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NEW CONSERVATIVES IN RUSSIA AND EAST CENTRAL EUROPE

Edited by
Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga



New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe

This book explores the emergence, and in Poland, Hungary, and Russia the coming to power, of politicians and political parties rejecting the consensus around market reforms, democratization, and rule of law that has characterized moves toward an “open society” from the 1990s. It discusses how over the last decade these political actors, together with various think tanks, intellectual circles, and religious actors, have increasingly presented themselves as “conservatives,” and outlines how these actors are developing a new local brand of conservatism as a full-fledged ideology that counters the perceived liberal overemphasis on individual rights and freedom, and differs from the ideology of the established, present-day conservative parties of Western Europe. Overall, the book argues that the “renaissance of conservatism” in these countries represents variations on a new, illiberal conservatism that aims to re-establish a strong state sovereignty defining and pursuing a national path of development.

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Katharina Bluhm
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1 Introduction

Toward a new illiberal conservatism in Russia and East Central Europe

Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga

The return of conservatism

The western-driven wave of globalization that began with the liberalization of financial markets from the 1970s onward, and strengthened even further with the collapse of the Eastern bloc, has come to an end. It is widely acknowledged that the financial crisis of 2007–09 represents the tipping point, even though it seemed at first that the architecture of the financial markets—with economic liberalism as its ideological frame—had survived largely unquestioned (Crouch 2011). It accelerated the much discussed “crisis of democracy,” becoming manifest in a deteriorating relationship between what were once mass political parties and their supporters. The further rise of China; Russia’s return to the table of global powers; the unsolved crisis of the Eurozone: all indicate the tectonic shifts that are well under way. The struggle over the future of existing institutional arrangements has also become an ideological battlefield, seeing increasingly developed arguments formulated by right-wing or even far-right forces.

This departure from the recent liberal vision of the polity as well as criticism of market economies are often characterized as illiberalism, nationalism, and populism. While these concepts highlight important commonalities, they do not capture the sweeping contestation that liberalism now has to face. A central thesis of this book is that we are witnessing a “renaissance of conservatism,” an attempt to create a *new, illiberal, and activating* conservatism aiming to change the status quo from within the capitalist order and the traditional cleavage between left and right. This holds especially for East Central Europe (ECE), where communism interrupted the conservative tradition of thought, and where conservatism is being redeployed against communism *and* liberalism. The literature on *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (“Law and Justice,” PiS) and Fidesz (*Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége*, “Alliance of Young Democrats”), the right-wing parties in power in Poland and Hungary, stresses that the agenda of these parties is more systematic and comprehensive than the concept of “populism” would suggest. However, there has been little research done so far to study the genesis of these parties’ agendas and the conservative milieus and intellectual circles that have given the political turn in Poland and Hungary its intellectual foundation and legitimacy.

This is even more the case for Russia, where no populist party conquered power in order to change the track of development. Many scholars have conceptualized Vladimir Putin's official turn toward conservatism during the period 2011–13 in the context of the mass protests against his third presidency and acts of election fraud as a cynical, eclectic, and populist attempt of an “authoritarian kleptocracy” to stay in power at any cost (Casula 2017; Rodkiewicz and Rogoza 2015; Shekhovtsov 2017). In fact, Russia's state-owned media and presidential administration play quite skillfully with different narratives and identity concepts such as “one-country-civilization,” “Russian World,” anti-Westernism, nationalism, or traditional (conservative) values. Yet the focus on the official turn to conservatism underestimates the groundwork carried out by conservative milieus and intellectuals, and the discursive power conservative views have developed in Russia.

The declared goal of the conservative intellectual circles in this region is to challenge today's Western economic and cultural liberalism while at the same time opposing communism. This goes beyond a diffuse “sliding back” toward authoritarian structures and mentalities. More than elsewhere, intellectuals and moral and political activists involved are purposely re-inventing conservatism and trying to determine the political agenda.

With Karl Mannheim (1955 [1936]) and Michael Freeden (2006 [1996]), we argue that the new conservative thought has themes, ideas, and core concepts in common that are related to its communist and post-communist past and reflect severe disappointment with the results of the transition and the manner in which Western integration took place. The references to neo-colonial theories, from which new conservatives in Hungary, Poland, and Russia draw, can only be understood in this context. At the same time their history, different geopolitical positions, and weight have also produced decisive differences. Polish and Hungarian conservatives search for *ideational* alliances within Central and Western Europe rather than further to the east.

This introduction proceeds as follows. The next subsection reviews major explanations of the rise of illiberalism in the post-communist region and asks why it is that illiberalism, in its conservative expression, emerged in Poland, Hungary, and Russia and not elsewhere. We also clarify our focus on actors, networks, and key concepts of the new conservatism. We then argue why we think that it is conservatism—rather than other conceptual alternatives—that more plausibly captures illiberalism in these three countries and introduce our approach, combining insights from the sociology of knowledge with scholarship on social movements. We then end the chapter by presenting the outline of the book.

Explanations for the rise of illiberalism

The dominance of liberal and neoliberal ideas throughout post-communist Europe was formidable by all accounts: all countries but one (Belarus) sooner or later in their transitional path implemented neoliberal ideas such as “increasing

national competitiveness” through the pursuit of “fiscal discipline,” an outward economic orientation, and reliance upon markets for the allocation of goods and resources (Ban 2016). Most countries also pursued the liberal political agenda of ensuring free elections, strengthening civil society (initially with external, Western support), building checks and balances around governments, and passing legislation to protect minorities. In the words of one observer: “Liberalism in this part of the world became an obligatory syntax of political thought” (Trencsényi 2014, 136, citing political theorist Aurelian Crăiuțu).

