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Article:

Introduction: Media and Illiberal Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe

In the past several years, the region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has been experiencing significant democratic backsliding (Hanley and Vachudova, 2018; Dostal et al., 2018; Vachudova, 2019). The rise of authoritarian political parties and leaders to power in democracies of Hungary or Poland has brought an unprecedented attack on key democratic institutions, including the media. Across the region, the growing appeal of right-wing populism, channelled through many traditional news outlets as well as online platforms, is said to have contributed to widening societal polarization, and enabled the rapid increase of the prominence of xenophobic, non-liberal and anti-European attitudes in the public sphere. These political trends resonate among pundits who argue that a "specter is haunting Europe and the United States; the specter of illiberal democracy" (Issac, 2017; see also Rupnik, 2016), placing the region on a global map of populism.

In Central and Eastern Europe, however, this spectre seems to be particularly prominent as it was the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, who has first explicitly invoked it in 2014, claiming with pride that his government has been building "an illiberal state, a non-liberal state", which according to him replaces liberalism with nationalism as the core state ideology, and adopting an increasingly authoritarian style of governance.[1] Many observers argue that Poland has taken similar path after the 2015 elections, emulating Orbán's approach by attempting to paralyze the constitutional court and take control over the judiciary, by politicizing the civil service, or by turning the public service media into government mouthpiece (Przybylski, 2018). In other countries of the region, including Czech Republic and Slovakia, the journalistic autonomy is reportedly under threat from powerful business elites, or oligarchs, who have been purchasing news media outlets in order to promote and protect their business or political interests (Štětka, 2019; Havlík, 2019).

While many observers and journalists have pointed out to the deteriorating levels of media freedom across the region, existing academic research has not paid sufficient attention to the relationship between media landscape and the process of democratic deconsolidation in CEE. The scholarship exploring the relationship between media and politics tends to focus on the normative aspects of transition to democracy, or the role of media in democratic governance (Surowiec and Štetka, 2017). In addition, the examination of media landscapes in the "regional" settings tend to consider them as a derivative of political systems that foregrounds the "logic of politics of media" and keeps the "logic of media over politics" in the background. Even the recently published *'East European Politics'* Special Issue on "*Rethinking 'democratic backsliding' in Central and Eastern Europe*" (2018), whilst providing a comprehensive overview of backsliding from the perspective of its impact on democratic politics, barely takes a notice of the impact of this process on media systems in the region.

In light of these research gaps, the main aim of this special issue is to explore new ways of conceptualizing illiberal democracy in the context of the transforming CEE media landscapes, and to offer empirical insights into the impact of emerging authoritarianism on media freedom and pluralism in the region. Stemming from a research seminar hosted by Loughborough University in November 2017, the special issue offers a set of empirical papers that approach the subject in question in a multi-disciplinary way and, by engaging with scholarship on politics, media studies and political cultures of the region, adds to the existing debates on democracy, populism and media. Its central aim is to answer the following question: what are the manifestations and the consequences of illiberal tendencies in media systems for democracies of Central and Eastern Europe?

''Illiberal Democracy': Roots and the Evolution of the Concept

Until recently, in Central and Eastern Europe, 'illiberalism' has hardly been used as a descriptor of trends emerging at the crossroads of politics and media landscapes. While scholarship tends to consider various forms of Soviet-styled authoritarianisms as a starting point for the democratic transition of media landscapes in CEE, even though not uncritically (e.g. Downey and Mihelj, 2012), it has paved the way for the transitologic paradigm (Jakubowicz, 2007; Jakubowicz and Sukosd, 2008) in the field. Arguably, this starting point set the trajectory of analysis in a way that under-plays the illiberal developments, and more recently media scholars have found themselves struggling to analytically capture the process of weakening of democratic institutions and apparent reversal of the transition process, as evidenced by the changing relationships between politics and media in seemingly consolidated democracies. The term "illiberal democracy" has famously been coined by Zakaria (1997, p. 23) who, in his original article in '*Foreign Affairs*', made several references to democracies in the CEE region, most notably to Slovakia and Romania, and used the regional political regimes to exemplify the spectrum of "illiberal" trends across the world, including "near-tyrannies" illustrated by Belarus. Since then the concept of 'illiberal democracy' has been used sporadically, signifying, however, qualitative as well as quantitative changes; with e.g. Diamond (2005) talking about illiberal democracy in the context of Latin America, using its local iteration of "democradura".

