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Illiberalism, polarisation, resilience, and resistance:
Concepts in dynamic tension

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Recent years have witnessed a growing number of illiberal regimes around the world (Pappas, 2014; Brubaker, 2017; Csigó & Merkovity, 2016; Enyedi, 2016; Rupnik, 2016; Magyar & Madlovics, 2020). Among other features, such regimes undermine liberal norms that entail equal legal protections of citizens and social groups. Governments and leading political actors in these regimes typically propagate discourses and advance policies that represent extreme narratives and stigmatise or exclude targeted groups (Vidra & Fox, 2014; Feischmidt & Hervik, 2015; Cammaerts, 2018; Kaya, 2018), which in turn fosters a radicalising shift in the political mainstream (Minkenberg, 2017). This often leads to political actors intentionally adopting polarising strategies. Typically cutting along existing cleavages, polarisation shreds social cohesion and can act as an accelerant for illiberal movements, and as a cudgel against opponents of illiberal regimes. Yet polarisation and illiberalism are not unchallenged and irresistible forces; they exist in dynamic tension with resiliencies that defy polarisation and resistance that wilfully confronts illiberalism. This special issue is concerned with the interplay of these core concepts: *illiberalism*, *polarisation*, *resilience*, and *resistance*. Adopting the axiom that liberal democratic systems are preferable by virtue of their individual and minority group protections, we welcomed articles that explored attributes and measures that mitigate the impacts and confront illiberal discourse and policy, and instead work toward greater social inclusion of vulnerable groups (Krasztev & Til, 2015).

The articles in this thematic issue¹ are concerned with countries where illiberalism already sits in the seat of power, namely in Central and Eastern Europe, where the establishment and operation of illiberal regimes is conspicuous, where ‘pernicious polarisation’ (Somer, McCoy & Luke, 2021) that strains resilience is often striking, and where resistance is

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crucial to halt or reverse illiberalisation. Taken together, developments in these countries offer a clearer view of how illiberal actors and their polarising strategies produce ‘hollowing’ or ‘backsliding’ (Greskovits, 2015) and how resistance and resiliencies stymie them.

In this introduction, we review the four key concepts that undergird the special issue’s articles. The special issue is focused on illiberal *regimes*, so we describe illiberalism and illiberalisation in state-centric terms, though acknowledging its social and sometimes movement manifestations. Similarly, resistance refers to well-known forms of contentious politics, such as protest, which confront the actions of the state. These two concepts concentrate on a clear and fairly discrete set of actors: illiberal parties and state institutions on the one hand, and liberal ‘resistors,’ such as social movement actors and non-governmental organisations, on the other. By comparison, polarisation and resilience describe more diffuse social phenomena. Political or social actors may exacerbate polarisation or enhance resilience, but both of these concepts refer to massive social conditions, more contextual than illiberalism and resistance. Building on this framework of concepts in dynamic tension, this introductory article draws upon extant research to present the insights to be gleaned from studies in this issue. And we highlight tools from the EU Horizon-2020 BRaVE (Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation) Project,² which gave rise to this special issue, as they provide new findings about the degree and character of polarisation in some countries in Central and Eastern Europe, and about the resilience-building practices that counteract it. We address each concept – illiberalism, polarisation, resilience, and resistance – in turn and, in lieu of a separate section on the contributions, allude to how the papers of the issue address them (*italicising* contributing authors’ names).

Illiberalism

Research from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute confirms that the world is in the swell of an ‘accelerating and deepening’ wave of autocratisation (Maerz, Lührmann, Hellmeier, Grahn & Lindberg, 2020). Riding the crest of this wave, epitomising the trend, are illiberal regimes, which disregard or even abjure minority rights in favour of majoritarian (–inspired³) governance. Beyond this broad characteristic, illiberalism is amorphous. Indeed, as Laruelle (2020, p. 115) argues, illiberal movements ‘do not necessarily make up a coherent ideology; rather they represent an interconnected set of values that come together in country-specific patterns.’ Antipathy towards liberal values (Krekó & Enyedi, 2018), supranational institutions, globalisation, multiculturalism, and any of a variety of vulnerable groups (migrants, LGBT individuals, Roma, ethnic or religious minorities) are common – but manifest in varying primacies of antagonism. Opposition to foreign influence in defence of supposedly ‘native’ values and systems is the fundamental posture of illiberal actors. Pervasive corruption and clientelism, too, are widespread (Grzymala-Busse, 2019; Krekó & Enyedi, 2018; Pirro & della Porta, 2021; Vachudova, 2019) – but they are not distinguishing features.

