

# THREATS TO DEMOCRACY: MEASURES TAKEN BY RIGHT-WING POPULIST REGIMES DURING THE COVID19 CRISIS IN EASTERN EUROPE<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT<sup>2</sup>

Right-wing populist governments in Central and South-eastern Europe are currently abusing the emergency caused by the pandemic in order to extend their power and influence over institutions through legislative changes. The governments in Poland, Serbia, Slovenia and Hungary have raised fears by their measures to either establish authoritarian regimes and/or to reassert their grip on power during the Covid19 crisis. This text is intended to give an insight into the measures of the ruling right-wing populist parties (PiS in Poland, SNS in Serbia, SDS in Slovenia and Fidesz in Hungary) during the pandemic. On the one hand, the article intends to show that the individual governments have misused the crisis to bring independent and/or state media under their control, to conclude corrupt deals between the ruling party and government-related companies and to put pressure on other independent institutions (such as the

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judicial system) and the opposition. On the other hand, reactions by civil society organizations and the European Union shall be examined. The article shows that both, civil society and EU pressure is indispensable, particularly in times of crisis, since shifts in power in favour of right-wing populist rulers happen swiftly and have negative long-term consequences for democracy.

KEYWORDS: Covid 19, Democratization, Democratic Backsliding, European Union, Civil Society

## INTRODUCTION

The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008, as well as the Refugee Crisis in 2015 increased the electoral strength of right-wing political parties. Various scholars have noted a trend towards illiberal politics across the globe, whereat the Eastern and South-eastern European regions are no exception to this development (Kapidžić 2020, Bermeo 2016, Levitsky and Way 2010). While the rise of illiberal regimes takes on a variety of forms, depending on the context, one commonality is the formal respect of democratic procedures (i.e. elections), but not to what comes before or after (Kriesi and Pappas 2015). In such settings, an uneven level playing field between the dominant ruling party and the political opposition is observed, but also less political freedom, captured state institutions and controlled media. Democratic abuses are today thus less obvious and need a detailed analysis of the mechanisms that underpin an illiberal regime.

Obviously, the current Covid19 pandemic presents a new challenge to regimes across the globe. Especially younger democracies, which are characterised by relatively less rigorous checks and balances' mechanisms found themselves in a dare situation, in which the Covid19 Crisis could (and was) misused by illiberal ruling parties to fortify their rule. Right-wing populist governments in Central and South-eastern Europe are currently abusing the emergency caused by the pandemic in order to extend their power and influence over institutions through legislative changes. But not only are ruling parties misusing the crisis for their personal interests, the Covid19 pandemic has also revealed institutional weaknesses in younger democracies. The similarity between the measures undertaken by right-wing governments in the wider Eastern European region is striking. This paper looks at the measures undertaken during the year 2020 in Hungary, Poland, Serbia and Slovenia.

While Hungary, Poland, Serbia and Slovenia have had different historical trajectories and differ according to their democracy indices, they converge on certain dimensions: in all four states, investigative journalists, independent media and minority groups are attacked, whilst the independence of state institutions (notably the judiciary) is either already

under the control of the ruling party or is currently experiencing pressure from the government. As an answer to these policies, in all four countries protests were organized but were often limited to online protests, protests from the balconies using kitchen utensils, or cycling protests. Last summer the European Union agreed to use EU funds to uphold the rule of law by using a conditionality clause for its member states. As things stand now, the conditionality clause needs to be reviewed by the European Court of Justice as requested by Hungary and Poland. This means that another two years will pass, before the clause is applicable.

This article introduces the reader first to the current political situation in Hungary, Poland, Serbia and Slovenia before discussing the measures undertaken from March 2020 until October 2020. As the pandemic is still ongoing in the beginning of 2021, the paper gives the reader a descriptive overview of the policies conducted that concern the economy, state institutions and media. In addition, attacks on political opponents will also be presented. The final part discusses the reactions of civil society and the EU in times of the Covid<sub>19</sub> crisis. As a matter of fact, right-wing leaders in Eastern Europe are very well connected, support each other and nurture close relationships. It is therefore of utmost importance to reveal how ruling parties try to strengthen their grip on power and why a strong answer by the European Union is absolutely necessary.

