



# Anti-liberal ideas and institutional change in Central and Eastern Europe

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## ABSTRACT

Three decades since the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, the ideal of liberal democracy is under considerable strain. Recent developments in the region show that democratic institutions do not only evolve and consolidate, but they can also decay. The article intends to provide a comprehensive theoretical account to shed light on the ongoing multifaceted and multi-layered processes of change in the region. Drawing on the literature on the role of ideas and on the body of research explaining ongoing transformations in Central and Eastern Europe, it conceptualises the normative core of anti-liberal ideas. It shows that this core is embedded in a set of narratives pitted against liberal democracy, which take the form of causal stories, put forward values and solutions, being ultimately used to legitimise institutional change in politics (i.e. agency and the social power structures) policies (i.e. how economic nationalism alters the neoliberal model) and the polity (i.e. the rules of the political game). This conceptual map, which is derived inductively from the literature, is meant to guide future empirical studies and theory building exercises seeking to understand institutional change in the region and beyond.

## KEYWORDS

Anti-liberal ideas; liberal democracy; institutional change; narratives; causal stories; legitimisation strategy

## Q3 1. Introduction

The rise of anti-liberal ideas as opposed to liberal democracy has emerged in recent years as a new research puzzle. More than 30 years ago, liberal democracy and neoliberalism became the hegemonic *lingua franca* of the international community and powerful legitimising paradigms for political leaders of all persuasions. Eager to catch up with the West, to integrate into the global economy and ultimately to join the European Union (EU), the old and new political elites from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have proclaimed the 'triumph of democracy', embraced the neoliberal paradigm and the adjacent set of reforms with far-reaching socio-economic consequences. As scholars of democratisation and comparative politics have shown, the hope for a better future legitimised in the 1990s the implementation of shock therapy reforms. Governments in the region sometimes went beyond what international actors or the EU prescribed (Appel & Orenstein, 2018, p. 3), as few economic reforms accounted for the specificities of the national context

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(Ban, 2016; Bruszt & Vukov, 2017). Even as Western Europe began to deplore the effects of neoliberal policies, in Eastern Europe, the neoliberal momentum 'lasted, lasted and lasted' (Appel & Orenstein, 2018, p. 3). After three decades of change, the ideal of liberal democracy is under considerable strain (Blauberger & Kelemen, 2017; Kelemen, 2017; Müller, 2013). Anti-liberal ideas are flourishing within the EU, being more salient in some parts of CEE, although not confined to this region.

Anti-liberal ideas are not new *per se*. Critics of liberal democracy have always existed on the European continent (Ignazi, 2003, p. 148; Lacroix & Pranchère, 2019). Latent or manifest, they have historical roots in different national contexts. In recent years however they have re-emerged and, sometimes even became institutionalised, being translated into measures that deviate from the principles and values of liberal democracy, leading to policy/institutional change with far-reaching consequences for political, social and economic transformations. Recent developments in CEE countries have been examined from different perspectives and conceptualised in many ways as 'democratic backsliding', 'executive aggrandisement' (Bermeo, 2016, p. 5; Cianetti et al., 2018), 'authoritarian turn', 'authoritarian legalism', 'democratic deconsolidation', 'de-democratization', 'de-Europeanization' (Gürkan & Tomini, 2020), 'competitive authoritarianism', 'populist constitutionalism', 'authoritarian modalities of governance', 'democratic involution' (Buzogány, 2017), 'authoritarian neoliberalism' (Bruff & Tansel, 2019). There is no consensual terminology on how to account for ongoing transformations as the nature and the degree of change varies from one context to another. While scholars of party politics study the rise of conservative populist parties, scholars in the international political economy shed light on the combination of neoliberal economic rhetoric with conservative values. These growing bodies of research, often disconnected, describe different parts of this puzzle; we still miss the big picture and a comprehensive theoretical account of the ongoing multifaceted and multi-layered processes of change.

Our article thus aims to provide a theoretical supporting structure for scholars with an interest in this topic as well as for the contributions in this issue that address the following questions: what is the nature and the shaping power of anti-liberal ideas? By addressing this question, the article seeks to contribute to the existing literature in two ways.

For one, while since the collapse of communism transformations in CEE have been analysed with a focus on the circulation of ideas, norms and prescriptions defined exogenously by regional/international actors to consolidate liberal democracy, this paper examines the opposite trend, with a focus on the transformative power of anti-liberal ideas, pitted against liberal democracy. The rise of anti-liberal ideas is not specific to CEE. What makes the region a compelling case is that anti-liberal ideas seem to be put forward by domestic political actors and intellectuals themselves (Buzogány & Varga, 2018, p. 814; see Buzogány and Varga in this issue; see Behr in this issue) rather than imported from elsewhere.