In the study of regional politics, the term 'illiberal democracy' began gaining exploratory value in 2014, mainly due to the deepening of the political regime shift in Hungary. Scholarship pointed to different roots of illiberal trends emerging in politics among democracies which, until recently, served as poster exemplars of successful democratisation. With reference to Hungary, Szelényi and Csillag (2015, p. 13) attribute illiberalism to "post-communist neo-conservative ideology", which "emphasizes the value of patriotism, religion

and traditional family values much like some of the socially conservative neo-cons in the USA do". Elsewhere, noting the regional aspects of illiberalism, Bustikova and Guasti (2017) differentiate between illiberal "turns" and "swerves", with the former representing permanent political changes, and offer evidence that Hungary is the only democracy among Visegrad Four (V4) at the brink of a long-lasting illiberal turn. Focusing on the rise of illiberalism, Wodak (2019, p. 195) speaks about the "post-shame era", which, in her view, brings about, on the one hand, "normalisation" of taboo subjects, and, on the other hand, a certain 'shamelessness', that is "both the frequency of lies and the violating of discourse conventions". Finally, using political economy frameworks, Buzogány and Varga (2019) seek for the inroads into illiberalism in the region by foregrounding at 'ideational' reactions to neo-liberalism by the networks of 'neo-conservatives', who, since early 2000s, formed new knowledge regimes in Hungary.

The dissemination of the above-mentioned ideological, processual, discursive, and ideational dimensions of illiberalism as a trend defining democracies in CEE is oftentimes associated with the Russia's soft power statecraft (Surowiec, 2017), or with developing regional relationships, formal and informal, between political actors pursuing illiberal politics. Irrespective of its dynamics, which most certainly still requires insightful context-specific analysis, the spread of illiberalism raises questions about mechanisms for global or regional proliferation of this trend in governance. Notably, this line of reasoning is reinforced by geographical dissemination of illiberalism. For example, Ötkem and Karabeki (2016, p. 470) point to the universalisation of non-democratic governance solutions and illustrate this trend by discussing illiberalism as an ideological driver of regime change and, notably, Turkey's fluid strategic culture that exploits a "range of actors and dynamics beyond the control of the government". Extending the latter argument, Göl (2017 p. 965-966) demonstrates how illiberal trends in Turkey's domestic politics are driven by the interplay between domestic

and international politics, particularly how Turkey's pro-western - EU and US - foreign policies are affected by regressive politics, as well as how a weakened system of checks and balances might enable Turkey to be entangled in the regional military conflict. Going beyond Eurasia, there is an evidence of illiberal politics having an impact on democracies of other states Vachudova, 2019, too. Wilson (2015, p. 1318) explores the relationship between illiberalism and identity-driven politics in Indonesia, and understands 'illiberal democracy' as being reduced to "grounded in the logic of money politics and political violence". Diprose, McRae and Hadiz (2019, p. 691) in their analysis of Indonesian politics suggest that illiberal trends that flourish here illustrate that "the state and market have failed to address social injustices". These explorations indicate that alongside with challenging "established" liberal democracies in Western Europe and the United States and consolidated democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, illiberalism is a reaction to globalisation (Enyedi, 2016; Buzogány and Varga, 2019).