Neoliberalism—understood as an approach to government claiming that “unhindered markets are best able to generate economic growth and social welfare” (Bockman 2013, 14)—boils down to an “identifiable set of economic theories such as monetarism, rational expectations, public choice, and supply-side economics” (Blyth 1999; Ban 2016, 10). It represents more than just a “revived version of classical liberal economics” (Ban 2016, 9), since in contrast to classical *laissez-faire* liberalism and later libertarianism, it does support the continued existence and relevance of a minimal state that “would protect private property, maintain order, and provide some protection for the poor. In spite of its anti-state rhetoric, neoliberal policies were not meant to eradicate the state, but rather to have forged a new kind of state” (Bockman 2013, 14). Variations existed in the extent to which post-communist countries “embedded” neoliberal policies through welfare spending, with the Baltic and Balkan EU member countries pursuing what was called a “disembedded neoliberalism,” while the Visegrad countries generally followed an approach that combined neoliberalism with—at least until EU accession—relatively generous welfare schemes (Bohle and Greskovits 2012).

Several explanations have been advanced for understanding neoliberalism’s rise to dominance in the region. First, post-communist countries started their transition when neoliberalism was reaching its ascendancy (Appel and Orenstein 2016). Ideas of different inspiration were far less present and absent from the advice extended by international organizations and in particular the Western advisors that did extensive counselling of the post-communist reformers.¹ Furthermore, proponents of neoliberalism framed it as a promise not just about economic well-being, but also about democracy and the rule of law (Crawford and Lijphart 1995; Shields 2008), leading to the conceptual “great merging” (Ban 2014) of free market and democracy in the 1990s.² Following a communist state that had attempted to control all spheres of social activity, mistrust toward the state was widespread and the large-scale retreat of the state a priority for the reformers.

Second, Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley (1998, 73) document how neoliberal reformers strengthened their position and isolated themselves from potential challengers, most importantly by forging an alliance with the new managerial class (in the case of Russia with the young oligarchs) around the “new ideology of managerialism, monetarism,” and also by the means of selective welfare spending in order to contain collective action (Vanhuysse 2006; Greskovits 1998). It has also been noted that neoliberalism bore a certain resemblance to

Marxism-Leninism, being a “holistic,” “revolutionary,” and “universalistic” world view claiming to affect all spheres of life, and promising that, if administered in the right dose, it would spur the growth that would trickle down to all (Eyal et al. 1998, 74); it should therefore not come as a surprise that, as Eyal et al. have claimed, there was a certain “overlap in personnel” between the “high priests” of communism and those of post-communism. And precisely this view is shared by new conservatives in the region.

Third, further contributions have emphasized that neoliberalism advanced not so much through sheer coercion, but rather that its success throughout the region was largely due to the existence of transnational academic networks that paved the way for neoliberalism while rejecting other approaches, to “the hybrid and dialogic origins of neoliberalism, rather than the arrogance and might of a Western monologue” (Bockman and Eyal 2002, 336). While this process is referred to as diffusion or translation (Ban 2016), Bockmann and Eyal followed Bruno Latour’s criticism of diffusion and proposed instead the notion of “lengthening networks” as a better metaphor for understanding the advancement of neoliberalism.

How then could alternative ideas—openly challenging neoliberal tenets, and often referred to as the illiberal backlash in post-communist Europe—emerge and, in the case Poland and Hungary, win the support of major political forces? Arguably, this is not just a matter of the extent to which liberalism was embedded (Bohle and Greskovits 2012), as the embedding of liberalism hardly approximates the contours of illiberal conservatism. First, illiberalism is actually quite widespread, irrespective of whether or not the country in question belonged to those countries in which reformers mitigated the impact of neoliberal reforms through welfare spending. Second, even though power holders critical of liberal tenets are present in several post-communist countries (Dawson and Hanley 2016), it is mainly in Poland and Hungary that they invested considerable efforts in developing such criticism into a full-fledged ideological contestation of liberalism (and we would also add Russia to this group). Hence, the strength of conservatism cannot be simply seen in inverse correlation to the amount of liberalism experienced by society. Poland as well as Hungary belonged to the group that actually attempted to “mitigate and embed” reforms (although admittedly not as much as the Czech Republic, as discussed further below). Conservatism, on the other hand, is virtually absent from those countries that did the least embedding of economic liberalism and saw extensive austerity programs following the financial crises, such as Romania (Ban 2016), Bulgaria (Adascalitei 2017) and the Baltic states (Sommers 2014), notwithstanding the signs of illiberalism manifest in the political arenas of these countries (Greskovits 2015).

The weak institutionalization of political systems

Another approach in answering the question about the emergence of illiberalism has been to reconsider the effects of transition and in particular the eastern enlargement of the European Union. Thus illiberalism appears as the result of

the lack of institutionalization of established political parties, showing that the parties in power throughout transition failed to ensure the representation of popular interests. This happened because post-communist political party systems have been hardly structured by cleavages and barely enjoy legitimacy, and since political party organizations have tended to be highly unstable (Powell and Tucker 2014). Dissatisfaction with political elites and perceived corruption also tended to be far higher in East Central Europe than in Western Europe (Dahlberg et al. 2013), although the data suggests that if dissatisfaction alone were to explain the rise of illiberal conservatism, it should have emerged in Romania and Bulgaria, not Poland and Hungary.