Moreover, while most of the literature explores one facet of ongoing transformations, this article proposes a comprehensive theoretical account looking at how anti-liberal ideas reshape *politics* (i.e. political agency and social power structures), *policies* (i.e. economic and social measures undertaken by democratic backsliding regimes), and the *polity* (i.e. core constitutional design or the rules of the political game in a given country). Obviously, these are all overlapping and uneven transformations, as constitutional

changes permit certain discretionary policy measures, which in turn strengthen electoral support from certain groups in society.

Against this backdrop, drawing on a flourishing literature, the paper provides a comprehensive mapping of anti-liberal ideas in Central and Eastern Europe. It shows that their ideational core is embedded in a set of narratives pitted against liberal democracy, which take the form of causal stories, put forward values and solutions, being ultimately used to legitimise institutional change in politics (i.e. agency and the social power structures) policies (i.e. how economic nationalism alters the neoliberal model) and the polity (i.e. the rules of the political game). Conceptualised as narratives, the core anti-liberal ideas encapsulate causes, underlying values and strategies of legitimisation. In this attempt of conceptualisation of a normative core, we focus specifically on those CEE countries that had the lowest liberal democracy score in the latest V-Dem edition: Hungary, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria (also discussed in this issue).<sup>1</sup> While many of the narratives we present here can travel beyond this specific subset of countries, we focus our empirical assessment on this category of most critical cases.

To do so, the article is divided into three main parts. Section 1 discusses the nature and the transformative power of anti-liberal ideas. Section 2 maps the ideational core of the anti-liberal narrative, putting forward values and solutions to legitimise institutional change. Section 3 shows how anti-liberal ideas alter unevenly, polities, politics and policies in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond.

### **1.1. The power of anti-liberal ideas in CEE**

While the literature on the politics of ideas is well established (Ban, 2016; Blyth, 2013a, 2013b; Campbell & Pedersen, 2014; Carstensen & Schmidt, 2018; Hall, 1993, 1997; Parsons, 2016; Schmidt, 2016), the ambition of this article is to shed light on the nature and transformative power of anti-liberal ideas. To do so, the article borrows some key assumptions from this body of research and more specifically from the article of Deborah Stone (1989) on 'Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas'.

#### **1.1.1. From ideas to anti-liberal ideas**

A well-established literature shows the centrality of ideas in understanding the politics of institutional change (Ban, 2016; Blyth, 2013a, 2013b; Hall, 1993; Schmidt, 2008; Stone, 1989). While some give more credit to ideas themselves, claiming that what actors believe is important, others admit a more instrumental use of ideas, as self-interested actors promote ideas that in turn produce change which enables them to pursue their interests (McNamara, 1998; Schmidt, 2008; Campbell, 2002; Schmidt & Thatcher, 2013, p. 34; Blyth, 2013a, 2013b; Ban, 2016; Seabrooke & Tsingou, 2019). Ideas are important for understanding structures of power (Carstensen & Schmidt, 2018, p. 319). They are key factors determining actors' goals, preferences and political behaviour (Berman, 1998). They embody political struggles, in particular the struggle among competing ideas (Béland & Cox, 2013, p. 193). They give meaning to actors' experience of the world and their world views (Wendt, 1999; Schmidt, 2008; Campbell, 2002; Béland & Cox, 2011). Ideas can be ideologies, beliefs, norms, culture, discourses, myths, narratives, stories, frames, etc.

Ideas matter in explaining change. As demonstrated by Peter Hall (1993, pp. 279–280), change can range from incremental policy modifications to radical overhauls embodying ruptures with the status-quo. New paradigms replace old ones and paradigm shifts ‘occur when policymakers suddenly find themselves faced with unusual political and economic problems for which the current paradigm offers no clear-cut solutions’ (Campbell, 2002, p. 23). Certain ideas gain resonance and acceptance because there is a fit between them and particular contexts (Berman, 2013, p. 228) and political opportunity structures.

In contrast, the rise of anti-liberal ideas has given rise to a heterogeneous body of research: it has been studied in party politics to understand the appeal of conservative populist parties (Braghiroli & Petsinis, 2019; Cianetti et al., 2018, 2020; Dawson & Hanley, 2019; Gherghina & Fagan, 2019; Haughton & Deegan-Krause, 2020; Makarychev, 2019; Vachudova, 2008, 2019, 2020), in international political economy to shed light on the combination of neoliberal economic rhetoric with conservative values (Bohle & Greskovits, 2019; Bruff & Tansel, 2019; Bruszt & Langbein, 2017; Buzogány & Varga, 2018; Orenstein & Bugarič, 2020), as well as in EU studies to understand the increased contestation and politicisation of EU integration resulting from clashes in cultural beliefs and contrasting undertakings of European values (Coman & Leconte, 2019; Krastev, 2020; Laczo & Gabrieljelic, 2020).