### EXPLANATIONS FOR THE RISE IN ILLIBERAL POLITICS IN EASTERN EUROPE

While there is a plethora of classifications of regimes that are not fully democratic, but also not fully authoritarian, this article applies the concept of illiberal politics in order to grasp the procedural dimension of illiberal or hybrid regimes (Bieber 2020; Levitsky and Way 2010). Illiberal politics is therefore a set of policies “that extend an electoral advantage for governing parties with the aim to remain in power indefinitely. This includes perpetuating advantageous socio-economic structures and governing practices, as well as specific and targeted restrictive actions against political opponents and independent institutions” (Kapidžić 2020, 2). It results thus in hybrid and illiberal regimes, in which only formal democratic procedures are respected.

The rise in illiberal politics in Eastern and South-eastern Europe since the GFC in 2008 resulted in numerous analyses on the subject. Given the development during the last decade in the two most dramatic cases – Hungary and Poland – a rich literature exists that deals with the phenomenon of illiberalism in these two countries (for example see Bernhard 2021; Bernhard 2020; Gora and Wilde 2020; Cianetti et al. 2018). The cases of Hungary and Poland are representative of a broader global pattern: rather

than the direct breakdown of democracy into autocracy (for example via direct military interference), we are witnessing the establishment of hybrid regimes, where illiberal ruling practices are less blatant, more hidden and therefore, need more analytical scrutiny in order to detect them (Bermeo 2016). The South-eastern European countries are no exception to this trend, whereat many of the post-Yugoslav successor states never moved away from their hybrid limbo since the end of the Yugoslav wars (Bieber 2019). While Slovenia's regime stability has been an anomaly within the former Yugoslav federation, recent electoral strength of the right-wing political party SDS as well as Janša's nomination as Prime Minister in 2020 has raised concerns for the country's democratic future.

Scholars have emphasised various factors for the rise of illiberal regimes in Eastern and South-eastern Europe since 2008: the rise of populist parties and their ruling strategies (Vachudova 2020; Bieber et al. 2018; Innes 2014); the role of changing structural conditions, such as socioeconomic factors, domestic institutions and the characteristics of civil society (Bernhard 2021; Bieber 2020; Greskovits 2020; Kapidžić 2020); as well as the EU's responsibility for it (Sedelmeier 2014). This paper acknowledges the importance of external factors (primarily the role of the EU) as well as domestic factors (primarily the role of civil society organisations) when explaining the rise of illiberal politics.

As most of the CEE countries joined the EU in 2004, the disappearance of the stick and carrot relationship with the Union led to non-compliance with the EU's fundamental norms, as countries are not subject anymore to enforcement mechanisms (Bernhard 2021, 19; Sedelmeier 2014). Authoritarian practices were not punished by the Union and with this, right-wing leaders were given the freedom to strengthen their grip on power (Kelemen 2017). Thus, due to the absence of conditionality, the relationship changed between the EU member states. Furthermore, despite reaching a recent compromise regarding the rule of law clause, the European institutions demonstrated a weak and inconsistent response to the rising authoritarian practices in Poland and Hungary. Being not punished by the EU, leaders in the East continue to abuse their power. Reasons for not punishing illiberal behaviour are found in partisan politics as well as a weak normative consensus among the EU member states (Sedelmeier 2014).

In the Western Balkans, the conditionality mechanism is still in force, yet the expected positive influence on democratisation as in the CEE accession process failed to materialise (Schimmelfenning 2008; Schimmelfennig et. al 2006; Vachudova 2005). Consequently, scholars have recently started to emphasise the presence of unfavourable structural conditions in the Western Balkan countries and assessed the EU's responsibility in a critical way (Elbasani 2013). One of the main criticisms refers to the accusa-

tion of the EU being more interested in “stabilitocracy” than democracy (Bieber 2019; Kmezić 2019). The term denotes the current EU’s strategy towards the Western Balkans which focuses more on security conditions on the ground and interstate disputes, in order not to experience violent escalation in Europe’s backyard. As Veljković argues, the displacement of stability into the sphere of security pushed the question of democracy into the background, which led to captured states in the respective countries (Veljković, 2019: 80).

