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INTRODUCTION



The shaping power of anti-liberal ideas

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ABSTRACT

This special issue sheds light on the shift from consensus over democracy and liberal values to increased dissensus. With a focus on Central and Eastern Europe, it explores the nature and the origins of anti-liberal ideas and their diffusion beyond the EU. While anti-liberal ideas are not new *per se*, this special issue shows how in recent years they have re-emerged, being invoked by a wide range of political and social actors who seek to translate them into policy solutions and by the same token to change the foundations of national polities, policies and politics.

KEYWORDS

Anti-liberal ideas; Central and Eastern Europe; populism; conservatism

Over the last decades, the foundations of the liberal order and the pillars of liberal democracy have been under considerable strain, being increasingly challenged by the rise of autocratic constitutionalism/legalism (Scheppelle, 2018), not only in Europe but also in other parts of the world.¹ As an illustration, in the European Union, since 2010 onwards, governments in Central and Eastern European member states have adopted a wide range of measures, constitutional or unconstitutional, seeking to dismantle the post-1989 political order. A counter-narrative to the liberal and neoliberal ideational consensus has been emerging in politics, meant to reshape policies and even the foundations of domestic polities. This shift from consensus over liberal democracy to increased dissensus goes beyond pure rhetoric, being translated unevenly across the region into policies – very diverse in nature – as this issue illustrates.

While the ‘democratic backsliding’ of Central Europe has been depicted as part of a global ‘populist wave’ (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), the growing literature often overlooks the nature of anti-liberal ideas and by the same token the ideological foundations of this trend. Little attention has been paid to the work of political mobilisation carried out on the fringes of political parties, occasionally leading to culturalist theses on the weak roots of democracy in Central Europe. Putting the stress on historical legacies as a main explanatory factor, Minkenberg for instance argues that the radical right in Eastern Europe is a *‘sui generis’* phenomenon being both organizationally more fluid and ideologically more extreme than its Western counterpart’ (Minkenberg, 2017, p. 1). How radical right parties have emerged, which actors have helped establishing them and setting their ideological agenda, or how their political offer has been varying in

relation to the political context (for a critique of such a macro-historical approach, see Zalewski, 2016, p. 13) have remained open questions.

This special issue seeks to bring two contributions to the current state of the literature, by trying to capture the nature of anti-liberal ideas (1) and by looking at their implications for politics, policies and polities (2). The collection of articles brought together here is articulated along these two main lines of analysis: it examines the origins of anti-liberal ideas; their circulation and diffusion; as well as their translation into concrete outcomes, that is institutional and policy change. Put differently, the contributions gathered here tackle the following set of interrelated questions, from different angles:

- What are the origins of anti-liberal ideas?
- How do they come to play a role in political life in the first place?
- What are the mechanisms of their production and domestic/transnational circulation?
- How are they used to legitimize institutional change and translated into concrete policies?
- What are the outcomes of this ideational change on politics, polity and policies?

The eight articles show first and foremost, in different ways, that anti-liberal ideas are old ideas: they stem from counter-narratives opposed to the liberal consensus that emerged in the post-communist period and are rooted in the history of political thought. Second, said ideas, latent in the pre-communist and communist times, have found a fertile ground to develop since the 2010s onwards, in the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis. They have re-emerged as alternatives to liberalism, promoted by parties such as the Hungarian Fidesz and the Polish Law and Justice as well as intellectuals with political affiliations. Third, anti-liberal ideas and discourses have been circulating among other Central and Eastern European heads of government and incumbent parties' officials in the wake of the refugee 'crisis', which opened up a discursive opportunity structure for their diffusion (Coman & Leconte, 2019; see Rone 2021). They are all but confined to Central and Eastern Europe (see Andguladze in this issue; see also Beyer), as their promoters, intellectuals and political leaders (see Behr in this issue; see also Buzogany and Varga), share some common ground with some of their Western counterparts in Europe and in the United States. Fourth, although there are some common elements that can be observed in various national contexts, anti-liberal ideas vary from one political context to another. While core narratives – such as anti-communism, the rejection of fundamental values and of human equality, nationalism and the critique of the EU – can be identified at the centre of the critique of political, economic and cultural liberalism (see Coman and Volintiru in this issue), this issue shows that they translate differently – depending on specific domestic opportunity structures – in constitutional politics (see Blokker in this issue) and into a very diverse set of socio-economic (see Ban *et al* in this issue) or gender and sexuality policies (see Beyer in this issue).