Furthermore, while the European Union has initially been seen as having made a crucial contribution to the spread of liberal democracy in the post-communist area (Vachudová 2005), more recent contributions have doubted the lasting impact of “Europeanization” (Coman 2014, 920). Rather than “Europeanization,” they document “concentration and abuse of executive power, a systematic political patronage and a plebiscitary interpretation of democracy” (Tomini 2014), although until 2015 liberal democracy was perceived to be far more “resilient” in Poland than in other countries (Tomini 2014; Brusis 2016). Simply put, it was perhaps just a matter of time until the weak institutionalization, deep divisions and volatility of political party landscapes would turn out to be an opportunity for one “political partisan player [...] to cement its predominance by degrading democratic competition,” as happened in Hungary from 2010 onwards (Kitschelt 2015; Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015). This explanation, however, raises the question of what drives that “political partisan player” and why such a player would attempt to do more than simply reverse the liberal transition agenda by attempting to form a new national and international model of political economy. Explanations stressing the weak institutionalization of party systems also fail to address variation across the region: why are conservatives politically successful in Poland and Hungary, pledging to pursue nothing less than a “national-conservative revolution” in those countries while hardly even present in the parliaments of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania or Bulgaria?

The political economy of market reforms and transition

A broad comparative literature on political–economic transition and the different ways in which post-communist countries mastered the economic transition from plan to market suggests that the answer might reside partly in the extent to which post-communist politicians could “embed” the market economy in the wider society, and in which way they managed to integrate their economies.

In the Variety of Capitalism literature (VoC), the Visegrad countries—Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia—are sometimes called “dependent market economies,” characterized by fast integration into Western and international value chains during the 1990s and an ensuing strong presence of Western capital in key sectors such as manufacturing, banks, or media (Nölke

and Vliegenthart 2009; King and Szelényi 2005; Bluhm et al. 2014). Manufacturing investment in the four countries compensated for the deindustrialization that took place in almost all post-communist countries after the breakdown of the Soviet-led international economic system with semi-tech and semi-skilled manufacturing jobs in highly modernized and productive subsidiaries of Western companies. In Poland and Hungary, the strong presence of Western capital sparked calls for something coming close to the re-nationalization of key industries, an idea later adopted by “national-conservatives” around the Kaczyński brothers and Viktor Orbán. In the Czech Republic, such debates over the Western presence in national markets have been under way since the Vaclav Klaus-led government of the 1990s. However, this criticism then fused with otherwise neoliberal ideas on social welfare, and Klaus could not realize his version of a market economy “without social adjectives” because of resistance in the former dissident elite and in the population, favoring a “social liberal” approach to reforms (Orenstein 2001). In contrast to Poland and Hungary, Czech conservatives largely excluded social protection from their agenda.

While the VoC approach might offer a hint about what facilitated the counter-movement precisely among the leading transition countries Poland and Hungary, the concept of “embedded neoliberalism” gives another. Many countries in the post-communist region witnessed liberalism without embedding that is a comprehensive social policy aiming to mitigate the social impact of economic reforms. For instance, in the Baltic countries reformers simply framed market reforms as a matter of national survival (Bohle and Greskovits 2012). In Romania, neoliberalism in the form of wide-ranging privatizations only reached the country in the 2000s (Ban 2016), and only after an initial period of “embedding,” meaning significant concessions to militant and vocal trade unions (Varga 2015; Varga and Freyberg-Inan 2015).

In contrast, Visegrad countries—including Poland and Hungary—witnessed more “embedding” of market reforms, meaning higher levels of social and welfare spending than other countries of the post-communist region, at least throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. For instance, in the Czech Republic such “embedding” mitigated the impact of reforms by incorporating popular demands for social protection into policymaking from the onset of transition (Sil 2013; Orenstein 2001). However, Poland and Hungary could not reach similar levels of embedded liberalism as the Czech Republic, simply because they did not share with the Czech Republic a powerful left-wing trade union with strong political support from left-wing parties without a communist past (Sil 2017; Varga 2015). In Poland and Hungary, political forces on the left and right and trade unions participated in liberalization and market reforms, while conservatives could largely dissociate themselves from the large welfare cuts and reforms of the 1990s and 2000s. As a consequence, they developed an agenda around defending national sovereignty from perceived Western economic and political domination, recuperating the welfare state, and eliminating all traces of “communism” (as outlined in the next subsection, this insistence upon “anti-communism” is a further difference from the Czech Republic).

To conclude, the rise of conservatism is largely an effect of how post-communist countries embedded their respective market economies. However, despite the political economy literature's contribution to understanding the contours of illiberalism, it shares with the "weak institutionalization" literature a focus on variables mainly concerned with the actions of political parties. Yet, as argued throughout this book, the emergence of a new illiberal conservatism is a broader phenomenon, and specific conservative ideas do not simply emerge within certain political forces, but rather within broader discursive fields, and from the interaction between politicians, think tanks, intellectual circles, non-governmental organizations close to the various churches, and the influence of mobilization efforts or conservative civil society actors.

Civil society in ECE

Much of the literature on the sources of illiberalism studies these at the level of political parties and of the institutionalization of a certain degree of representation of popular interests. A different and growing literature suggests that illiberalism might owe its rise not only to the dynamics of political systems, but also to developments in civil society and the agency of social movements. Long before the return to power of Fidesz and PiS in the 2010s, civil society in these countries showed a strong presence of what were referred to even then—at the beginning of the 2000s—as "conservative" forces. Human rights advocate and scholar Wiktor Osiatyński, for instance, referred to the network of organizations and initiatives around Radio Maryja in Poland as the largest formation of Polish civil society, "capable of engaging the commitment of millions" (Graff 2008). In Hungary, the conservative "Citizens' Circles" developed from 2002 onwards as a reaction to the electoral victory of Socialists and Liberals (Molnár 2016); already by that time, right-wing and conservative civil society forces showed the strongest street presence in protests and demonstrations in Hungary (Greskovits and Wittenberg 2013). It is important to note that a crucial point around which illiberal conservatism organized in Poland and Hungary has been the defense of the Catholic Church and the relevance of Christian precepts for their respective societies. We would also add Russia to this group of countries, as the importance of its Orthodox Church to conservatives can hardly be understated (see Bluhm and Brand; Köllner; and Wierzcholska in this volume). Church and religious organizations play a major role in all three countries in fostering a conservative civil society that aims to counterbalance the idea of civil society in the 1990s as a Western-financed lever for promoting democracy (Saxonberg 2016; Köllner this volume; Graff and Korolczuk 2017).

