of elections and parties, that is, by means of traditional representative organs and channels' (Mair 2013: 125).

Later developments counterproved Mair's initial assumptions, mainly because he was able to detect an increased level of politicisation of the EU issues only to a limited extent. Vivien Schmidt (2020) described the national political arena as 'politics without policy' because of the hollowing out of political options by increasing the communitarisation of policies. However, CEE shows that we can quite easily replace policy-based politics with symbolic and identity-based politics. Dufek and Holzer (2016: 20–22) explained how the harmonisation with the EU standards led first to de-politicisation and soon after to anti-liberal political mobilisation by the nationalist and Eurosceptic forces. Vivien Schmidt aptly calls this Europe-wide phenomenon 'politics *against* policy'. The CEE laboratory takes the lead in this respect, especially in the states where illiberal politicians started to provide reforms and implement policies that consequently hamper the smooth implementation of the *acquis communautaire*. We might mention the ongoing debate on the new financial framework of the EU or the financial aid related to the coronavirus pandemic and the stubborn defiance of Hungary and Poland against any relationship between money and the assessment of democratic standards. However, CEE is not alone in these trends; it's just faster.

In general, CEE turned more swiftly from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus (Hooghe – Marks 2009) or even destructive dissensus (Hodson – Puetter 2019). 'European disunion' (Palier et al. 2017) does not apply only to economic and social disparities among the MS but *within* the particular MS too. European integration did not reduce enough the gap between the losers and the winners of the democratic transition. As we will see, it instead contributed to reframing this gap and its political consequences into the discourse of winners and losers of integration and globalisation.

The problem is, of course, not only in the rhetoric of populist and nationalist politicians. Akalyiski and Welzel (2020: 18–19) suggest explaining Hungarian and Polish democratic backlash with the fact that these two countries experienced a sharp increase in emancipative values in Europe after 1989, which might have provoked the nationalist-conservative reaction. The losers and 'their' political parties reinforced the critique of the establishment by adding the EU

dimension into domestic critique. We can add the acceptance or rejection of the mainstream economic paradigm as another factor in the dispute between the winners' and losers' perspectives. Bluhm and Varga (2018: 4–5) explain the rise of CEE illiberal politics as a force opposing the dominant neo-liberal paradigm since the beginning of the transition from communism in CEE. Of course, this is not the only reason or explanation. Still, it is vital and well connected with the role of the EU membership as a factor of polarisation of CEE politics. Massively illiberal discourse in the region was fed by accusations that neoliberal economic principles inspired the austerity measures implemented by the EU to fight the crisis, had an allegedly devastating impact on the local population, and fostered 'foreign' instead of national economic interests (Ágh 2019).

The depth of the economic crisis and its political impact vary widely in the region. As Palier et al. (2017) demonstrated, the financial crisis increased the level of social and economic disparity between the core and periphery of the EU MS. It is surprising that after the crisis, the centre-periphery divide goes across, rather than along, the East–West divide. Some CEE countries (Estonia, Czechia, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) coped relatively well after the crisis and became part of the centre. Although the crisis in the Eurozone had a profoundly negative impact on most of the CEE countries, there is no direct link between the level of economic decline and the level of illiberal backlash.

The Baltic States were damaged dramatically (Kattel – Ringa 2013), yet their populist parties did not take an illiberal turn. Poland was the only EU country with ongoing economic growth, yet the elections of 2015 established a government of the national populist Law and Justice Party. The long-term coexistence of socioeconomic and nationalistic cleavages in CEE, specifically the dominance of the nationalistic cleavages in many countries of the region (Hloušek – Kopeček 2008), provides the explanation. Besides the politics of socioeconomic interests, the cultural and value-defined axis of party competition and voter alignments defines the regional political discourses and concerns. The inability to cope with the economic decline led some political elites to change the discourse from catching up with the West to blaming it for austerity measures.

The heated cultural wars and debates of the 1990s were reframed in the 2010s due to the polycrisis of European integration. While economic problems alone were not enough to stir up the once calm waters of tacit pro-EU consensus in the region, the migration crisis, unfortunately, added fresh winds to the Eurosceptic sails.