Thus, the EU has been accused of possibly unintended negative effects in the region, as Börzel and Pamuk state. „Europeanisation can have unintended negative effects on the domestic structure of the states. EU policies and institutions not only empower liberal reform coalitions to the extent that they exist in the first place, but can also bolster the power of incumbent authoritarian and corrupt elites“ (Börzel and Pamuk 2012, 81). By supporting directly and indirectly authoritarian parties, EU institutions boost their publicity and increase their legitimacy. What is more, political leaders often misuse European conditionality and European demands in order to strengthen their own power base. Yet, not sanctioning such practices fortifies their strength *vis-à-vis* liberal opposition parties, especially in a context where the ruling political party exerts pressure on the rule of law, the media and civil society organisations.

Next to the EU’s responsibility, numerous accounts point to the relevance of non-autonomous civil society organisations in perpetuating illiberal regimes (Bernhard 2020; Greskovits 2020). Accordingly, it is not enough to understand why citizens voted in the first place for right-wing political parties, but also how right-wing parties are able to uphold power positions and to establish a lasting hegemony in the society (Greskovits 2020). In this view, ruling parties have strong connections to civil society organisations which are not independent and function as a prolonged arm of the right-wing party (examples are the Civic Circles Movement in Hungary, Church affiliated organisations in Poland or GONGO in Serbia). Thus, internal characteristics of civil society organisations (i.e. whether it accepts liberal democracy and represents democratic values) and its links to the ruling power structure are quite important for the rise of illiberal politics (Bernhard 2020).

The article investigates the practices during the Covid<sub>19</sub> crisis, whereat evidence is predominantly based on analysis of the newspaper articles in the last 12 months, investigative reports (Balkan Insight, BIRN) and official interviews with politicians and scholars. Currently, few scholarly studies exist on illiberal measures in the four countries and time period assessed here (Fink-Hafner 2020). Thus, while external and domestic factors paved the way for the illiberal ruling practices that we are currently observing,

special attention is given to the ruling parties' strategies in times of crisis, hence a doptinga procedural lens. The argument is therefore that despite different historical legacies of the four cases, very similar features and mechanisms are observed in the right-wing political parties. All came to power via elections and started to eliminate horizontal checks and balances, independent media, and thus, hollowing out democratic foundations (Sadurski 2019; Scheppele 2014).<sup>3</sup> The paper focuses on four areas in which the strategies of the right-wing political parties are described and compared: in (a) the economy, (b) rule of law, (c) media and (d) opposition. This aims to contribute to a better understanding of the concept of illiberal politics as a feature of illiberal regimes.

### BEFORE THE PANDEMIC: DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN EASTERN EUROPE

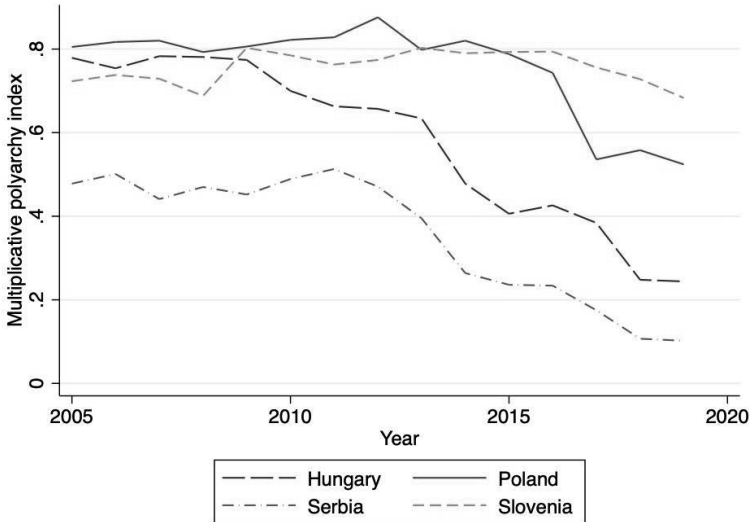
The rise of right-wing populist parties occurred before the Covid19 pandemic and was, inter alia, enabled through the GFC in 2008/09. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán and the right-wing political party Fidesz is the dominant party since 2010. In Serbia, the SNS (Serbian Progressive Party) came to power in 2012, while in Poland PiS (Law and Justice Party) under Jaroslaw Kaczynski is ruling since 2015. In Slovenia, the right-wing SDS (Slovenian Democratic Party) had in the last elections in 2018 the best result as a single party. Its president, Janez Janša, is currently the Prime Minister in Slovenia.