The special issue opens with an article by Ramona Coman and Clara Volintiru, which provides a theoretical framework for the contributions gathered in this issue and might be of interest for scholars willing to address the nature and the shaping power of anti-liberal ideas. They propose a conceptual grid to shed light on how anti-liberal ideas reshape politics, policy and the polity.

The articles by Valentin Behr, Aron Buzogány and Mihai Varga complement each other in tracing the origins of anti-liberal ideas and their production and circulation in Poland and Hungary. Behr examines the role of Ryszard Legutko, a leading figure in the Polish conservative *milieu* and in the Law and Justice party, who is playing a prominent role in the intellectual structuring of Polish conservatives and within an emerging anti-liberal Internationale. Buzogány and Varga present the intellectual trajectory of the illiberal turn in Hungary and Poland, showing how Fidesz and PiS challenge liberalism ideologically. Anti-liberal ideas are not new in the region. They survived during the Cold War and were latent or manifest in the first years of the transition to democracy; they crystallized in recent years, long before the electoral victory of Fidesz or PiS (see Behr; Buzogány and Varga; Rone; Blokker in this issue). Emerging as domestic products, anti-liberal ideas circulate from the 'semi-periphery' to 'the core', as Behr highlights.

The articles by Julia Rone and Ana Andguladze precisely scrutinize the circulation of anti-liberal ideas or their power of attraction in the region and beyond. Anti-liberal ideas are embraced as a 'normative ideal' by other actors in the region, like in Bulgaria, where political parties including the left, 'praise Orban and his conservative illiberalism on the domestic scene' and 'pay lip service to liberal values in their international discourse' (see Rone in this issue). They also gain ground elsewhere, like in Georgia, where anti-liberal domestic actors have found the 'anti-liberal Europe' as a powerful narrative to pit against 'normative power Europe', as Andguladze shows.

If anti-liberal ideas can reshape politics, policy and the polity as argued by Coman and Volintiru, their viability is conditioned by the reconfiguration of politics, that is the civil society space in which conservative and religious actors supported by the Catholic Church as well as 'conservative intellectuals in academic institutions', 'conservative think-tanks, foundations, and media-outlets' prepare the ground for policy (see Buzogány and Varga; Ban et al; Beyer in this issue) and policy changes (Blokker in this issue).

The article by Cornel Ban, Gabor Scheiring and Mihai Vasile, as well as the contributions of Jan Beyer and Paul Blokker are compelling illustrations of the complexity of such processes of change, the diversity of outcomes and variation across the region. Analysing the political economy of national-neoliberalism, Ban, Scheiring and Vasile explain why the national-neoliberal project was resilient in Hungary but not in Romania; they identify the 'core goals' or the 'deep structure' of national-neoliberalism and provide a comprehensive theory of policy resilience. Jan Beyer examines how the administration of Nikola Gruevski in Macedonia came to embrace regressive gender and sexuality policies and how the embrace of such illiberal ideas was a part of a wider strategy to reshape church-state relations. Politics and policy are intertwined. Anti-liberal ideas can also alter the core of the polity, as Paul Blokker explains with a focus on constitutional politics in Poland and Romania to show how conservative-populist positions have played substantial but highly variegated roles in different societies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Note

1. This special issue is the result of a research project titled 'Values in European Politics' (ARC – Action de Recherche Concertée) conducted from 2016 to 2019 at the Université libre de Bruxelles by Ramona Coman (co-promotor), François Foret (spokesperson) and François Heinder-yckx (co-promotor) with Valentin Behr (post-doctoral researcher) and Jan Beyer (PhD student). Most of the contributions brought together in this special issue had been presented at the international conference 'How "European values" unite and divide. Rule of law, identity and morality politics in the EU' on the 21st of November 2019 at the Institute for European Studies of the Université libre de Bruxelles.

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