## V. When polycrisis exacerbates the problem

Migration issues stimulated increasing support of far-right and extremist political parties in CEE (Minkenberg 2017). The impact of the migration crisis on party politics in Europe has included a very rapid politicisation of the migra-

tion issues in CEE, where there was almost no politicisation of migration at all before 2015 (Taggart – Szczerbiak 2018). In CEE, migration issues did not only affect the far-right parties on the fringes or national conservative mainstream parties like PiS or Fidesz. They increased soft Eurosceptic stances among historically rather pro-integration parties like the Czech Social Democratic Party and Slovak Smer. The migration crisis exacerbated trends towards a sinister mixture of populism, Euroscepticism and sovereigntist discourses among CEE parties. Traditional discourses that centred on the Roma minority, for example, were reinforced with negative images of Muslim hordes flooding European countries, who are allegedly supported by the EU migration policies (Stojarová 2018). Hungarian Fidesz, ruling since 2010 and radicalising its populist appeals despite all expectations that incumbency pushes populists to the mainstream, is a *pars pro toto* (Hegedüs 2019).

As if in a Petri dish, the CEE mainstream discourse was affected and radicalised more quickly and broadly than in Western Europe, as a comparison of Fico, Orbán, Babiš with Sebastian Kurz, Salvini or Mark Rutte would show. The CEE lab can be used here to understand why mainstream politicians were so vulnerable to far-right discourses and policies and, in general, the relationship between the supply and demand sides in the process of securitisation of migration and the radicalisation of popular and elite stances.

In CEE, the economic and migration crises (but not Brexit) reinforced the supply side with new populist parties. They also affected the demand side profoundly by deepening the realignment of voters and restructuring cleavages. Empirical examinations of Western European cases have thus far received the most attention. Kriesi et al. (2008) found that the traditional left–right divide, based mainly on different socioeconomic policies and preferences, was complemented in Western Europe with the cultural axis dividing inclusion from demarcation. Once firmly socially rooted, political choices are now more fluid, and cleavages are not only products of the winner–loser societal divide but are actively constructed by political parties.

Is this a purely Western phenomenon? When reading, after almost three decades, Herbert Kitschelt's famous paper (1992), a reader might have a feeling of *déjà-vu*. Early in the period of democratic transition, Kitschelt (1992: 17) had already identified the axis dividing liberal and cosmopolitan parties from their authoritarian and particularist counterparts. In the CEE lab, social cleavages can be seen to have been replaced by the harsh and rapid modernisation that took place during the communist regimes. After 1989, the increasing importance of 'politically constructed' cleavages accompanied a further decline in firm social divisions (Hloušek – Kopeček 2008). After the Eastern Enlargement, the CEE winners and losers' cleavage of economic transformation more closely resembles that of Western Europe, with people feeling either that they benefit or suffer from Europeanisation and globalisation.

The CEE lab can help understand how the populist parties reframed the losers' part of the story using more and more socio-cultural narratives of demarcation against the 'others' rather than a traditional class approach. This has been the case with populist parties in Western Europe, too, so comparative research can benefit from a larger sample of cases. Even more meticulous analyses of the CEE cases are needed to understand the patterns and dynamics of politicisation of the EU by fringe as well as mainstream parties. Here, the CEE countries offer a model where the permissive consensus of the masses and the active enthusiasm of the elites transitioned into markedly diverse and contested stances of both, and this has seemingly happened overnight and with clear traces. Therefore, in the next part, let us discuss the politicisation of European integration and the importance of adding the CEE context.