The level of democracy, and generally, the independence of state institutions, differ in the four cases. However, there is convergence in some dimensions with regards to the quality of the regimes in recent years as well as the general trend, when looking at established democracy indices. Figure 1 depicts the V-Dem multiplicative polyarchy index. Since 2013 Hungary, Poland and Serbia experience deterioration in their democracy level, while in Slovenia this deterioration happened more recently. Additionally, the newest report by Freedom House (Freedomhouse.org 2020) has classified Hungary as a hybrid regime (along Serbia), while Poland was classified as a semi-consolidated democracy (previously being classified as a consolidated democracy). This decision was largely determined by the increased influence of the ruling party in Hungary and Poland on the judicial system. Hungary is therefore the first EU member state which is classified as being a non-democratic regime. In addition, the October 2020 report by the Commission on Serbia has stated that the country has

3 Strictly speaking, Slovenia slightly differs from the other three cases as after the elections in 2018 Marjan Šarec Centre Party controlled a minority government. However, due to a political stalemate, Šarec had to step down by the end of 2019 and Janez Janša became PM.

made no progress in the area rule of law, whilst elections held this summer were controlled by the ruling structures (European Commission 2020).

**Figure 1.** *V-Dem Multiplicative Polyarchy Index for Hungary, Poland, Serbia and Slovenia (2005–2019)*



Source: Varieties of Democracy Dataset Version 10. (available on [www.v-dem.net](http://www.v-dem.net))

Note: The multiplicative polyarchy index asks the question: to what extent is the electoral process of democracy achieved? The index is operationalized as a chain, defined by its weakest link (multiplication). The components are the following: freedom of association, clean elections, freedom of expression, elected executive and suffrage. In all four cases, the dimension freedom of expression deteriorated in the last years.

As a result of these developments, the relationship with the European Union (EU) is strained, especially between the EU and Hungary, Poland and Serbia. In 2018, the European Parliament, with the support of the European People's Party, has initiated a rule of law procedure under Article 7 against Hungary. As unanimity from all states is required, the proceedings are stagnating (Mijnssen and Steinvorth 2020). Parallel, there are several proceedings against the PiS in Poland due to their controversial reform of its judiciary since 2017. Poland and Hungary protect each other from further measures.

At the same time, a growing network and close relationships between the PiS, Fidesz, SDS in Slovenia and SNS in Serbia is taking place. In September 2020, Orbán, Janša and Vučić have held an online conference

with the theme “the future of Europe”, in which the leaders presented their political vision for the European Union. During the conference, Orbán stated that keeping the EU together requires that the West “does not enforce its view on the Eastern countries” (Politico.com 2020, 1). The network between the right-wing parties is becoming ever more obvious as well as stronger. This is followed by growing economic ties as well as financial support to the respective right-wing party (Orbán’s support for Janša’s SDS as well as media outlets in Slovenia).

