Illiberal and Authoritarian Tendencies in Central, Southeastern and Eastern Europe

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☐   In his welcome address on behalf of the organizers, *Hansjörg Brey*, Director of the Southeast Europe Association (Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft / SOG), hosting the workshop in Marriott Hotel Munich, expressed his thanks to the distinguished group of experts having gathered in order to discuss an immensely important topic. This event, according to Brey, offered another opportunity to continue a long and fruitful partnership between the SOG and Professor *Nicolas Hayoz*, who is responsible for the Regional Research Promotion Program for the Western Balkans and the Academic Swiss Caucasus Net, both affiliated to the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. Brey also reminded the audience of a publication that had been presented in preparation to this workshop, containing articles of most of the participants to the workshop on the topic of "Illiberal and Authoritarian Tendencies in Eastern Europe". [1]

After the fall of communism, the liberal democracy has clearly not become "the only game in town". Concomitantly to multiple crises and weakness of the European Union (EU), some of its new member states have resorted to contentious policies that might undermine their (conspicuously fragile) liberal democratic orders. The EU candidate countries in the Western Balkans have undergone increasing authoritarian developments based on clientelistic networks and informal power structures. The reform agenda in the Eastern European states, although vigorously initiated after the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, have blatantly come to a still. – What has contributed to the stagnation of democratic developments in these regions? What is the suspected democratic backsliding in each country all about? In order to answer these questions, the workshop was composed of an initial keynote speech, four regional blocks of country studies concerning Central, Southeastern and Eastern Europe as well as a panel podium discussion whereby additional authoritarian regimes in Russia and Turkey were discussed.

The crisis of liberal democracy is not a regional but a global problem – *Ivan Krastev,* Chairman of the Centre for Liberal Strategies in Sofia, stated in his keynote speech titled "The Rise of Threatened Majorities". The crisis is reflected in a shift of power within the whole international system: Rising China, resurgent Russia, proliferation of armed conflicts and the declining role of Western Europe. The general appeal of market-based liberal democracy and good governance are marred by the "rise of populism". According to Krastev, Poland became the most worrying example of a democratic backsliding because it did not follow patterns noticeable in other countries. It was not affected by an economic crisis, the Gini coefficient and social inequality decreased, the ruling "Law and Justice" Party (PiS) was not a new political organization when it came to power in 2015, so its victory did not imply a classical protest vote. The head of PiS, Jarosław Kaczyński, appeared absolutely uncorrupted and consistently represented the same political views. Polish society, Krastev continued, had been on of the most pro-Europe within

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1   Religion & Society in East and West, Vol. 9-10, 2016. See also German version: Religion & Gesellschaft in Ost und West, Vol. 9-10, 2016.

the EU countries. Nonetheless, 60 % of young people voted right and vested power in the politicians who had been questioning the value of the last 26 years of Polish independence. This made Krastev ask: What did we get wrong regarding the basic nature of the post-communist period? The easy spread of liberal democracy to post-communist Central Europe made the Western world self-compliant. However, not the idea of how the West could transform the rest of the world merited attention, but, above all, how the rest of the world was changing the West. Echoing Ken Jowitt, Krastev maintained that liberal democratic order would have no alternative; however, there would appear "movements of rage" – reactions to weakened nation states. At the same time Krastev emphasized the exceptional nature of liberal democracy and its capacity to protect minorities that had just lost elections. It is exactly that compromise that allowed liberal democracy to succeed in some post-communist countries.

However, the migration crisis and related EU politics have contributed to the recent rise of "threatened majorities", Krastev argued. From the perspective of the new member states' citizens, the domestic elites, although often corrupt, seemed to care more than the EU officials about the respective society, while protecting it from the inflow of refugees. In no post-communist country there was a division over the refugee issue within the political parties. Krastev stated that this shared resentment towards accepting refugees represents the local version of popular revolt against globalization. It would be also rooted in history and varied experience with multiculturalism, demographic fear and the twists of post-communist transitions. Needless to say, the perception of migrants in the region was rather vague; most far-right parties in Central Europe represents above all anti-Roma sentiments as their main characteristics, unveiling the fact that the domestic weak institutions have not managed to integrate them so far.