One further major position around which these forces coalesced in Poland and Hungary was the perception that liberalism, with its focus upon markets and political institutions, ignores or even obscures problems that conservatives deemed as important as political-economic ones, allegedly interfering with liberal reforms: most importantly, issues of "transitional justice" (Stan 2009), of how to deal with the communist past. Conservatives in general argued for

harsher and broader prosecution of former communist officials and secret service personnel. While the Czech Republic quickly moved beyond this debate by adopting a radical “lustration law” that was heavily criticized internationally at the time, Poland, Hungary, and many other countries were far less resolute in this respect, finding ways to “accommodate” past elites rather than preventing them from holding public office. Consequently, the conflict over the culpability and influence of former communists raged on in Poland and Hungary, “escalating mutual accusations and deepen[ing] mistrust among people” (David 2006, 365). These conflicts “eroded the post-1989 consensus politics,” led to the first formulations of conservatism not just among politicians but also among intellectuals, and even turned against former dissidents, accused of having had “abandoned the anti-communist platform” (Trencsényi 2014, 137).

To summarize, research into the causes of illiberalism and more broadly the shape of democracy in ECE has either traced it back to structural factors such as weak political party institutionalization, the path of economic integration after the fall of communism and the conditions of EU enlargement, or to voter preferences and ideologies espoused by parties (Rovny 2015). It has generally explored illiberalism as a phenomenon characterizing political parties and has rarely focused on illiberalism within other social formations, such as civil society and social movements. While the literature on civil society in post-communist countries has documented the growing contestation of liberalism well ahead of—or parallel to—the rise to power of illiberal politicians such as Viktor Orbán and Jarosław and Lech Kaczyński, we still know little about the wider discursive field that has facilitated conservatism, something explored throughout this book.

How does Russia fit in? The re-ideologization of Russia’s increasingly authoritarian regime

At first glance, the Russian turn to conservatism appeared to be triggered by a completely different set of reasons. Russia’s “slide back” toward authoritarian structures and thought occurred much earlier than in Poland and Hungary, and well before opponents of liberal reforms united under the flag of conservatism. The liberal system of checks and balances never really took off, and the window of opportunity for a competitive party system—even a weak one—ended when Putin took office as president in 2000. The neoliberal economic reforms were contested from the beginning by greater sections of the elite, in particular during the constitutional crisis of 1993, when President Boris Yeltsin dissolved the country’s parliament by force. In the ensuing State Duma, the Communist Party and the Far Right had the upper hand over pro-presidential forces. The subsequent strengthening of the president’s power ended the experiment of introducing a liberal checks-and-balances system and stopped further reforms, while the social situation of most of the Russian population did not recover from the initial shock. Since then, the identification of liberalism with pure market liberalism as the cause of the socio-economic disaster in the 1990s, along with the

notion of the decay of statehood, have turned into strong narratives in Russia. They incorporate diagnoses about the neoliberal reform agenda that are not so different from what can be heard in Poland or Hungary.

Nevertheless, the ideology of managerialism and monetarism, as Eyal et al. put it (1998, 74), continued to influence Russia's hybrid regime. One of the most important lessons Putin took from the volatile 1990s is that stable rule requires macro-economic stability, limiting inflation through a strict control of the money supply. That is why the Putin regime refrained from interfering with the restrictive monetary policy of the central bank despite ongoing criticism from conservatives and communists. In his first term as president, Putin pushed through neoliberal-inspired welfare reforms that had already been prepared under Yeltsin (e.g. Cook 2007). Despite the Russian elite's strong anti-Western sentiments, since the mid-2000s the administration has increasingly turned to "neoliberal" administrative techniques such as New Public Management or public-private partnerships (Bikbov 2018).

The new "party of power" "United Russia" (*Edinaya Rossiya*), created in a top-down manner in 2003, started with a strong anti-ideological attitude (Bluhm in this volume) that allowed different approaches to economic policy. This attitude fits the literature on modern authoritarian regimes that sees the lack—or even avoidance—of a particular ideology as a key feature of such regimes (Krajev 2011; Hale 2010). Hence, the emergence of conservatism as an active opposition to the liberal reform project raises the question of why this kind of "re-ideologization" has happened.

The literature offers two sets of explanations for this phenomenon—both are related to the thesis of a pure instrumental use of ideology mentioned above. First, the "re-ideologization" is supposed to compensate for the increasing uncertainty of Putin's regime after the financial crisis, the drop in the oil price, and the colored revolutions that during 2011–12 even seemed to have reached Russia. It was also supposed to compensate for Dmitry Medvedev's failure to break out of the development trap with liberal-inspired ideas about "conservative modernization" (Trenin 2010; Shekhovtsov 2017, 80; see also Busygina and Filippov in this volume). Second, Shekhovtsov (2017, 84) and others argue that "Russian conservatism" became a starting point for seeking legitimation for Putin's regime in certain political camps in the West, including the Far Right. However, this understanding acknowledges the conservative turn only when Putin officially referred to it in 2013; it tends to reduce the role of conservative intellectuals, norm entrepreneurs, and political activists to "ideologues for hire" or believers that can be perfectly controlled from above. This view ignores the emerging discursive field of Russia's new conservatism: although supported by the administration from the beginning of the 2000s (with ups and downs), it became strongly connected to the fights within the Russian elite over Russia's future, and became rooted in an active conservative civic society and backed by the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) (see Köllner; Bluhm and Brand in this volume). Despite the fact that attempts to make a stringent "quasi-state" ideology out of conservatism have failed, and that Putin himself still claims to be a

“pragmatist with a conservative bent” (Putin 2013), the creation of a conservative infrastructure, networks and influence channels has had an impact on Russia’s foreign and domestic politics.