### MEASURES DURING THE STATE OF EMERGENCY

During the state of emergency, the parliament in Hungary has passed an emergency law on March 30<sup>th</sup>, which allowed Orbán to rule per decree. While also other European States have introduced the state of emergency, in Hungary the ruling Fidesz has used this situation to strengthen their grip on power. More than 200 decrees have been passed since March that not only serve to combat the pandemic but serve economic and political purposes (Dw.com 2020b). According to Kreko, four approaches can be distinguished within these decrees: 1. the ruling party concluded new business contracts with oligarchs close to the government; 2. many decrees were directed towards the municipal finances, often strongholds of the opposition parties, thereby depriving them of important sources of income; 3. financial pressure was exerted on opposition politicians by high fines for allegedly disseminating „misinformation”; 4. human rights have been systematically curtailed, for example through the passage of the Omnibus Act in July 2020, which discriminates against the LGBT population as it stipulates that the gender must be on the ID card at birth and cannot be changed (Youtube.com 2020).

Since the state of emergency was terminated relatively quickly, at the end of May, experts suspect that this instrument was deliberately used to demonstrate that there is no authoritarian style of government in Hungary (Youtube.com 2020). With the end of the state of emergency in May, however, a law was passed that allows the government to govern by decree and without control mechanisms during epidemics in the future (Dw.com 2020b). At the end of July, it was also announced that Index, one of the last long-standing and independent online magazines, would close because the editor-in-chief has been replaced by the new owners, whilst the advertising department was taken over by an oligarch close to Orbán. As a sign of protest, most employees have resigned.

Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party has excellent links with right-wing conservative parties in Central and South-eastern Europe, including the PiS, which is ruling Poland since 2015. Imitating Fidesz, the PiS tried to bring the Supreme Court under its control by forcing an early retirement of its



judges. This move, however, was declared by the European Court of Justice to be incompatible with EU law. The Supreme Court is important in Poland as it confirms the validity of the election results in the country. Therefore, the PiS had to wait for the end of the term of the Supreme Court's president, which was the case during the Corona crisis. In May 2020, a new president of the court close to the government was sworn in (Dw.com 2020a). In addition to its great influence on various state institutions, the PiS control the state television TVP, the only TV station that is broadcasted throughout the country.

In March, Poland's government introduced a nationwide lockdown, which was welcomed by a large majority of the population. As in the other Eastern European countries, it quickly became clear that the country's health system would not be able to cope with a large number of sick people, not least because of the severe migration of professionals and medical staff to Western Europe. After the almost three-month curfew, the Poles slowly returned to normality, also because presidential elections were to be held in June. In the midst of the pandemic, the two candidates, Duda from the PiS and his challenger Trzaskowski from the PO (Civic Platform) run a very close race. The focus was not necessarily on the management of the Corona crisis, but rather on the position of the candidates on government subsidies, cultural and ideological issues and human rights. There was as well a scandal before the elections. The Duda's government had ordered 100,000 protective masks from a „friend of the PiS”, which turned out to be useless (Notesfrompoland.com 2020).

The PiS candidate Duda has narrowly beaten his challenger. Contrary to the usual analyses of the Polish media, which portrays 51 percent of Poles as “conservative or nationalist”, it seems that the subsidies to families (i.e. the Family 500+ program) which have been paid out since 2015 were the decisive factor for PiS' election success. The government supports families with 500 zlotys a month (around EUR 110), which makes a noticeable contribution to the monthly budget in Poland. This lifted many families out of poverty, especially those who live in smaller communities and villages. The nationalist-conservative bloc only makes up about a third of the electorate. In fact, it was Duda's aggressive anti-LGBT rhetoric that led to a tight election result, and not because the majority of Poles have a right-wing conservative or semi-authoritarian view of the world. The anti-LGBT campaign has thus rather harmed Duda, than helped him gaining votes. Against the background of an average annual economic growth of five percent, many voters decided in favour of the PiS, also out of fear that the opposition candidate would cancel the family allowances in case of victory (Orenstein 2020).

Elections were also held in Serbia this summer despite the Corona pandemic. The task force for the Covid19 crisis initially ridiculed the virus in March 2020 and asked residents to go shopping in Milan as there would be now clearance sale (Rs.niinfo.com 2020a). After the first corona cases appeared, it quickly became clear that the underfunded and ailing health system in Serbia would be overwhelmed by a pandemic. The government then implemented some of the most draconian measures in Europe: day-long curfews from 6 p.m., an absolute curfew for the over 65-years-old population and a general curfew for everyone over the weekend, sometimes up to four consecutive days.