² The Building Resilience against Violent Extremism and Polarisation (BRaVE) Project is an EU Horizon-2020 grant project. Further information is available at: <http://brave-h2020.eu/>.

³ Some illiberal regimes can scarcely be termed democratic. In such instances, autocratic or authoritarian regimes position themselves, often plausibly, as acting on majoritarian will.

As its contrarian name suggests – ‘illiberal,’ after all, is a label consciously adopted by several politicians – illiberalism is defined by what it is not, what it opposes. Foremost among illiberal opponents is ‘gender ideology’ (Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Kováts, 2018); though it predates this wave of contention, recent illiberal activism against the ‘Istanbul Convention’ condemned it as the most recent iteration of creeping gender ideology. This straw man enemy, fabricated by illiberal actors, refers nebulously to non-traditional (e.g., non-binary) conceptions of gender and associated social roles, and to policies and activism that promote recognition and equal protection thereof. Krizsán and Roggeband (2021) – reviewed in this special issue by *Linda Gilby* – examine how anti-gender movements in several Central and Eastern European countries mobilised against the gender ideology supposedly enshrined in the Istanbul Convention. Nowhere was this variant of illiberal opposition more pronounced than in Poland. In their article, *Wójcik and Grabowska-Moroz* detail the parallel tracks of rule of law backsliding and vilification of the LGBT community; beyond denigrating liberal democracy itself, such targeting of minority groups is a barometer of wider deterioration. This finding echoes Roggeband and Krizsán’s (2020) contention that downgrading gender equality policies and marginalising their advocates is integral to the current wave of democratic recession.

Targeting LGBT communities and individuals permeates most of the illiberal movements and regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. *Dunajeva*’s study looks at the Russian case, where the ‘othering’ of LGBT organisations became entangled with particularly antagonistic foreign policy rhetoric, to wit, LGBT has been tarred as ‘amoral Western influence’ and another manifestation of ‘foreign agents.’ In other words, LGBT groups have been swept up in one of the Putin regime’s ploys to safeguard its survival.⁴ Whether inadvertently marred in broader machinations or purposefully targeted as antithetical to traditional morals probably matters little to Russian LGBT individuals facing harassment and discrimination. *Dunajeva* reveals how advocacy organisations are compelled to moderate and adapt to mitigate the effects of the state’s social control.

In societies where illiberalisation remains unconsolidated, LGBT toleration represents a central point of contention. As shown by the Bulgarian case in *Strahilov*’s article, illiberal (‘national-populist’) actors and the LGBT movement present duelling frames of national heritage. This theme of cultural history and whether it excludes or embraces LGBT individuals recurs in many contexts. Ayoub and Chetaille (2020) discuss how gay rights and anti-gay movements in Poland clash in sequences of framing disputes, as demonstrated in *Hreckova and Zeller*’s article. The study lays out how the illiberalising context generated by anti-gay movements, supported by the government, produces persistent distress, amounting even to trauma; in turn, this leads LGBT individuals to draw on sources of resilience, such as the equality marches in Poland.

But antagonism is not restricted to LGBT and gender. Illiberalism is charmingly inclusive in its antipathies. Anti-Muslim policies are also exceedingly common. In some instances, they are connected to native Muslim populations. *McNeil-Willson*’s study reveals how counter-terrorism narratives and policies, transplanted from Western countries, are used in the

⁴ On techniques of autocratic survival, which is closely connected to illiberal strategies, see Maerz (2020) on authoritarian regimes and Schneider and Maerz (2017) on electoral autocracies.

Russian-occupied territory of Crimea to persecute Muslim Tatars. More frequently, though, anti-Muslim policies go hand in hand with anti-migrant policy and rhetoric. Hungary is the foremost model of this variant of illiberalism (Halmai, 2017; Majtényi, Kopper & Susánszky, 2019). The regime's writ and rhetoric corrode public discourse and calcify hostility to Muslim residents. *Aytar and Bodor* unpack how patterns of discrimination and harassment push Muslim women in Hungary to adopt coping strategies. Such cases exemplify the way vulnerable groups are (further) stigmatised by illiberal actors.