The focus on migrants and protection of national values, Krastev explained, stemmed also from the specificity of structural adjustments during EU integration: Major economic decisions like budget deficits were removed from the domestic electoral competition. What remained has been identity politics. Finally, to pin down his argumentation, Krastev mentioned a book by Karin Stenner called "Authoritarian Dynamic" suggesting that an authoritarian mindset was a human predisposition activated in the face of "normative threat", e.g. migration crisis. In such a situation, majority groups would be prone to conspiracy theories, anticipating an alliance of "global minded" elites with "trouble minded" foreigners flowing to their countries. What can be done to counteract? Krastev emphasized the need for a thorough debate about democracy in Europe, the role of opposition and about combating corruption as an instrument of politics.

The first part of the workshop entailed theoretical approaches to illiberal and authoritarian tendencies in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. *Anton Shekhovtsov*, Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, discussed the possibility of a reversible post-communist transition and the challenge posed by radical right-wing parties, which, in contrast to "exhausted" liberal democrats, are able to present global alternative visions of a new world order.

Florian Bieber, Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz, addressed the nuanced authoritarian tendencies in the Western Balkan countries pointing to their reliance on informal government structures and "populism on demand". He also paid attention to their misleading claim of creating "post-transition" and "post-authoritarian" regimes, which, however, are clearly rooted in old, unreformed and very weak institutions.

Finally, *Vedran Džihić*, University of Vienna, and *Nicolas Hayoz*, University of Fribourg, looked at illiberal tendencies from the perspective of "bad leadership". Džihić reflected on the legitimacy and legitimation of semi-authoritarian systems, mentioning cooptation, different modes of

repression, ensuing obedience and two kinds of support for non-democratic regimes – specific and defused support. The specific support could be induced in delivering certain goods (improving the health situation) while resorting to clientelism and informality; the diffused support resulted from the focus on nation and charismatic leadership. Subsequently, Hayoz noted that the main syndrome of many post-communist countries was the personalization of power. The more personalized the environment, the more leaders tried to extend their power through informal, personal networks. Hayoz argued furthermore that whereas the leadership in the West appeared "post-heroic", the image of strong "heroic leaders" in Eastern Europe prevailed. While liberal regimes are about "containing" the leaders by rules and institutions, in Eastern Europe the leaders instrumentalise these institutions and operate with concepts of "enemies" and "foes". Given the very weak legal culture in the region, charismatic leaders are able to win ground. Hayoz mentioned furthermore different forms of leadership: Morally bad leaders, who are ineffective and thus do no harm; toxic, often populist leaders, who might be more influential and more destructive.

The first regional block of the workshop included the countries of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), whose official goal is EU and NATO accession. Ukraine constitutes a prominent example of a strenuous, post-communist and post-Soviet system transformation. The lingering reforms and the war in Donbas have been disillusioning for the society. *Olexij Haran*, University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy, focused in his speech on the small steps made so far. The recent presidential, parliamentary and local elections have been internationally recognized as free and fair and did not result in the monopolization of power. At the same time, however, the mixed electoral system introduced by President Viktor Yanukovych to strengthen his ruling party have been erroneously maintained under the current government as well. It namely tends to favour personalization of political parties and informal practices among the party candidates.

Conversely, the changes of power in Georgia has generally been problematic, ranging from civil war to revolution and finally, to elections, *Giga Zedania*, Professor of the Ilia State University in Tiflis, stated. Furthermore, despite elections, the technologies of power have always remained the same: A charismatic leader supported by a network of friends and allies, suppressing opposition, free press, and the NGO sector. Zedania touched upon the possibility of "liberalism without democracy" or "democracy without liberalism", concluding that none of these forms have been established in Georgia. The consensus prevailed that liberal democracy was inevitable a model for Georgia's development, accompanied by European and Euro-Atlantic integration. At the same time, Zedania reminded that the democratization process in Georgia has been actively combated by Russia. The intensive propaganda through media outlets financed from Moscow has recently resulted in an electoral success of a pro-Russian party.

By the same token, *Natalia Timuş* from Maastricht University demonstrated how the initially promising democratization process in Moldova has been hindered by massive corruption, a fragile party system, behaviour of political elites and Russia's ongoing influence. The lack of long term progressive reforms and only short-term changes has, unfortunately, been tolerated by the EU.

Against this background, Central European political regimes appear as "soft cases". *Zoltan Kiszelly* from Kodolányi János Foundation College in Budapest argued that the "illiberal state" created by the ruling right-wing party Fidesz constitutes a political framework for the modernization of Hungary by means of greater political sovereignty within the EU and reduction of neoliberal economic policies in the country. This system, however, benefits mainly the ruling national conservative elites. Because the elections in Hungary were won in the "center", Fidesz has successfully managed to occupy the middle of the political spectrum and to keep its political

rivals at bay. This is why economic redistribution has been taking place first of all in favour of the (upper) middle class, Kiszelly stressed. The success and longevity of this system depends on its economic capacity and the condition of political opposition in the country.