At the end of May, the SNS declared that the “war on the pandemic” has been won, in order to schedule the parliamentary elections for June 21 (Rs.niinfo.com 2020b). From absolute lockdown, the government quickly switched to opening discos and restaurants, allowing football games with up to 25,000 spectators, all without any epidemiological measures, but with the aim of giving voters a false sense of security so that they could vote on June 21. Consequently, the political opposition boycotted the elections, not only due to the pandemic, but also due to lack of free and fair conditions for competition. As in 2016, there were cases of election fraud and manipulation, as well as a low turnout. As expected, President Vučić’s SNS celebrated a huge victory; Only 6 opposition MPs made into the parliament.

However, the rapid relaxation of the corona protective measures and the holding of the elections turned out to be fatal after a few days. During the summer, the number of new infected persons was between 200 and 300 per day, while local hospitals were in a near- catastrophic situation. There was not only a shortage of medical personnel, but also of basic materials such as masks and disinfectants. Many doctors and large parts of the medical staff became infected with the virus. Journalists who reported on the precarious conditions were arrested and later released under pressure from civil society (Rs.niinfo.com 2020). In addition, research by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) showed that the statistics in Serbia were manipulated and data on new infections and deaths were falsified so that the elections could be held in June (Birn.eu.com 2020).

In Slovenia, on the other hand, the right-wing conservative parties are not dominant, even if Janez Janša’s SDS won 25 percent of the votes in 2018 and thus achieved the best election result single-handedly. After previous Prime Minister Marjan Šarec resigned with his center-left minority government, Janša was sworn in as Prime Minister in January 2020. This gave him control over the measures during the Corona crisis. As in the countries previously discussed, the government tried to replace the board of the state television RTS during this period. During this process, however, the

Constitutional Court stopped Janša on the grounds that a change of staff before the expiry of the board's term of office would be unconstitutional. At the same time, independent media and journalists who reported on the measures imposed by the government in a critical way were attacked.

A corruption scandal was also revealed. When buying masks and ventilators, the government had given preference to a company that is close to the ruling party (Fink-Hafner 2020). The material procured had proven to be insufficient. Moreover, many firms who won public tenders were not experts in the field, nor did they provide any expertise in the health care sector. In this way, one of Slovenia's richest businessman secured a 24.5 million EUR deal to provide protective equipment. Although Slovenia has a lengthy and controlled bidding process, these rules have been suspended due to the pandemic (Delić and Zwitter 2020). In addition, another scandal was revealed in the second wave, when the government purchased useless Covid<sub>19</sub> tests, which were delivered through connections with the youth organisations of Janša's party (Balkaninsight.com 2021). As in previous governments where Janša held decision-making positions, he replaced the heads of the military and police and the head of the National Public Health Institute. Hence, Slovenia is also experiencing increased attacks by the right-wing SDS on state institutions, media and journalists.

Even if the takeover of state television in Slovenia has been stopped, Janša learns from other right-wing populist leaders, uses Twitter every day and tries to set up his own media houses and television stations with financial help from Orbán's circles. On July 9<sup>th</sup>, a law was passed that provides a budget reduction of 13 million EUR for the state television RTS, which would lead to a reduction of around 600 jobs (Birn.eu.com 2021). It is clear that Janša was looking in the direction of Budapest, Warsaw and Belgrade: Fidesz, the PiS and the SNS have long ago taken control of the state television. The controversial law is currently being debated in the Slovenian parliament, while the Culture Ministry received numerous objections from more than 100 organisations and individuals about the proposed legislation.