The dissemination of illiberal trends in politics across the globe pose a challange in conceptualising illiberalism in various democratic settings. While the theory of 'hybrid regimes' (Levitsky and Way, 2011) has been a compelling proposition by political science to theorise manifestations, solidified or emerging, of post-Cold War authoritarianism, these prevail among states that are yet to undergo systemic democratisation. Hybridity poses another challange for the analysis of media landscapes within the states of the third wave of democratisation (Huntington, 1991), namely the danger of ontological overlaps between 'hybrid regimes' as political settings, and 'hybrid media systems' (Chadwick, 2013; Surowiec and Štetka, 2017; Guo and Vargo, 2017) as macro-spaces in which illiberal trends advance. Alternatively, political scientists (Sedelmeier, 2014) whose work focuses on CEE have brought to the fore the concept of 'democratic backsliding'. Waldner and Lust (2018, p. 95) define it emphasizing regime-specific aspects of this process, arguing that "backsliding

entails a deterioration of qualities associated with democratic governance, within any regime. In democratic regimes, it is a decline in the quality of democracy; in autocracies, it is a decline in democratic qualities of governance". Having recognised a plethora of signifiers in the field – not limited to "semi-dictatorship", "semi-authoritarianism, "elected autocracy" - Bogaards (2018, p. 1482) focuses on "de-democratization", which he defines as having "a starting point, democracy, and a direction, less democracy. It makes no assumptions about causes, conditions, and culprits, nor about speed, extent, and end-point", leaving these as open to empirical scrutiny, which analysis of the media landscapes require. Of them all, the signifier 'illiberal democracy', however, is the most pervasive.

Media and Illiberal Democracy: Practices and Evidence from Cental and Eastern Europe

Whilst political studies traditionally tend to underplay the role of media in the advancement of illiberalism and media landscape is considered by political scientists merely as a contextual measure for the assessment of the scale of this phenomenon, questions can be asked about the scale and the depth of "new" political dynamics that illiberalism brings to media landscapes in the region. After all, the politicisation of media systems in CEE has been an intrinsic feature of the process of democratisation (Zielonka, 2015). In recent years, however, this process has taken different turns and, with the rise of populist political actors, media landscapes in the region evolve, and display new or re-invented affordances. Adopting the concept of Italianization (or Mediterraneanization) of media systems in the post-Soviet world (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2012) when drawing parallels between CEE populist leaders and Berlusconi's populism in Italy, some authors point to the central role of television control in the rise of political leaders such as Viktor Orbán, for whom illiberal politics became a hallmark of his governance (Körösényi and Patkós, 2017). Połońska and Beckett (2019)

advance the debate on the political developments at the crossroads of politics and media systems in Europe, and highlight the significance of illiberalism through re-shaping public media service, illustrating simultaneously the European-wide scale of this systemic phenomenon present at the junction of politics and media.

This special issue consists of four empirically grounded articles, which provide commentaries on the diverse manifestations of illiberal trends in media landscapes in the analysed democracies: Russia, Poland, Hungary, and Croatia. Starting with Russia, Ryabovolova and Hamment draw from the theory of hybrid event, and explore ways in which '*Satisfaction Challenge*' Youtube video became a nation-wide cultural meme challenging one of the Russian Government's key illiberal policies – represented as 'anti-gay propaganda law'. In spite of systemic obstacles to getting their message across, and against the adversarial stance of state-managed broadcasters, the authors demonstrate how a prank was turned into a civic campaign, amplifying the sense of social drama, and reinforcing the argument that hybridised media landscape affords agency as long as people are willing to participate. Surowiec, Kania-Lundholm and Winiarska-Brodowska scrutinise different aspect of illiberal trends. Focusing on Poland, they examine how the Law and Justice (the PiS) led Government took the governance control of public service media by taking charge of the controversial making and, subsequently, the execution of public media policy. Using the concept of 'executive aggrandisement' in relation to public service media, the authors make sense of far-reaching illiberal trends affecting the sector in Poland. In the article focusing on Hungary, Bátorfy and Urbán 'follow the money' and, in doing so, demonstrate how state advertising is turned into a powerful tool of political favouritism, as well as an instrument for market distortion, censorship and building an uncritical media aligned with the government. Taking a historical and longitudinal approach, Simunjak shows differences in the media portrayal of leading political actors in Croatia during the authoritarian period, the early period of transition to

democracy, and the current era of the illiberal drift. Using a content analysis, she demonstrates that representation of country's leaders in the media across the three decades is not necessarily aligned with the development of media freedom in the country, and she cautions against falling into the trap of making direct links between illiberal politics and the way it is mirrored in the style of media reporting of the political elites.