‘Anti-liberal ideas’ is a broad expression that we understand in this article as ideas contesting liberal democracy and its main features. Liberal democracy refers to a political system characterised not only by pluralism, free and fair elections but also by the rule of law, separation of powers, the protection of civil liberties and minority rights, the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion, and property. As defined by John Rawls, it is rooted on the one hand ‘in the fundamental principles that specify the general structure of government and the political process: the powers of the legislature, executive and the judiciary’; and on the other, in ‘the equal basic rights and liberties of citizenship that legislative majorities are to respect: such as the right to vote and to participate in politics, liberty of conscience, freedom of thought and association, as well as the protection of the rule of law’ (Rawls, 1996, p. 226).

Anti-liberal ideas are not new. They only have gained more ground in recent years. Back in 2010, Viktor Orbán has declared that Western liberalism and individualism are alien to the domestic political culture (Buzogány, 2017, p. 1313), claims that Polish intellectuals were already making even before 1989, as Behr shows in this issue. ‘Liberal democracy has no future’, argued Viktor Orbán. In 2014, at Baile Tusnad in Romania, he announced his ambition of building an ‘illiberal democracy’, the expression used to reject the Western liberal paradigm (Agh, 2016; Zakaria, 2007). ‘The new state that we are building is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not deny foundational values of liberalism, as freedom, etc. But it does not make this ideology a central element of state organisation, but applies a specific, national, particular approach in its stead’ (Orbán, 2014). While the expression ‘anti-liberal ideas’ is broad, some key elements can be identified: a majoritarian understanding of power; the rejection of pluralism and multiculturalism; economic nationalism and the contestation of international/regional organisations and the EU in the name of sovereignty and national identity. Anti-liberal ideas contain new and old conservative ideas about abortion, minority rights and gender issues; most of their promoters are anti-immigrants, they tend to be patriotic and religious (see Williamson et al., 2011).

If 'illiberal democracy' seems to be a 'mobilizing buzzword' invoked to reject the last two decades of post-communism (Buzogány, 2017, p. 1314), the question is whether this illiberalism is a new paradigm, an ideological project or an interest-based one. Scholars who have analysed the rise of populist parties (and implicitly the rise of anti-liberal ideas) and the transformation of the right in Europe have argued that Orbán's discourse contains a combination of populist and neoconservative ideas, which do not constitute a new ideological core but rather a set of catch-all ideas. Much like the catch-all party of earlier decades (Blyth & Katz, 2005), the purpose could be the same: maximisation of electoral support amongst supporters by creating stronger and more threatening demarcation lines against non-partisan social groups.

### 1.1.2. Anti-liberal ideas and their entrepreneurs

Ideas do not achieve prominence on their own but must be championed by carriers or entrepreneurs, individuals, parties or groups capable of persuading others to reconsider the ways they think and act (Berman, 2013, p. 228; Blyth, 2013a, 2013b; Carstensen & Schmidt, 2018; Behr, Buzogány and Varga in this issue). Both the characteristics and power position of actors play a role in explaining why some ideas rise to prominence while others do not (Berman, 2013, p. 228). How ideas gain power matter (see Buzogány and Varga in this issue). Carstensen and Schmidt (2018) define ideational power as 'the capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence other actors' normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements', while institutional power is defined 'as actors' control of others through the formal and informal institutions that mediate between A and B'.

Anti-liberal ideas are promoted by different actors in many ways across Central and Eastern Europe (CEE): in Hungary by the Fidesz, and subsequently legitimised by a broad network of political and societal groups (Pirro et al., 2019); in Poland by Law and Justice, a party with a Christian conservative-national ideology (Cianetti et al., 2018, p. 245; Nimu & Volintiru, 2017); in the Czech Republic not only by an 'illiberal social democracy' (Dawson & Hanley, 2019) – as Milos Zeman 'has aligned himself with the illiberal governments of Poland and Hungary, publicly praised Vladimir Putin, and sought to expand trade and diplomatic links with China, Russia, and the former Soviet region' (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018, p. 280), but also by the party of Andrej Babis – ANO which stands in English for Action for Dissatisfied Citizens (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018, p. 278). Anti-liberal ideas are invoked in Romania by a wider spectrum of parties than usually acknowledged (Gherghina et al., 2017), from the relatively high turnover of extra-parliamentary radical-right populist parties (Soare & Tufiş, 2019) to the spin-off parties on the left, designed to capture a nationalist and religiously conservative electoral base which falls outside the reach of a mainstream platform like the Social Democrats (PSD) (Volintiru & Gherghina, 2020). The recent rise to prominence of a new far-right party in Romania – Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR) – showcases the persistent electoral appetite for conservative ideas. The anti-liberal discourse in Bulgaria marked a personalistic turn in Bulgarian politics as it was used to legitimise state capture and politicisation (Ganev, 2018). Anti-liberal ideas are echoed by other actors too, by intellectuals, new think tanks and civil society organisations, the media – new outlets or constrained to follow governmental lines.