Typically, illiberalism is a backlash against liberalism that was once prevalent in the country and that is denounced as having a destructive impact on the society. The concomitant denigration of liberal democratic institutions and procedures generates democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016; McCoy et al., 2018; Vachudova, 2019; Fish & Abrams, 2020; Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020; Somer et al., 2021). However, we should not misconstrue illiberalism as a wholly national phenomenon; it can spread across countries and regimes. Russia is often cast as the main supporter of illiberal systems and leaders through its disinformation campaigns (Vachudova, 2019; Laruelle, 2020), particularly in the former Eastern Bloc. Though that is not to say that Russia directly influences these regimes, but 'rather, it creates echo chambers that amplify homegrown illiberal voices' (Laruelle, 2020, p. 126). Within the EU, the Visegrad countries (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) now form an illiberal bloc and facilitate Russia's expansionist strategy (Pappas, 2019). Illiberalism is a potent and diffusible political form, and its most conspicuous feature is strategic polarisation.

Polarisation

Polarisation 'refers to the process through which complex social relations come to be represented and perceived in Manichean "black and white" terms, as resulting from an essential conflict between two different social groups' (McNeil-Wilson et al., 2019, p. 6). It is a core feature, a conscious political strategy, of illiberal regimes. Illiberal actors deploy it, often with a populist-style false dichotomy between the people and vaguely described elites cast as their enemies, to portray themselves as the representatives of popular will.⁵ Never was this more clearly expressed than when Viktor Orbán, rejecting his party's electoral defeat in 2002, said, 'the nation cannot be in opposition' (*A haza nem lehet ellenzékben*).

That is not to say that polarisation is solely a manifestation of illiberalism. A degree of polarisation is present in every society (Carother & O'Donohue, 2019; Fish & Abrams, 2020). However, high degrees of polarisation can generate governmental stagnation and instability, and incentivise political extremism (Dreyer & Bauer, 2019). And the extent of polarisation in many illiberal regimes is alarming. In part, that is because intentionally divisive rhetoric and policy intensifies polarisation (Pappas 2019; McCoy & Somer, 2019; Somer, McCoy & Luke, 2021). This breeds the 'pernicious polarisation' that McCoy, Rahman, and Somer (2018, p. 18) describe as 'a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in the society increasingly align along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of "us" versus "them."'

⁵ See Körösnéyi and Patkós's (2017) study of the difference between liberal and illiberal variants of populism.

Illiberal regimes, as interested as any with staying in power, benefit from this process because it reinforces their claims to popular support and cements their electoral advantage.

Societal polarisation registers at the individual level. Illiberal actors employ rhetoric and discourses that stereotype, vilify, and dehumanise (Gerő et al., 2017; Kaya, 2018; Majtényi, Kopper & Susánszky, 2019; McCoy et al., 2018). The effect of polarising language is to enhance in-group loyalty and exacerbate out-group distrust. As distrust yields to threat perception, instituting discrimination against out-groups wins greater support as a necessary defence of the nation. Such measures are, of course, an assault on the liberal features of liberal democracy; and as illiberal leaders leverage their popular support to undermine and subjugate resistant institutions, those measures are often also an assault on democratic institutions and procedures.

Measuring polarisation has become a white whale in political science, fervently sought but elusive. A reliable measure could help identify which countries or contexts are at greatest risk of polarisation and thus democratic breakdown. Though several types of measures have been produced (e.g., Lauka, McCoy & Firat, 2018; Matakos, Terzi & Tsaparas, 2017; Wagner, 2021), the BRaVE Project⁶ Polarisation Indicators are unique in that they measure polarisation related to five specific social dimensions (Taylor & Prentice, 2020): ethnic/racial, religious, political, gender/sex/orientation, and socio-economic. As *Hrckova and Zeller* (p. 104) point out in their case study, 'Polish society is highly polarised [...] on "gender/sex/orientation" issues. In other words, Poland is uniquely unfit to cope with intense politicisation of LGBT issues.' Unsurprisingly, then, rhetoric from the government and other illiberal actors in Poland has impacted this area most, deepening the division between already opposed camps, particularly on abortion and LGBT issues.