Concluding Remarks

To reiterate, the aim of this special issue is to expand a discussion on illiberal democracy on CEE, not only by foregrounding selected aspects of politics in CEE, but by considering transforming media landscapes in the region and, drawing from various sources, to explore the impact of emerging authoritarianism on media freedom and pluralism in the region. On the one hand, the special issue highlight how these changes in the media landscapes, indicative of illiberal trends, "fit" into a dissipating picture of the international populist *zeitgeist* (Hameleers and Vliegenthart, 2019). On the other hand, it emphasises, or at least draws the attention to, local particularities of media landscapes as indicators of illiberal trends. Thinking horizontally, from a global perspective, Freedman (2018) argues that the origins of illiberal turn lie in the market shortcomings as well as "'media policy failure" (p. 610), including failures to tackle concentrated ownership, failure to regulate technology companies, failure to safeguard effective fourth estate, failure to nurture independent public service media, all of which, arguably lead into a new policy paradigm. His compelling argument, however, can be challenged by vertical thinking about CEE, and a deeper analysis of how political actors that rely on illiberalism set up media policy that works in its service, creating a particularly disruptive vicious circle. The origins of illiberalism can be found in the origins of media systems in CEE, and in the ways the media landscape have developed. After the fall of state socialist regimes, the inherent vulnerabilities of media landscapes shown authoritarian tendencies not just on the level of policy, but on the level of political cultures, as

well as professional practices, failing to ensure the implementation of democratic safeguards. Systemic flaws pertaining to media ownership and under-investments in the sector - including the instrumental approach of media and communication studies limiting the next generation of professional and media citizens - was weakened by the departure of foreign investors that followed the global economic crisis of 2008 and the rise of the Internet in the last decade (Štětka, 2015). These, as well as the tendency to 'media policy shocks' rather than gradual democratic 'media policy reforms' stand, we argue, on the way of reinforcing the culture of strong media citizenship, high political participation, and responsibility for the media sector as a common good, that enables to counter-balance illiberal trends in politics.

Given the internationalisation of illiberalism, as well as the fact that European Union (EU) have, with mixed results, struggled to address illiberal trends among Member-States, including those pertaining to public media service issues, we aim to contribute to the increasingly global debate about the origins as well as manifestations of illiberalism in democracies in the CEE region. At this stage, however, we do not claim to have solutions to 'illiberalism': although instinctively, beyond this volume, our attention is focused on certain issues in the region, we are well aware that these need to be scrutinised further. Being mindful of the pervasion of "the post-communist hangover" as well as "politics of victimhood" that echoes the Cold War period, and being cautious of the claims about "exceptional" political circumstances made by populist actors in CEE, we argue that the recent illiberal turn in the region is part of a global political shift, rather than a regional one. Notably, the "selective" approach to democratisation, systemic interventions of political actors into media systems, and instrumentalism with which particularly public media is treated by political actors, brings us to the argument that the logic of democratisation is not a linear process. Despite the fact that CEE is undergoing a "democratic wobble", the jury is still out on the extent to which this crisis of democratic media systems constitutes a uniquely

idiosyncratic period, or whether this is simply the continuation a long term process that had been implicit in the transition process, but came to the prominence in the past few years. We open this special issue with this line of reasoning and, therefore, with the assumption that the concept of 'illiberal democracy' is not taken for granted, but it is problematised by recognising local and regional characteristics of illiberal trends and their significance for democracies and media systems in the CEE region.

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[1] Orbán used those words in his speech at Băile Tuşnad on 26 July 2014, see https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/ , last accessed 4 November 2019.