230 However, not all political actors in the region have managed to develop a powerful narrative like Viktor Orbán. Nonetheless, some elements are common. While the ideological core of the Fidesz and the Polish Law & Justice Party (PiS) is rather consolidated, ANO's ideological core is vague (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018, p. 278) and promotes a form of 'technocratic populism' (Havlík, 2019), which is also an alternative to the dominant liberal democratic paradigm. ANO's discourse is less radical than the one promoted by Orbán (Havlík, 2019, p. 370) although its effects challenge in the same way the foundations of liberal democracy. Anti-liberal ideas are expressed by various Romanian politicians in support of economic nationalism (Ban & Bohle, 2020), but designed for electoral mobilisation rather than deep institutional change. The strategies used vary depending on the structural and institutional constraints that the parties, once in power, have to face (Toplišek, 2020, p. 391).

## 240 **2. Anti-liberal ideas as narratives: causes, values, strategies of legitimation and solutions**

We argue that anti-liberal ideas are embedded in a set of narratives, which take the form of causal stories, to be used as strategies of legitimation to reshape politics, policies and the polity as discussed in the sections below. As Stone (1989, p. 282) put it, causal stories 'describe harms and difficulties, attribute them to actions of other individuals or organisations, and thereby claim the right to invoke government power to stop the harm'. They are rooted in a process of 'problem definition' which is a process of 'image making, where the images have to do fundamentally with attributing cause, blame, and responsibility' (Stone, 1989, p. 282). Narratives are employed as a way of representing reality and as an explanatory scheme to account for social and political phenomena (Bevir & Rhodes, 2003).

255 In CEE, anti-liberal ideas are at the core of a process of problem definition which points out the failure of the combined processes of democratisation, marketisation and Europeanisation undertaken since the 1990s onwards. Drawing on the existing literature, three main narrative cores are identified, each one pointing out causes, solutions, values and drawing on specific strategies of legitimation (see Table 1):

260 The first one targets political liberalism; it places responsibility for the political and economic crisis on 'corrupt communists and liberals', portrayed as 'agents of the dominant capitalist-global order'. The aim is therefore to change the balance of power through a new set of legitimation ideas which discredit domestic democratisation and exploit the weakness of democracy for their own profit.

265 The second one designates economic liberalism; it finds fault with Western capitalism and embraces the form of 'militant economic nationalism' (Bohle & Greskovits, 2019, p. 1075). It promotes increased independence *vis-à-vis* the EU and other international organisations and sees the process of transformation driven by EU integration as a cause of current domestic problems. As an illustration, Viktor Orbán argued that 'the idea that capitalism would bring prosperity (...) while the state should keep itself away from the economy has led to the bankruptcy of this system' (Fabry, 2019, p. 117). He thus argued in favour of increased renationalisation and redistribution of privatised property (Bohle & Greskovits, 2019, p. 1076). These ideas have become dominant in the mainstream discourse in Hungary (Fabry, 2019, p. 116), which aims to re-establish economic

**Table 1.** Mapping anti-liberal narratives: causes, values, strategies to legitimise institutional change and solutions.

Narrative core/ dimensions of change		Politics	Policy	Polity
275	Causes	Demise of the Western system of values ( <i>see Behr; Buzogany and Varga; see Andguladze – in this issue</i> )	Critique of the excessive dependence on foreign capital	The failure of the post-communist transition and democratisation driven by domestic elites
	Values	National/Christian values presented as ‘European’ conservative values ( <i>see Behr in this issue</i> )	Economic nationalism ( <i>see also Buzogány and Mihai Varga in this issue</i> )	Majoritarian conception of democracy Sovereignty
280	Strategy of legitimisation	Identifying enemies Liberal democracy presented as a danger ( <i>see Behr in this issue</i> ) Delegitimizing progressive opponents – political actors and civil society organisations (CSOs) promoting human rights and liberal democracy	Delegitimizing regional and international actors or paying lip service to liberal values in their international discourse ( <i>see Rone in this issue</i> )	Legalism/legalistic revolutions Selective use of comparative law
285	Solutions	Confine pluralism and reject multiculturalism ( <i>also Behr in this issue</i> ) Branding mainstream political actors as ineffective and disingenuous in addressing the national social and economic problems Restrain political competition Looking for allies and building coalitions of supporters ( <i>also Behr in this issue</i> )	Support domestic capital ( <i>see Ban et al in this issue</i> ) Limit FDI ( <i>see Ban et al in this issue</i> ) Fiscal and jurisdictional recentralisation Redistribution policies Welfare rights for native families ( <i>see also Buzogány and Mihai Varga in this issue</i> ) Channel (discretionary) public funding to loyal supporters (e.g. local governments, domestic firms, conservative civil society) Constrain rights and freedoms ( <i>see Beyer in this issue</i> )	Restore the allegedly stolen sovereignty of the people Executive aggrandisement A majoritarian approach to power Limitations on institutional independence Use and abuse of (counter) constitutional mechanisms and principles ( <i>see Blokker in this issue</i> )