The economic performance would also be decisive in case of controversial "good change"-politics in Poland, *Magdalena Solska* form the University of Fribourg argued. One year in power of "Law and Justice" PiS has brought about a number of reforms accompanied by the massive elite exchange in state institutions. As a result, the rashly implemented policies based on unprecedented party patronage have undermined the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal, civil service and state media while spreading the propaganda of the planned attack on the Polish President at Smoleńsk in 2010. The intensive focus on religion, national culture and history, as well as generous social benefits for families have resulted in a broad support for the party, whose popularity would depend on the economic development of the country and the strength of hitherto uninspired opposition.

Whereas the "soft" challenges to liberal democracy in Slovakia – such as the low level of trust in public institutions, an inefficient judiciary system, state oriented parties, concentration of media in the hands of economic groups with political ambitions – have been conspicuous also in other post-communist democracies, the recent electoral success of the overtly right-wing extremist "People's Party – Our Slovakia" (L`S-NS) could threaten the foundations of liberal democratic order in the country. Inclined to fascism, the party rejected the current foreign policy orientation and represented extremist, anti-systemic views, *Grigorij Mesežnikov* from the Institute for Public Affairs in Bratislava stated.

Illiberal tendencies in the Czech Republic appeared rather subtle for the time being, and bucked down merely to the discourse of main political actors in the country, which could, however, impact the political culture in the long run. *Vlastimil Havlík* from the Masaryk University in Brno pointed to the new trend, whereby elites use their political power to pursue economic interests, example of which was the current Finance Minister Andrej Babiš.

The presentations of patterns of authoritarian and illiberal tendencies in Central and Eastern Europe on the first day of the workshop were followed by a panel discussion on "Illiberalism and New-old Forms of Authoritarianism in Central Europe, South-Eastern Europe and beyond". The event was moderated by *Hansjörg Brey* from Southeast Europe Association and focused on the Western Balkan countries as well as on two authoritarian regimes, Russia and Turkey, and thus put the discussion into a broader perspective. The debate was structured along three guiding topics – the basis for autocratic power in each country; state of the media and the role of academia, including so called "anticipating obedience" ("vorauseilender Gehorsam"); the role of the EU and the West in general.

Gudrun Steinacker, former German Ambassador, Vienna, and *Andrea Capussela*, independent researcher from Milan, noted that in the Western Balkan countries the ruling parties and elites have not changed substantially since the fall of communism. The current political and economic elites had therefore no incentives to alter the *status quo*, and the source of their legitimacy was either the (hitherto futile) EU integration process or gaining independence (Kosovo).

The consolidation of authoritarian regime in Russia accompanied by an aggressive foreign policy has been supported by the great bulk of society. According to *Sergej Sumlenny*, head of Heinrich Böll Foundation in Kiev, most Russians perceived the annexation of Crimea and the conflict with Ukraine as a confrontation with the USA, whose value was much higher than the

value of their own, visibly decreasing, life quality. Sergej Sumlenny emphasized that the mechanisms of controlling society had been systematically built up for years in Russia. Media landscape and the NGO sector had been suppressed, and the propaganda system very well developed. Additionally, the attempts to weaken the EU by funding extremist right-wing parties and dealing with the EU member states bilaterally have turned out to be quite fruitful so far.

Having been in power for fourteen years, the "Justice and Development Party" (AKP) has dominated the whole political sphere in Turkey including the president's office and government on national and local level. *Cengiz Günay* from the University of Vienna noted that while the state controls the whole construction sector and is the largest landowner in the country, many people's jobs are thus fully dependent on the party. Moreover, patronage, media monopolization and re-privatisation after the economic crisis of 2001 have secured a solid clientelistic network of support for the party.

The discussants agreed that in all authoritarian regimes the role of independent academia and media is very problematic. Overt repression against journalists and self-censorship have become frequent in Russia. The AKP in Turkey created its own think-tank which dominates the publications within the field of foreign policy. Because the "Gülen movement" was particularly strong exactly within the academia, it was then exposed to more severe control and repression. In Kosovo, media and academic research had always been dominated by political and economic elites. As Gudrun Steinacker rightly stressed, because the research sector in the Western Balkans has been extremely underfinanced and dependent on sponsors for the last twenty years, "anticipating obedience" has become a matter of survival.