## REACTIONS FROM CITIZENS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

The corona crisis was misused by right-wing populist leaders to negotiate corrupt deals between government-affiliated companies and the ruling party, as well to control various media outlets and to increase their influence on institutions. Civil society responded with protests and demonstrations, which were heavily supported by left-wing movements and NGOs. The ways how citizens demonstrated ranged from car demonstrations in Warsaw and Budapest, cycling protests in Ljubljana to balcony protests

with kitchen utensils in Belgrade. After the lockdown, mass protests were organised in Serbia in order to prevent new lockdowns. In Poland, the parliamentary debate on further tightening of the abortion law has led to demonstrations by the end of October. Such protests need to be analysed as a reaction to the restrictive and corrupt measures undertaken by the right-wing governments, and not primarily against epidemiological measures that should protect the health of its citizens. While the Friday protests in Ljubljana are still ongoing at the beginning of 2021 (albeit on a smaller scale), protests in the other capital cities have gradually faded away.

Simultaneously, a response to the current developments by external actors is weak and disappointing. The European Parliament has debated for several years how to react to breaches against the rule of law within the EU (Gora and Wilde 2020). As applying Article 7 on the member states led to a faltering process in the past, several EU representatives called for making the accession to the EU funds conditional on a rule of law clause. As expected, during the budget negotiation of the Coronavirus recovery fund, Poland and Hungary demonstrated their political coalition, vetoing any adoption of the budget (Holesch and Kyriazi 2021). This resulted in a political stalemate for months. By the end of 2020, a compromise between Poland, Hungary and the EU was reached. The compromise between the rule of law and access to EU funds drawn-up by Germany has been heavily criticised by several MEPs (Theguardian.com 2020). As Hungary and Poland are currently insisting on legal review of the clause by the European Court of Justice, its implementation can be postponed up to two years.

Those who oppose the compromise, notably the Northern EU countries, state that the new text is narrowing down the definition of rule of law, rowing back on important elements. Furthermore, the compromise aims to punish breaches against the rule of law which are linked to the EU budget. Critics thus state that the clause is somehow degraded to an anti-corruption measure. Additionally, Poland and Hungary succeeded in demanding a need for a qualified majority: 15 of the member states, representing at least 65 % of the EU's population are needed to support possible sanctions. The European Commission holds the monopoly on the right of the initiative, but as the Commission was rather reluctant in condemning illiberal practices in Hungary and Poland, only time will show whether something will change through the rule of law clause.

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The article demonstrated similarities between the strategies of ruling right-wing parties in the Eastern Europe. All current leaders came to power via formal democratic procedures, i.e. elections, while all of them are as well experienced politicians and had a “start-up” period during the 1990s. The democratic abuses are, therefore, less blatant and more hidden, and the mechanisms used by the ruling parties need more analytical scrutiny in order to make sense of illiberal politics, and therefore, a rise in illiberal regimes in Eastern Europe. While the article demonstrated a convergence of illiberal politics during the Covid<sub>19</sub> crisis, the outcome in the four cases is likely to differ. Notably, the country that exhibits the strongest, most independent institutions, as well as most autonomous and strong civil society organizations, will experience the least democratic backsliding. This is currently the case in Slovenia. As things stand now, Janša’s SDS is facing a strong opposition, as the current political crisis in the country shows. In February 2021, the Slovenian parliament aimed to topple the right-wing government in fear of democratic backsliding. Yet, Janša survived the no-confidence vote. Next elections are set to be held in early 2022, until then the SDS still has time to continue with its illiberal politics.

The ruling right-wing parties apply similar strategies in order to strengthen their grip on power and to weaken any domestic opposition. Measures range from corrupt contracts, control of courts and independent media to defaming and threatening the political opposition. Their mechanisms nurture clientelism and nepotism, ultimately leading to democratic backsliding. While the EU compromise on the rule of law clause has been interpreted by some as disappointing, not counting anymore on Brussel’s help, certain domestic factors still can exert pressure on the right-wing parties. In the case of Slovenia, independent institutions still can check Janša’s government. While Janša aimed to strengthen Slovenia’s military complex with an investment of 780 million Euros for the purchase of weapons (like Hungary), the Constitutional Court has temporarily suspended the implementation of the law. As major institutions in the other cases are already under control of the ruling party, and therefore independent civil society organizations, coupled with a strong answer from the EU, are indispensable. The current situation in Europe and the ongoing pandemic during the winter months present substantial challenges for the future of democracy in Eastern Europe as well as the future of the Union itself.

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