## VI. How CEE can help to understand the politicisation of the EU

Scholars of the EU have used politicisation as a buzzword covering many different issues and manifestations since the late 1990s (de Wilde 2011). Politicisation as a combination of diverging public opinion, strategies of political parties and increasing the importance of identity-based politics that has been leading to the end of permissive consensus was theoretically rooted in Hooghe and Marks's (2009) postfunctionalism. The empirical rise of anti-EU resentments and Eurosceptic political actors in many countries of the EU have fuelled the latest debates. The idea that politicisation stems from the transfer of political authority matched explanations of politicisation as a product of strategic choice, economic interests or re-construction of cleavages (de Wilde et al. 2016: 10–12). In all of the cases, the attention was shifted to the space of the national political arena and competition of political actors within the MS, where politicisation can be conceptualised as a rising salience, expansion of actors involved in the debate as well as the polarisation of a particular topic (Grande – Hutter 2016: 25–26).

Hutter and Kriesi (2019) argued that the polycrisis did not lead to the same degree of politicisation of EU issues in CEE as it did in North-western and Southern Europe. As Havlík and Smekal (2022) showed, this is not necessarily so. While a sample including Hungary, Latvia, Poland and Romania confirms Hutter and Kriesi's findings, a selection including Czechia, Slovakia and Estonia would show a rising trend of politicisation. The same applies when we look at the level of 'Europeanisation' of electoral campaigns in CEE, which means the degree to which the CEE EP elections are dealing with EU-related issues. Analysis of the 2019 EP elections shows quite different degrees and various sources of Europeanisation. In Hungary and Romania, the campaigns dealt almost purely with domestic topics. The campaign was moderately Europeanised in the Czech Republic and highly Europeanised in Estonia (Hloušek – Kaniok 2020: 286–287). It confirms the research of Emanuelle et al. (2020), who

analysed the emerging integration-demarcation cleavage in the results of the EP elections. They demonstrated that variations of the salience of this cleavage cut clearly across any East–West divide. There is no specific CEE pattern. In Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania or Slovenia, they did not find even the emergence of a 'demarcation bloc' (i.e. parties fighting against globalisation and Europeanisation). In Hungary, they detected this cleavage in the embryonic phase, while Czechia, Estonia, Poland and Slovakia were in the stage of full political mobilisation. No CEE country reached the maturity level of integration and demarcation cleavage, but only three MS did so at all: Austria, Finland and Greece (Emanuele et al. 2020: 11–13).

Central Eastern Europe can thus serve as a lab where we can set aside many external factors, such as length of membership, and focus on how domestic actors foster or subdue politicisation of the EU issues. Comparative research covering the CEE countries would contribute to expanding the debate on the sources of politicisation of the EU in party politics on the genuinely European level. The lab can serve to test the different conditions for politicisation, such as cleavages and partisan divides cutting across (Hutter – Kriesi 2019) or replacing (Hooghe – Marks 2018) existing cleavages, level of public Euroscepticism (Green-Pedersen 2012), the role of those who oppose the EU as agents of politicisation (de Wilde et al. 2016) or the triggering role of the Eurozone and migration crises (Grande – Hutter 2016, Zeitlin et al. 2019). After a period of idyllic expectation of a sort of civilisational leap forward after reaching EU membership, some CEE MS display rapid processes of turning remote international conflicts (de Wilde – Lord 2016) over the EU-related issues into domestic ones involving the masses, parties, media, and public discourses and increasing the salience of the EU topic. The CEE lab is also a proper place to test the Eurosceptic challenges caused by the pandemic and the Ukrainian war.

Hutter and Kriesi's (2016: 1001) remark that we have to see 'conflicts over Europe as being embedded in the broader long-term restructuring of conflict structures' is essential here. The 'polycleavage' triggered by the EU polycrisis (Zeitlin et al. 2019: 966) matches strange bedfellows and undermines the ability of the actors to seek necessary compromises, no less in CEE than in Western Europe. The 'politics trap' (Zeitlin et al. 2019: 967–968) producing integration deadlocks is fuelled no less from CEE than it is fuelled from Western or Southern European MS.