In this context, the role of the EU and the West in general seems quite ambivalent. EU and USA have invested more in Kosovo than in any other developing country, without effectuating any progress. What is more, Kosovo constituted a precedent for humanitarian intervention without the UN Security Council consent. All the more it is important for the West to make it a success story of state building, Andrea Capussela argued.

Macedonia's EU accession negotiations have been stuck because of the name conflict with Greece. Gudrun Steinacker pointed out that although the country had been receiving IPA funds (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance) and donations from Germany, the efficiency of such investments remains questionable and has never been verified. The EU approach is not coherent either; there are several competitors, i.e. consulting companies competing for projects in the region.

In contrast to that, Turkey has always been a "geographic other" to the EU, an undefined candidate slowly implementing the *acquis*, Cengiz Günay said. EU-promoted liberalism had been only a top-down project that had never been publicly discussed in the country. This is why the current "Erdoganisation" of the ruling party, its loss of ideological expression, the control of media and pragmatism prevailed. The people valued more the flexibility of their leader who could define the situation and find solutions beneficial for the nation.

The appreciation for leaders' flexibility is also visible in Russia. Sergej Sumlenny argued that the present Russian elites could by characterized by "immoralism". The lack of any moral ties made them think they were stronger and free in their own actions. He furthermore stated that the limits of patience of the Russian population has not even reached thirty percent, so poverty and state repression could still be doubled. This is why the best solution would be to continue sanctions, which could prevent Russia from further aggression.

On the following day, two regional blocks addressed the Western Balkan country – specific authoritarian tendencies related to an unfinished state-building process (Kosovo), weak institutions, no elite exchange, no fair and free elections, lack of accountability and domination of only one party (Serbia, Montenegro).

In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) *Adis Merdžanović*, University of Oxford, paid attetion to the structural problems hindering the development of a liberal regime, such as discriminatory provisions in the Constitution, a high degree of decentralization within a power-sharing setup, the prevalence of the same elite cartel, a dire economic situation and botched privatization. The mantra promoted by international actors "stability over democratic reforms" should end.

The Macedonian case presented by *Dane Taleski* from the South East European University in Skopje demonstrated why increasing social inequality and a low quality of democracy did not result in societal protests and demand for democratic change. Taleski argued that elaborate distributive social policies implemented in Macedonia aimed to build patronage and create a system of serfdom. Those policies had been designed to target and entrap certain groups of people (students, farmers, pensioners) and to secure their support. The benefits were just marginal and not strong enough to really change the social situation in the country.

Against this background, *Senada Šelo-Šabic* from the Institute for Development and International Relations in Zagreb showed how the lack of profound societal and political change in the course of the EU accession process could hinder the consolidation and internalization of liberal democratic values in Croatia.

The final presentation by *Natasha Wunsch*, visiting fellow at the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz, focused on pre- and post-accession democratic backsliding within new EU member states and the EU candidates. She concluded that both pre- and post-accession backsliding were driven by similar dynamics such as declining EU leverage, weak internal control mechanisms as well as weakly ingrained democratic values among citizens. These tendencies require, however, different remedies: Member states should be exposed to increased EU pressure, but this, in turn, might bear risk of exacerbating EU scepticism. Candidate countries shall strive for renewed engagement with non-executive domestic actors, which could strengthen internal drive for 'deep' reform.

All in all, the presentations and debates of the workshop proved the diversity of prevailing illiberal developments that can be considered from a comparative, intra- and interregional perspective. Nicolas Hayoz reminded us that in order to explore the "backsliding process", it is necessary to determine whether the post-communist states of Central Europe have ever been real liberal democracies at all. Moreover, the different role of populism and leadership across the regions could be explored as well. Accordingly, Hansjörg Brey suggested thinking about "soft" and "hard" challenges to liberal democracy and focusing also on good practices and sustainable answers to the deficiencies of the liberal model, enlargement and neighbourhood strategies, as well as the future vision of the European project. Following up on that, Vedran Džihić warned of foregone conclusions: Is there a distinct pattern of authoritarian backsliding in the Western Balkans or is it rather "business as usual", typical perils of a delayed transformation? By the same token, the so called "illiberal tendencies" in Central Europe might prove to be the characteristic problems of post-communist democracies and only a temporary phenomenon. If there were, however, new, discernible patterns of backsliding in the analysed regions and countries, a new narrative would be needed, reflecting the non-linearity of post-communist transformation.