Similarly, Hungary displays multidimensional polarisation. Society is polarised over gender/sex/orientation issues – Krizsán and Roggeband (2021) covers this area in detail – but polarisation of ethnic/racial issues is more conspicuous. For several years the Orbán regime has often directed its illiberal rhetoric at this divisive area. *Aytar and Bodor* assert that the government began its anti-immigrant campaign in 2015 during the refugee crisis. Previously, Muslims, a small segment of Hungary's population, were hardly ever the target of illiberal vituperation. That changed with the government's response to the refugee crisis. Orbán's great and growing emphasis on Hungary's 'Christian heritage' ostracised groups religiously and ethnically unaligned with that tradition. The greater the polarisation around ethnic/racial issues, the more dangerous the environment for non-native ethnic groups, including some of the Muslim women in *Aytar and Bodor's* study.

Illiberal regimes have many tools and tactics to shore up support and bolster their position; polarising rhetoric is the one used most often. Well-aimed polarisation strategy shifts party systems (Vachudova, 2019) and lacerates social cohesion (Molek-Kozakowska & Wanke, 2019). But its intent and usual effect is to strengthen the position of illiberal actors. Thus, guarding against and counteracting polarisation, that is, building resilience, forms an essential component to resisting illiberalism.

⁶ Available at: <http://brave-h2020.eu/toolkit>.

Resilience

The concept of resilience has attracted increasing attention in recent years. Web of Science records⁷ show a sharp rise in articles invoking it over the last decade. In part, as Brassett, Croft and Vaughan-Williams (2013) assert in their introduction to a resilience-focused special issue, that is due to its broad applicability, its ‘productive ambiguity.’ The BRaVE Project defines resilience as the ability ‘to face and respond to adversity, and the capacity to draw on various sources of strength and social resources to adapt and cope with challenges and situations of strain, stress or trauma’ (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019, p. 22). Individuals,⁸ groups, even regimes can possess and exhibit resilience. Adversity and challenges, moreover, take many forms: individuals can face radicalisation challenges; groups may struggle with fractionalisation; regimes meet threats to their survival. In other words, resilience is an overarching concept which can be specified into many subtypes. Given this broad applicability – just within social science! – resilience becomes conceptually meaningful only when we situate it in a bounded area of research.

This special issue is concerned with liberal manifestations of resilience; its articles address the social resilience that counteracts illiberal actors and regimes. By inferring from the examples in the issue’s articles, we observe that actions affecting resilience can be categorised as accumulating, applying, or corroding. *Accumulating* resilience refers to activities that enhance the liberal democratic esprit of a group and enhance its ability to cope with illiberal attacks. *Hreckova and Zeller* reveal how Polish LGBT protesters draw strength and encouragement from participating in equality marches. They feel better able to handle the daily challenges of illiberalism. *Mikecz* discusses the group solidarity that Hungarian Living Memorial activists created by sharing their grief. And *Aytar and Bodor* examine how immigrant Muslim women in Hungary participate in communal prayer as a way of processing discrimination. Through such collective actions individuals and groups accumulate emotional ideational strength to deal with the tensions stoked by illiberalism.

The effect of accumulation is exhibited when individuals and groups *apply* resilience. This refers to activities that cope with illiberal attacks; actors draw upon extant resources to deal with difficulties. As *Aytar and Bodor* discuss, unlike their immigrant peers, natively Hungarian Muslim women feel confident enough to apply their resilience by, for example, filing complaints in response to discriminatory behaviour. Similarly, *Dunajeva’s* article shows how Russian LGBT organisation change their names and slightly alter their operations to evade the worst effects of Russia’s anti-foreign agent and anti-LGBT laws. Applying resilience is thus deploying resources to surmount illiberal challenges.

However, accumulating and applying resilience do not occur in isolation; these actions exist in dynamic tension with illiberal and polarising actions that *corrode* resilience. For many institutions and vulnerable communities, illiberal regimes are a threat, straining the resiliencies to cope with non-recognition or vilification by governing actors and their supporters. Adversarial or simply independent state institutions, such as the judiciary, are

⁷ Results for a search of the term ‘resilience’: <https://www.webofscience.com/wos/woscc/analyze-results/3e31bc99-a5a3-47e0-9c79-6470c0395696-00c2ea5f>.