Defining conservatism

Modern political conservatism is a reflexive political ideology that distinguishes itself from a conservative habitus or everyday mindset. The constructed nature of modern political conservatism is apparent more than elsewhere in the post-communist context. Western Europe conservatism was re-established as part of a liberal order after the Second World War and is—although challenged by the New Right—still deeply rooted within the West European party systems. This is not the case in post-communist Europe. Although conservative thinking was not totally absent during the period of state socialism, it was unreflectively embedded in revolutionary rhetoric and could not distance itself from communist ideology. The return of conservatism as an ideology in the region—or its “resurrection,” as some Russian authors put it (Makarenko 2016, 286)—since the 2000s is the result of intellectual work and political self-identification that also allows the formation of alliances with other “conservatives” within and between countries, and thus a highly reflexive process from the beginning. Its promoters operate at different levels of ideas: at the level of analytical and ideational reflections on current situation and crises, the level of historical–philosophical tradition and identity construction, as well as on a quasi-scientific level of (self) research into the phenomenon in the context of other conservatisms. It is often authors who identify themselves as conservative that carry out research on new conservatism in post-communist countries.

The first analysis of conservative styles of thinking provided by the well-known sociologist of knowledge, Karl Mannheim in the mid-1920s, is an established reference point for these authors. So is Samuel Huntington’s work on modern conservatism (1957), stressing the situational and positional character of conservatism as a counter-ideology to the “progressive” ideologies of modernity—liberalism and socialism. This idea of conservatism as an intellectual and political counter-movement to liberalism and socialism forms a key frame for the new conservatism in the region.

The main criticism of new conservatives is directed against Western neo-liberalism and the idea that political models can travel between regions and countries. Furthermore, they also question an alleged alliance between neo-liberalism and the political and cultural agenda of the so-called New Left: they accuse this alliance of forgetting the old social questions in favor of identity politics and the protection of minority rights. It is important to note that the conservative response to liberalism and socialism does not exclude the incorporation of “progressive” ideas (Huntington 1957; Freedon 2006 [1996]). For instance, the new conservatives in the three countries share with the Left the conviction about the need of state redistribution. Orbán directs his notion of “illiberal democracy” primarily against recent models of liberalism that have

supposedly turned into the opposite of an original liberalism that truly defended “freedom.”

Despite their positional and situational character, all versions of modern political conservatism have some elements, themes, and motives in common that form a specific “style of thought” (Mannheim 1955 [1936]) of conservatism and that allow conservatives to identify themselves as such. In their perspective, conservatives often stress the existence of national specificities, which they contrast with the universalist claims of liberalism and socialism. However, in order to become a true counter-movement with mobilizing power across countries, they need constitutive elements that overcome particularism. Melvin Thorne has argued that all conservatives share a certain “intellectual core” around notions of “human nature” as “unalterable and unchanging” and of an “objective moral order” that is “real, immutable and eternal” (Thorne 1990, 8). George Lakoff has shown that conservatives share a type of thinking around a “central model,” allowing them to recognize themselves as conservatives despite tremendous divisions among them. This model consists of a deeply moralizing approach to politics, seeing only those social institutions as necessary that act as “strict fathers,” disciplining individuals toward more autonomy rather than cultivating their dependence (Lakoff 2010 [1996]). Michael Freeden (2006 [1996]) has argued that modern conservatism possesses—like the “progressive” ideologies—a set of ideas or “core concepts” (“natural order,” “tradition”) which varies in terms of precise content but generally remains stable. These core concepts are surrounded by other, more situational concepts, themes, and motives that help create the impression of conservatism’s high level of heterogeneity. Three core concepts stand out in particular: the concepts of change, natural order, and tradition. Conservatives share the idea that change is problematic if it does not aim to restore or move closer to the “natural order.” The understanding of “natural order” has varied tremendously, including diverse concepts as “God, history, biology, and science” as the “anchor of social order” (Freeden 2006 [1996], 334).

Sociologists have criticized approaches to conservatism that stress the existence of “intellectual cores” (Thorne), a “central model” (Lakoff) or “core concepts” (Freeden) for assuming the “intellectual coherence” of the conservative project rather than treating such coherence as something in need of explanation (Gross et al. 2011, 329). We agree with this contention, but point to one major explanation of such coherence, namely the efforts of conservatives themselves, often sustained over decades. Lakoff for instance has argued that US conservatives have been working on achieving internal coherence, expanding networks and influence, and developing ways to reach the wider population ever since the 1970s (Azab Powell 2003). Similarly, the intellectual coherence of conservatism in ECE and Russia is the outcome of the conservatives’ sustained efforts at expanding networks and disseminating their ideas.