sovereignty and privilege national economic insiders at the expense of outsiders (Johnson & Barnes, 2015).

The third narrative focuses on cultural liberalism and points out the crisis of Western civilisation and the need for a rediscovery of moral values (Fabry, 2019, p. 118; Foret & Calligaro, 2018) to recreate a political community which is equated to the cultural/moral community.

Each of the narratives identifies causes and brings together solutions. They are put forward in the name of values often associated with sovereignty, nationalism and Christianity. References to values such as sovereignty and national identity abounded in this process of legitimisation, while spinning them around so that they eventually convey a message that is at the opposite of their original meaning (Coman & Leconte, 2019, p. 862). In addition, they are supported by strategies of legitimisation, that is ‘pushing responsibility onto someone else’ and accusing ‘someone else of intentionally causing the problem’ (Stone, 1989, p. 289), while legitimising and empowering particular actors as ‘fixers’ of the problem’ (Stone, 1989, p. 295). The narratives emerging in CEE imply delegitimising the opposition, civil society, international and regional

organisations, including the EU; in so doing, promoters of anti-liberal ideas seek to reshape the foundations of the polity, policies and politics in different ways (see Table 1), putting forward a wide range of solutions in the name of a set of specific values. While change is uneven, the narratives are conspicuous. Although they are presented in the Table 1 in distinct categories, causal arguments, solutions, values and strategies of legitimation often overlap.

## 2.1. Uneven degrees of change: politics, policy and polity

The degree of change is uneven depending on national political structures. In order to properly assess these dimensions, we look simultaneously at social, political and economic transformations. Drawing on the existing literature we show that in some contexts, economic transformation precedes the political one and vice-versa. Economic transformations are much more restrained than democratic alterations. While change can be observed in some key policy areas, continuity is perceived in others, leading Bohle and Greskovits to question the gap between 'noisy politicised policies of change and the quiet policies of continuity' (2019, p. 1071). As a general trend, promoters of anti-liberal ideas use policies as instruments through which anti-liberal ideas are realised, which in turn alters the polity and reinforces the cycle.

### 2.1.1. Politics: altering the social power structures

The relationship between state and society as well as power structures within society have been subject to change in CEE (Buzogány, 2017, p. 1313) before and after the Fidesz or PiS came to power. Being for a long time in opposition, they contributed to the creation of new ties with conservative civil society, by co-opting right-wing civic groups (Bustikova & Guasti, 2017; Greskovits, 2020; Hanley & Vachudova, 2018; Pirro et al., 2019). In Hungary, 'the new right began its term by promising to revive the republican spirit and giving hope to the country to revive itself, relying on its inner strength' (Bozóki, 2008, p. 213). In this attempt, Orbán sought to create a new community from above, guided by 'the values and models of one particular cultural group' (Bozóki, 2008, p. 224). In Poland, the Law and Justice Party supports the influence of the Church over politics and policies, promoting a 'new moral order', and subsequently putting forth a variety of policies aimed at blocking abortion, LGBT rights, and even in-vitro fertilisations (Nimu & Volintiru, 2017, p. 227). In Poland, for example, some NGOs were among the first to oppose the ratification of the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention on violence against women, as early as 2012 (Stubbs & Lendvai-Bainton, 2019, p. 553). To a less extent, in the Czech Republic, Babis has co-opted voices in academia, journalism, and the existing NGO sector (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018, p. 286). For the Czech Republic, the values narrative was used to target migration and the rights of minorities. In Romania, nationalist political discourse harnesses a large electoral base of conservative NGOs and this is an essential aspect of how ideas have altered institutions: by gaining electoral legitimacy through popular support. In Romania, the former government of the Social Democratic Party (PSD) attempted to align its value platform with religious groups supporting a referendum to uphold family values, for mobilisation purposes. The latter religious groups now form the electoral backbone of a new radical Romanian party AUR supporting 'family, nation, Christian faith and liberty'.