⁸ On individual youth resilience, see Grossman and co-authors (2017), which informed the BRaVE Project’s conceptual framework of resilience (McNeil-Willson et al., 2019).

often illiberal government targets (Taggart & Kaltwasser 2016, p. 358). Part of *Wójcik and Grabowska-Moroz's* article discusses how the PiS government has worked to erode judicial constraints on its power, which in turn exposes LGBT individuals and groups to more discrimination and harassment. *Kascian and Denisenko's* piece exhibits the way, in Belarus, President Lukashenka berated and infantilised the opposition movement, undermining their legitimacy to protest fraudulent elections. And *McNeil-Willson's* article details the counter-extremism language and instruments used against Crimean Tatars that have not supported Russia's illegal annexation of the region. Sweeping arrests and repressive measures debilitated Crimean Tatars' capacity to accumulate or apply resilience. These sorts of illiberal tools, spanning the gamut between caustic rhetoric, detrimental policy, and directed violence, bolster regimes and corrode the resilience of certain segments of society.

Resistance

Whole societies do not blithely stand by as illiberalisation spreads. Many resist. In the countries covered in this special issue, most have experienced highly visible resistance to their governing illiberal regimes. For example, in the last decade Russia has experienced two major anti-regime movements, the For Fair Elections movement in 2011–2012 (Zeller, 2020) and the anti-corruption protests in 2017–2018 (Moroz, 2020); the illiberal machinations of PiS have sparked several waves of mobilisation in Poland (e.g., Bielinska-Kowalewska, 2017; Król & Pustułka, 2018); Belarus has experienced periodic resistance to the Lukashenka regime – all equally doomed, it seems – the most recent of which *Kascian and Denisenko* cover; and *Esteso-Perez* reveals how in Macedonia an illiberal government's corruption and clientelism, ubiquitous characteristics of illiberal regimes, became the focal points of an anti-corruption movement in Macedonia in 2016, which played a significant role in ousting the government and then ensuring its electoral defeat. Such examples epitomise resistance by movements aimed at regime change (cf. Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011).

Yet, while the term conjures images of mass demonstrations, resistance denotes a wide range of responses. Gene Sharp (1973) famously identified hundreds of non-violent protest actions. As illiberals rhetorically posture about opposing foreign influence and defending certain values and systems, resistance can take the form of counter-narratives. *Strahilov* shows how Bulgarian LGBT groups rebut the narratives of anti-gay movements by organising events that highlight inclusive aspects of national traditions, asserting the open and tolerant principles in Bulgarian heritage. When the Hungarian government erected a monument that abrogated Hungarian culpability in the Holocaust and Second World War crimes, resistance took the form of a 'living memorial.' *Mikecz* discusses how this movement purposefully juxtaposed the false depiction of the government's monument with inclusive remembrance through personal stories displayed in an improvised memorial around the monument. In Poland, LGBT equality marches resist government illiberalism – but, as *Hrckova and Zeller* describe, this resistance feeds back into the community's resilience, invigorating activists and protest participants.

Thus, resistance encompasses myriad forms of opposition to illiberal actors and the insidious creep of illiberalisation. Its intent is usually twofold, though. Resistance aims to counter illiberal regimes, and also to build resilience among the resisters. In this way, liberal resilience and resistance are at best symbiotic. Just as polarisation is a crucial tool of illiberal

regimes and actors, accumulating and applying resilience are the means by which resistance counters illiberalisation and promotes liberal democracy.

Taken together, the concepts of illiberalism, polarisation, resilience, and resistance cut to the heart of contemporary socio-political developments in Central and Eastern Europe. On the one hand, illiberal actors, vested with government power, use polarising rhetoric and policies to strengthen their political position and further their agenda: blocking or rescinding certain groups' rights and protections, and weakening sources of opposition. On the other hand, actors resist the deleterious social effects through practices that accumulate and apply social resilience. The articles in this special issue capture the dynamic tension represented by these concepts, the push and pull of countervailing socio-political forces. It is our hope that this special issue will add to scholarship and discussion of the important, and in several instances troubling developments in Central and Eastern European politics and society.

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