There are many qualifiers for conservatism in the post-communist context, such as “national,” “social,” “left” or “right,” “enlightened” or “responsible” conservatism. What they share—although with varying emphasis—is the concept

of a “strong state,” meaning a high power concentration at the level of government to the detriment of the checks-and-balances system of modern liberal democracy. The preoccupation with state strength is the key to understanding why the new conservatism is illiberal and authoritarian at its core (despite the opposite claims heard from new conservative ideologists and politicians). The notion of a strong state goes hand in hand with a deep skepticism toward liberal *laissez-faire*. The new conservatives propose Karl Polanyi’s idea of a global counter-movement against globalization that “re-embeds markets” into national states and societies through *national* re-regulation and state-driven development. The economy is therefore a major playground for the new conservatives, although concrete economic approaches often differ. In contrast to the *Gemeinschaft* (community)-romance on the far-right periphery in Europe and Russia, conservatives accept the market economy and private property. They regard the introduction of a market economy as a major achievement of transition, but one that has to be better related to national values and standards, and which should serve the overarching goals of the state and society (which are usually perceived as identical). “Tradition” thus provides precisely the cultural program that guides the perception of morally proper and socially acceptable behavior.

Conservatism versus populism and nationalism

The recent literature on the rise of illiberal thinking in post-communist Europe and elsewhere depicts some of the concepts, themes, and motives of the new conservatism using terms such as “populism” or “neo-nationalism.” There are two reasons why we do not follow this path. First, “populism,” as well as “nationalism” or “neo-nationalism” to some extent, are not self-designations, but concepts coming from outside of the new conservatism. In contrast, the “resurrection” of conservatism in the region is a self-perception and should be taken seriously as such, in the sense that it is worth looking into what these actors understand by it. Populism in particular has become a highly politicized term used by different sides in recent political battles, something that makes the use of the term more difficult.³

Second, despite certain overlaps, populism and nationalism do not cover all aspects relevant to grasping the new phenomenon. Populism is understood as “a moralistic imagination of politics [...] which opposes a morally pure and fully unified, but ultimately functional, people, to small minorities” (Müller 2014, 485). While some see in it a mere “communication strategy” (Aalberg et al. 2017), it is nevertheless decidedly illiberal “because of its rejection of intermediaries and institutions as well as the political discourse fostered by them” (Aalberg et al. 2017, 12). Populism and nationalism are sometimes regarded as “thin-centered” ideologies (Mudde 2004, 544)⁴, as “discursive” frames rather than ideologies (Aslanidis 2016). Most importantly, nationalism and populism both need “thicker” or “full” ideologies in order to achieve concrete political goals and take the shape of concrete policies (Stanley 2008). What the concept of populism therefore misses (to the extent that it fails to take into account more

specific ideological formulations) is that the actors usually associated with “populism” in post-communist Europe and Russia have a specific agenda, specific contents or concepts that go beyond the people–elite contradiction.

Furthermore, populism is almost exclusively applied to political parties: the term is never used to denote think tanks, foundations, or any other organizations or groups beyond political parties that do the groundwork for the new conservatism. We therefore need a frame that captures illiberalism beyond the electoral arena. “Illiberalism” per se is hardly a candidate: “illiberals” do not just reject liberalism, but actively seek alternatives (which we intend to investigate). And illiberalism can also characterize forces in the post-communist area that are not conservative by self-definition, or that fall under the term of the Far Right. Thus, while illiberalism seems to feature widely throughout the region, conservatism is a particular contestation of liberalism.

Terms such as right-wing nationalism or neo-nationalism also feature heavily in the description of post-communist illiberalism (Gingrich and Banks 2006). “Economic nationalism” seems to have become an important answer worldwide to the unsolved questions that the financial crisis left behind. A flurry of studies dedicated to economic policies pursued in ECE demonstrates the relevance of this analytical frame, even though some countries stick more to a neoliberal path than others (Johnson and Barnes 2015; Ban 2016). The term “nationalism” is often close but not exclusively related to conservative, right or far-right thought, and is reconcilable with economic liberalism: the Baltic States, for instance, followed a path of far-reaching economic liberalization in the 1990s precisely under the slogan of national survival (Bohle and Greskovits 2012). Yet conservatism includes ideas about social order that go beyond the notions of national identity, history, and solidarity that nationalism usually praises. Moreover, nationalism is primarily particularist and fosters rivalry between nations. Conservatives who want to mobilize beyond their own national community often distance themselves from a “chauvinistic” nationalism of the Far Right, and pledge their dedication to a “healthy” and “tolerant” version of nationalism open to other national identities.

Our approach

We see new conservatism as part of an expanding discursive field in which liberalism, at least in the 1990s, played the role of the “incumbent,” or dominant, ideology. A “field” is a “space of conflict and competition” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) and “consists of relationships between different ‘positions,’ with various types of ‘resources,’ economic, symbolic, etc., flowing between them” (Crossley 2003, 59). Discursive fields are “discursive terrain(s) in which meaning contests occur” (Spillman 1995, 140) and that focus our attention not only on the competing ideas and discourses, but also on the actors engaged in their production and dissemination. We approach the discursive field of liberalism and new conservatism as structured not so much by isolated actors and organizations, but by “knowledge networks” (Stone 2005), understood as loose

groups of think tanks, media outlets, politicians or factions within political parties, and university departments or holders of single university chairs that engage in the production and dissemination of ideology, that is of a “political conception of the world” (Mannheim 1955 [1936]).⁵ We are particularly interested in the role played in such networks by conceptual or “conceptive ideologists” (Marx and Engels 2010 [1845]), the intellectuals that have the capacity and skills to take on the task of bringing together the disparate strands of criticism vis-à-vis the present situation into ideologies, political conceptions of the world.