This transformation is supported by political actors as a result of a 'party-captured stated' or by oligarchs who dominate the economy in a 'corporate state capture' (Grzymala-Busse, 2008; Innes, 2014; Gherghina & Volintiru, 2017; Volintiru et al., 2018; Bohle & Greskovits, 2019). For Greskovits (2020, p. 3), the argument which stresses the state capture is incomplete, as it does not take enough into account 'the anti-liberal parties enduring substantial support in public opinion'. It has been a decade since there was a pronounced shift to the right in civil society and government throughout the region Hungary, Poland or Slovakia since a decade ago, and others like Bulgaria or Romania only more recently. Greskovits points out the role of educated conservatives and 'the civic activism of the radicalising educated conservative middle class for the rise and lasting power of illiberals in Hungary and perhaps other countries' (2020, p. 4).

This process of subtle change is supported by strategies of (de)legitimation of the opposition and civil society through media campaigns which are under the control of influential political actors. Polarisation is also central (Vachudova, 2019), that is the division lines between 'us' and 'them', mainly enemies (e.g. migrants, immigrants, elites), motivated by the credo that Christianity and Western civilisation is superior and based on the rejection of multiculturalism on the grounds that mixing cultures engenders identity which leads to a 'carnival of hate' (Mounk, 2018, p. 31).

### 2.1.2. Policy: economic nationalism alters the neoliberal model

From anti-liberal ideas a new vision of the polity emerges, with an emphasis on economic nationalism one that is often translated in economic policies that strengthen loyal elites and permit pork-barrel politics. In Hungary and Poland, political transformation has enabled economic transformation, while in the Czech Republic economic transformation is ongoing, but political transformation is latent. For Romania and Bulgaria, the political discourse in support of nationalist policies left no substantial traces in the actual decision-making process, with neither an economic or political transformation taking deep roots.

Unlike Western Europe that went through a period of economic slowdown, for CEE the last decade meant a period of economic growth and prosperity. Overall convergence was clear in the region – to a greater (i.e. Romania, Lithuania, Latvia) or lesser extent (i.e. Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovenia). EU member states from this region are in fact net beneficiaries of European funding, receiving much more than they contribute to the EU budget (Anghel, 2020), mainly in the form of cohesion funding. But large subnational disparities make the effects of economic integration less tangible for some. The relative economic deprivation in Central and Eastern Europe can be linked to anti-liberal political options, as for example in the Czech Republic, its poorest regions of Karlovarsky and Ustecky, home to the disappearing coal industry, are strongholds for the ANO populist party, while poverty stricken rural areas in Poland all voted for PiS in the last presidential election. European funding has contributed to the local development, but it has also placed a heavy burden on administrations that often lack both technical capacity (Volintiru et al., 2018) and capital for the co-financing requirements (Medve-Bálint & Bohle, 2016). In this context, anti-liberal economic policies ensued under the regional form of 'economic populist sovereignty' (Buzogány and Varga, in this special issue).

Changing the economic order is also part of the key narrative and main ambition, as a way to protect sovereignty and the interests of the nation. After his re-election in 2010,

Orbán declared his ambition to 'build a country in which foreign banks and bureaucrats are not telling us what to do' (Buzogány, 2017, p. 1314; see also Ban, Scheiring and Vasile). Scholars have identified different forms of policy changes such as 'reversal of pension privatisation and flat taxes, and the rise of alternative – statist – developmental paradigms' (Bohle & Greskovits, 2019, p. 1071). In Romania too, a series of policy initiatives aimed at de-financialisation – including provisions related to private pension contributions or crediting, stopped short of actually being implemented given strong political backlash from the liberal opposition at the time (Ban & Bohle, 2020). While some authors see in such economic policies different degrees of economic nationalism (Bohle & Greskovits, 2019; Johnson & Barnes, 2015; Orenstein & Bugarič, 2020; Ban et al. in this special issue), others linked such economic measures promoted by Central and Eastern European leaders as forms of emulation of Putin's economic nationalist model.