Zürn (2016: 177) discussed the impact of politicisation on the further institutionalisation of the EU. While looking at how the EU is politicised in CEE politics, which is typically driven by the negative framing of the EU by Eurosceptic nationalist politicians, we can add a concern about the institutionalisation of a liberal democratic polity in the member states. The danger of destabilisation of the liberal democratic institutions is less at stake in 'old' member states than in the 'new' ones. On the other hand, the CEE can work as a lab for scholars who

want to examine the most probable agents of democratic backsliding since there are the same suspects all around Europe. The difference between CEE and WE is in scope, virulence and success more than in illiberal agents' mechanisms, manifestations and rhetoric. In CEE, the virulence of illiberal policies is more robust, as is the scope of illiberal political actors and their political success. As Ekaterina Rashkova (2021: 239) put it: CEE 'can be said to be the catalyst to a debate on the EU governance model and its democratic legitimacy'.

The EU's polycrisis blends with the illiberal challenges of CEE politics emerging with the full EU membership of the vast majority of countries in the region. Study of these interlocked processes can therefore help us to understand how the national dynamics of politicisation have an impact on the EU level (de Wilde et al. 2015) and, of course, how they work the other way around (Ares et al. 2017) in the more and more complex system of EU multilevel governance. Increasing politicisation makes us think in terms of multilevel politics, both in the West and CEE.

## VII. Instead of a conclusion: What is the CEE lab good for?

Hanspeter Kriesi (2020) assessed the general trends of democracy in Europe, showing that democracy is still on the rise. Citizens are supporting liberal democratic politics, although they tend to be dissatisfied with the performance of democratically elected political leaders, especially during the period when Europe faced an economic crisis. Left and right challenger parties attacking the incumbent political elites are on the rise. However, at the same time, they can function as a democratic corrective, increasing the long-run responsiveness of the elites to the citizens. Moreover, trapped in governmental responsibility, populist challengers typically face many constraints.

We can remain optimistic and subscribe to Kriesi's point of view. This, however, does not mean that we shan't care about the more or less deteriorating quality of policies, politics and sometimes even polities (like in Hungary and Poland) in the region. Dissatisfaction produced by the feelings of the 'losers' is on the rise, fuelled most recently by diverging opinions on European integration and fears drawn from the real or alleged implications of the migration crisis. Rising Euroscepticism is one of the typical responses since there are many losers of globalisation and Europeanisation too. The constraints and limits imposed on the left and right populist challengers might be insufficient to stop such parties from breaking through or preventing the implementation of an illiberal programme.

Many scholars say that the problem of political science is the lack of a lab to use for experiments. On the other hand, we do have history, and we do have comparisons that might compensate for this 'insufficiency'. Is this not a call for a real pan-European comparative political science in which, sometimes, CEE

can serve as a kind of lab even for those researchers whose interests have never crossed the Elbe river?

The main takeaway from this paper is that the CEE lab can serve as a regional microcosm of existing, emerging as well as contained elements of illiberal backlash. Central Eastern Europe is neither doomed to de-democratise nor is Western Europe perfectly resilient against illiberal political trends. The CEE lab is testing challenges and resilience mechanisms in more 'extreme' conditions. The CEE lab offers a sample of variations broad enough to show macro-trends and analyse the subtler mechanisms through which illiberal politicians are gaining momentum.

The unique configuration of the polycrisis of European integration and the illiberal challenges mitigated only partially by the EU membership in CEE allows us to study the intersection of socioeconomic and cultural-identity cleavages. As the CEE lab shows, the role of the EU's politicisation under the conditions of the recent polycrisis is a vital part of such study. In the CEE lab, we can disregard many external factors, such as length of membership, and focus on how domestic actors foster or subdue the politicisation of EU issues.

As far as the mechanisms are concerned, we can use the CEE lab to understand the affection of mainstream politicians for radical discourses on the European Union in general or migration, minority rights and liberal democratic institutions in particular. We can use the lab to understand the methods used by populist politicians to reframe discourses that appeal to the 'losers' of Europeanisation from socioeconomic to identity-based narratives of demarcation from 'the others'. The CEE lab explains the varieties of democratic swerve as well as resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic (Guasti – Bustikova 2022). The CEE lab shows the role of a specific type of leadership in the promotion of illiberal values as well as the defence mechanisms employed by liberal politicians, civil society or media.

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