Mannheim wrote of groups engaging in the production of knowledge as “communities of knowing” and emphasized the importance of shared experiences and the “rootedness of knowledge in the social texture” for the emergence of such communities: political knowledge is not just a reflection upon (or “contemplation” of) distant events, but often emerges from concrete and often *resented* collective experiences. The spread of neoliberalism among Central and East European intellectuals, and in particular economists, harks back to their resentment over communist state bureaucracies (Bockman and Eyal 2002). Similarly, conservatism has re-emerged as an intellectual and political current out of experiences such as Russia’s loss of international influence and prestige following the fall of the Soviet Union. In the case of conservatives in Poland and Hungary, it has emerged out of the resentment over the liberals’ failure to do justice to post-communist societies by pursuing a thorough condemnation of communism and of what conservatives perceived as its internationalist legacy.

In such processes of knowledge production and reflection upon collective experiences, societal actors actually do more than simply collect and reflect upon the information and events around them: they also develop frames, that is “interpretive schemata that signifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of action in one’s present or past environment” (Snow and Benford 1992, 137). For Mannheim, the development of ideologies such as conservatism start from “definitions of the situation,” that is “meaning-giving, evaluating definition[s]” producing “situation[s] where activity and counter-activity are distinguishable, and the totality of events are articulated into a process” (Mannheim 1955 [1936], 21). We take frames or “situational definitions” as a starting point in our empirical analyses, helping us to structure the empirical material and the various “positions” that conservative actors take in their discursive field. We thus ask what the starting point is in conservative criticisms of the post-communist period, how these conservative critiques define the situation of their group and country, and to which problems and actors they trace back their specific situations.⁶

In the context of the American conservative movement, George Lakoff has argued that US neocons have mastered framing far better than their political opponents, at least since the 1970s—for instance by framing taxes as an encroachment on individual freedoms, a frame Lakoff considers more powerful than the frame used by liberals that presents the payment of taxes as an issue of

patriotism (Azab Powell 2003; Lakoff 2010 [1996]). Similarly, in ECE, the new illiberal conservative framing of transition as a missed opportunity to undo an unjust past eventually trumped the neoliberal framing of transition as an opportunity to catch up with the West (Trencsényi 2014). Furthermore, we refer to this new conservatism in ECE and Russia as activating, because it challenges the established post-1989 order, including the countries' positioning in the international labor division.

To summarize, in this book we aim to research how conservatives develop, recombine and adapt concepts under a broader frame of conservatism, and how they struggle to achieve conceptual coherence in their positions. We build on the notion of frame from the field of social movements research and pay attention not just to the contents of discourses, but also to the networks in which they emerge and which then circulate them. This focus opens up the ground for conceptualizing the contested nature of conservatism. Thus, even though conservatism has emerged in each of the countries we study as an important diagnostic and moralizing frame, different groups and circles often disagree over important aspects of conservatism, and have produced a heterogeneity of conservative "positions" within the wider discursive field, making conservatism anything but a monolithic ideology.

Chapter synopsis

Part I

Our book proceeds as follows. Russia is a key case for the rise and conceptual development of the new illiberal conservatism, which is far from being the same as "Putinism." Hence, two chapters in this section are devoted to the Russian case. In Chapter 2, Katharina Bluhm analyzes the emergence of a conservative discursive field of think tanks, foundations, and media, and the core concepts of the new Russian conservatism, which has become the dominant frame for different groups and circles since 2003. She argues that the new illiberal conservatism emerges from two directions: first, from Putin's administration and the "party of power," which was searching for an ideological label after the victory in the 2003 elections. The second side—encouraged by the first one—consists of ideologists and political activists who were concerned by the road Russia had taken not only in the 1990s but also since Putin's ascension to power. Putin's return to presidential office in 2012 led to a further expansion of conservative infrastructure, which, however, did not pacify the internal elite conflicts about economic models, the state's role, and the concept of tradition.

Chapter 3 demonstrates that conservatism in general has a binary nature: it can be seen as proposing a set of absolute, sometimes religiously derived values, which are applicable to all people at all times; and it can be seen as promoting the concept of organic development, which implies that there are no absolute values and that each society should develop according to its own nature. Conservatism is therefore simultaneously both universalist and particularist. Paul

Robinson charts these two trends in Russian conservative thought. He argues that Russian conservatives from the Slavophiles onwards have taken two approaches to reconciling the universal and the particular. One has claimed that Russia's particularity is that it is the repository of universal truth, and has therefore insisted that Russia must defend its separate identity for the benefit of mankind as a whole. The second has identified the universal good with the promotion of national diversity. This second approach has therefore rejected universalism while at the same time preserved the idea that Russia has a universal mission. In line with this logic, many Russian conservatives in the modern era claim that the development of a multipolar world, in which nations protect their sovereignty and defend their right to a separate path of development, serves not only Russian interests, but also those of humanity as a whole.

In Chapter 4, Aron Buzogány and Mihai Varga take interest in the intellectual contours of the illiberal project in Hungary and explore the writings and core concepts of major intellectual figures associated with Viktor Orbán. They find that what is central for Hungarian conservatives is the restoration of state authority to define and pursue "national interests." Focusing on the core elements of the illiberal agenda and the main intellectual figures that formulated it, Buzogány and Varga find that these elements were manifest long before the 2010 electoral victory of Fidesz, and were heavily influenced by the Hungarian reception of Western conservative writers. Ewa Dąbrowska reaches similar conclusions in Chapter 5, in which she details the complex scene of Polish think tanks and intellectual circles that formulated conservative ideas long before the rise to power of Law and Justice in 2015, and examines their discourse. Using the concept of a discursive coalition, she shows how conservatives formed such a coalition following the electoral victories and corruption scandals of the post-communist social-democrats. In response, they developed the positive vision of a new, fourth republic featuring a strong state that is able to act and follow national interest. She interprets the institutional changes enacted by PiS as consistent with the conservative discourse, yet following a more narrow political ideology.