In Hungary, for example, Orbán's government sought to renationalise what it identified as strategic economic sectors (Toplišek, 2020, p. 394). As Toplišek shows, 'by the end of 2017, the foreign ownership of the banking sector decreased from 80 per cent to just below 50 per cent, with two thirds of the domestic share owned by the state' (2020, p. 394). Similarly, the Polish Law and Justice government has sought to 're-polonise' the domestic banking sector (Toplišek, 2020, p. 394). But in Hungary, this renationalisation agenda did not limit itself to what were considered strategic sectors. The government has pursued the same strategy at the level of small firms in many other sectors. While the Hungarian economic model is transforming to become less liberal and more statist, the Polish model is moving in the opposite direction, that is 'further liberalism and more embedded capitalism' (Bohle & Greskovits, 2019, p. 1073). Furthermore, while there is an increased politicisation of macroprudential policies in CEE, different patterns emerge: in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland, Central Banks moved to protect domestic markets without challenging international central banking practices, while the Romanian and Hungarian Central Banks moved closer towards supporting nationalist incumbent governments (Piroska et al., 2020).

To what extent is Hungary moving towards a different model of neoliberalism remains however an open question (see Ban et al. in this issue). Bohle and Greskovits (2019, p. 1073) demonstrate that even in the Hungarian case, effective change is rather limited as 'the main pillars of embedded neoliberalism have not been altered fundamentally' (2019, p. 1085; see the comprehensive analysis by Ban et al. in this issue).

Variation can be observed also in terms of social policies and welfare rights. While the Hungarian government limits welfare rights (Stubbs & Lendvai-Bainton, 2019, p. 555; see Buzogany and Varga in this issue), the PiS government has expanded social policy to the 'good families' or 'native families' (Vachudova, 2019, p. 693). The Family 500+ programme, which gives a monthly child benefit of 500 zlotys (around £90) for every second and subsequent child up to the age of 18, as well as to low-income families with one child 'is justified on the grounds of poor demographic trends and redistributing the wealth created more equally amongst the population' (Toplišek, 2020, p. 395). The government has also lowered the retirement age to 60 for women and 65 for men. In contrast, in Hungary, Orbán's social agenda was rather poor, characterised by radical welfare retrenchment and criminalisation of the homeless (Toplišek, 2020). Considerable differences have been observed in the social policies promoted by the Fidesz government in Hungary and by Law and Justice in Poland. While the former has pursued a policy of

social disinvestment, in Poland PiS has sought to implement ‘an inclusive set of social policies to provide greater security to those who had lost most in the transition’ (Stubbs & Lendvai-Bainton, 2019, p. 552). But here scholars have pointed out that what appears to be ‘an expansionary social policy’ rests, primarily, on a conservative, and generous, set of family policies (Stubbs & Lendvai-Bainton, 2019, p. 552; Orenstein & Bugarič, 2020). Nonetheless, while in Hungary the risk of child poverty increased, in Poland it decreased significantly. What they have in common is the lack of investment in the education and healthcare system.

In addition, the economic growth was often attributed to the national reforms implemented by domestic governments, thus consolidating their legitimacy, and not to the long-term integration process of these economies. Despite continuity in economic policies (Bohle & Greskovits, 2019), national leaders often postured about how ‘courageous, U-turn structural reforms’ (György Matolcsy – Central Bank Governor in Hungary), ‘standing up to the technocrats in Brussels’ (Andrej Babiš – Prime Minister of the Czech Republic) provided their constituents with the prosperity they enjoy. As such, paradoxically, it is the European funding and Single Market that have in effect propped up the political leaders that promote anti-liberal ideas and argue for limitations of EU integration (Anghel, 2020, p. 188; also Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018; Csehi & Zgut, 2020; Hegedűs, 2019).

While larger markets can indeed act upon the promises of economic nationalism based on large internal supply and demand, the smaller economies of Central and Eastern Europe were left only with the mere posturing of the anti-liberal rhetoric in economic affairs, unable to follow through emancipatory electoral promises, and in fact, continuing to rely intensively upon Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), European funding and crediting (Ban et al. in this Special Issue; Ban & Bohle, 2020; Bohle & Greskovits, 2019). Even in terms of natural resources or consumption, anti-liberal political discourse attempts to portray foreign capital or the EU as exploitative ‘like colonists that come to steal our country’s resources’ (Liviu Dragnea – Social Democratic Party Leader in Romania), when in fact there is no chance of economic self-sufficiency for any of these countries whose prosperity has been linked to economic integration.

### 2.1.3. Polity: changing the rules of the political game

Over the last decade, many political parties have come to power in CEE with the ambition to change the nature of the post-1989 political regimes (Zielonka, 2018), that is their foundations. Changing the polity through anti-liberal ideas can take different forms including constitutional revisions to reshape the functioning of the government, national courts, parliaments or the executive (see Blokker in this issue). In recent years in CEE different political actors have adopted measures leading to the (uneven) centralisation of power, followed by provisions which limit the independence of institutions such as courts and central banks. All these institutional transformations support what Bermeo defined ‘an executive aggrandisement’ (2016), invoked as a solution to the problems of the post-communist transformation and Europeanisation, largely discredited by the parties in power: in Poland by the PiS, in Hungary by the Fidesz, and in the Czech Republic by ANO, for example. Political transformations are pursued in the name of sovereignty – understood as the power to decide (decisionism), to control resources and to have the final say in key policy areas, regardless of the competences of the European Union – which is undermined

by the EU and other international actors whose legitimacy is contested (Coman & Leconte, 2019).

Hungary is a case in point to understand the process of institutional change. During the first mandate of Viktor Orbán as Prime Minister (1998–2002), Fidesz passed a new constitution, eliminated a large part of checks and balances, weakened the parliament's prerogatives (and halved its size) and challenged the independence of the judiciary (Buzogány, 2017, p. 1313). A new electoral law was introduced during his first mandate after his re-election in 2010. Viktor Orbán sought to establish 'a centralized core executive', following the ideal of an effective 'hard' government (Buzogány, 2017, p. 1314). Not all the governments enjoy the supermajorities they need in Parliament to pass legislation, to change the Constitution and to pass major constitutional reforms and profound transformations. While in Hungary Viktor Orbán is enjoying a comfortable majority in the Parliament, in Poland and the Czech Republic the Senate – controlled by the opposition parties – is limiting major reforms. In the Czech Republic Andrej Babis is praising the merits of 'centralized management' (Havlík, 2019, p. 381) in order to 'run the country effectively' (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018, p. 289; Havlík, 2019). This form of technocratic populism is presented by Babis as an alternative to the dominant liberal democratic paradigm. The Law and Justice Party in power in Poland since 2015 has dramatically eroded liberal democracy, while in the Czech Republic coalition governments led by the ANO party have captured state administration and policymaking for oligarchic and criminal interests (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018). These political regimes are becoming 'hybrid' regimes, which are neither democratic, nor authoritarian (Bozóki & Hegedűs, 2018, p. 1174).

Eliminating judicial checks and balances on the central government has been a particular fixture of anti-liberal central governments in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The assault on the rule of law was driven by the motivation to thwart domestic contestation (e.g. media, opposition, civil society or private sector). In the case of Romania or Bulgaria, judicial reforms were aimed at diminishing anti-corruption institutional reforms supported by the EU (i.e. EU Control and Verification Mechanism (CVM)). The politicisation of courts has been countered by European Court of Justice rulings against Poland, Hungary and Romania over the course of recent years. Furthermore, in Hungary, much like Poland, local challengers are being starved of budgetary resources, as the Covid-19 crisis served as a perfect excuse to re-centralise budgets, taking money away from local governments controlled by the opposition (Dobos, 2020). These constituted only some of the violations of democratic standards that occurred during the pandemics in Hungary and Poland, but also other countries in the region, like Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia or Slovakia (V-Dem, 2020). To alter the foundations of the liberal order, some CEE governments use or abuse both constitutional and unconstitutional means (see Blokker in this issue) to mainly restrict rights (see Batory, 2010, p. 33). Legality has been invoked to legitimise controversial changes in which the law has become a vector of change to support 'legalistic revolutions', 'counter-revolution by law' or 'counter-constitutionalism' (Blokker, 2019, p. 520).

### 3. Concluding remarks

This article makes a dual contribution to the existing literature. Firstly, it adds to the existing literature on the power and the nature of ideas, by shifting the focus on anti-liberal

ideas' impact on democracies, rather than the more frequent perspective on transnational democratic value promotion. As we argue in this article and illustrate in this special issue, anti-liberal ideas present in CEE are not simply imports, but domestic intellectual products. Secondly, we proposed a common framework of understanding the shaping power of anti-liberal ideas and their use to alter simultaneously the polity (i.e. the rules of the political game), the policies (i.e. how economic nationalism alters the neoliberal model) and domestic politics (i.e. the social power structures). These three dimensions are targeted by a wide range of political and social actors with different intensities in CEE and beyond, but we show the extent to which there is a largely underexplored general framings and uneven degree of change. Drawing on the flourishing literature on the ongoing transformations in CEE, the article maps out the core of anti-liberal narratives – pitted against political, economic, and cultural liberalism – and which are diffused as problems or causal stories in search for solutions, supported by a diverse set of legitimation strategies. The conceptual map presented in Table 1 – derived inductively from the literature – is meant to support the articles in this issue and to guide both future empirical studies as well as theory building exercises on the shaping power of anti-liberal ideas.

## Note

1. Vdem (2020) Liberal Democracy Score: Hungary 0.402, Bulgaria 0.434, Romania 0.488, and Poland 0.5, with all other CEE countries scoring above these values, despite notable anti-liberal reactions in countries such as Czechia or Slovakia that we cover in a limited manner in this article.

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