It is important to note that much of what conservatives articulate in terms of ideas is reflected at the level of the core electorates of PiS and Fidesz. This issue is explored in Chapter 6 by Jochen Roose and Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski with the help of European Social Survey data. While religious orientation and a belief in one's own low political efficacy are common for both parties' core supporters, a strong valuation of tradition and homophobia are typical for Polish PiS supporters but less so for Hungarian Fidesz supporters. Roose and Karolewski further argue that both parties built their electoral success on problems of transformative governance, such as high social costs for some social strata, a perforated welfare state, and the corruption of elites in connection with specific scandals of previous governments. Krzysztof Jasiński further develops the focus on the PiS agenda in Chapter 7, taking particular interest in what the PiS means with its "conservative modernization" strategy. Jasiński sees in it an attempt to respond to the "dependent market economy" that has emerged as a result of the

transition and European integration. He explores how PiS politicians want to overcome Poland's semi-peripheral position within Europe by "strategic coordination," and explains the fundamental controversies surrounding its implementation and consequences.

Part II

The book's second part focuses on the translation of conservative ideas into economic and social political action, as well as across borders, between national settings. Irina Busygina and Mikhail Filippov argue that despite the intellectual build-up in the conservative camp, the conservative influence over Russian economic policy remains limited, as Putin and liberal economists deem their proposals unacceptable. The only exception—albeit a significant one—is increased military spending, with the ambition of Russian military dominance in the world. In contrast, Dąbrowska, Buzogány, and Varga observe that Polish conservatives found considerable inspiration in the rise to power of Viktor Orbán in 2010 and his use of heterodox economic policy. Examining contacts between Polish and Hungarian conservatives and the reception of Hungarian ideas and policies by Polish experts related to PiS, the authors conclude that Polish conservative economic ideas in the 2010s were heavily influenced by Orbán's policy experiments.

Returning to Russia, Katharina Bluhm and Martin Brand also find considerable influence exerted by the new Russian conservatism over family policy. Their focus is on an ultraconservative coalition of the Russian Orthodox Church, civic organizations, and experts and politicians, demanding a return to a multi-child family as social norm and the strengthening of the family as a fundamental institution, against the individual rights of its members *and* the state. Despite their growing influence, ultraconservatives are far from determining family policy in Russia. Agnieszka Wierzcholska examines the Polish conservative actors' approach to gender roles and reproductive rights, and discusses how Polish society has been polarized and mobilized over gender issues since PiS came to power in November 2015. The author shows how a "war on gender" became the "glue" that helped bring together various conservative actors. Here too, the Church played a decisive role, opposing "gender-ideology," targeting sex education in schools, and calling for the strengthening of the traditional roles of men and women.

Drawing on an ethnographic study, Tobias Köllner offers a bottom-up perspective on conservatism in contemporary Russia. In particular, he draws attention to notions of conservatism within Russian Orthodoxy and related activities at the local level. In this way, he, too, rejects conceptualizations of conservatism as being exclusively introduced and cultivated from above by Putin's administration. In contrast, the relation between the state and the Russian Orthodox Church in contemporary Russia is perceived and described as a complex interplay of two powerful institutions that are engaged in both cooperation and conflict.

Sebastian Schiek and Azam Isabaev further develop the prospects of conservative transfers between post-communist countries by studying conservative “transfers” from Russia to some of its neighboring countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States. Their focus is the law “against homosexual propaganda amongst minors” adopted by the State Duma in 2013, which they see as an instance of “moral conservatism,” an ideological predisposition widespread in the post-Soviet space. The chapter addresses the question of why the Russian law and the existing links between Russia and its neighbors did not lead to a domino effect, causing neighbors to adopt similar laws. Although moral conservatism is dominant in all former republics, its politicization and the interests of political actors are crucial to grasping the diffusion process.

The last chapter concludes this volume by systematizing the key similarities and differences found between the Polish, Hungarian, and Russian cases. Bluhm and Varga argue that the broad picture emerging from the volume is that conservatives contest liberalism not just in terms of rejecting economic liberalism, but struggle to reaffirm and reorient state policies across a wide range of domains from the perspective of national traditions. This has the effect of paradoxically limiting alliances between Russian conservatives and their Polish and Hungarian counterparts, who see their traditions as deeply rooted in the Western world. For Russia’s new conservatives, the proclaimed distancing from Europe goes hand in hand with an attempt to maintain and develop an ideational influence over those actors in Europe who are perceived as potential allies. These, however, are likely to be found more on the Far Right than among fellow conservatives in East Central Europe.

Notes

- 1 For comparison, in the case of earlier transitions such as the Spanish one—Spanish economists and reformers participated not only in networks imbued with neoliberal ideas, but also German ordoliberal ones, at that time emphasizing relatively progressive approaches to redistribution (Ban 2016, 23).
- 2 Before that decade, the dominant conviction was that democracy and free market were not mutually reinforcing, but that instead there is a need to reconcile the two (Blyth 1999).
- 3 See for example Mouffe, who demands a new Left “populist” strategy to counter the “populism” of the nationalist Right (Mouffe 2013). See also Müller (2015) for a discussion of the dangers of conceptional overstretch in the case of populism.
- 4 Mudde paraphrases the terminology used by Freeden in discussing nationalism (Freeden 1998).
- 5 Similarly, Marlene Laruelle conceptualizes the “Kremlin” as competing networks of knowledge production she refers to as “ideological ecosystems,” “each of which consists of specific institutions, funders, patrons, identifiable symbolic references, ideological entrepreneurs, and media platforms” (Laruelle 2017).
- 6 See Varga (2014) for an analysis of social movement strategies with the help of “definitions of situations” in the context of post-communist worker protests.

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