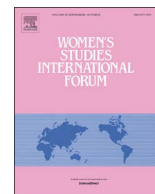




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The gendered modus operandi of the *illiberal* transformation in Hungary and Poland[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Based on a comparative analysis of the ideological and policy tools of *illiberal* ruling parties in Hungary and Poland, this paper makes the case that the 21st century Central European illiberal transformation is a process deeply reliant on gender politics, and that a feminist analysis is central to understanding the current regime changes, both in terms of their ideological underpinnings, and with respect to their *modus operandi*. It argues that: 1. opposition to the liberal equality paradigm has become a key ideological space where the *illiberal* alternative to the post-1989 (neo)liberal project is being forged; 2. family mainstreaming and anti-gender policies have been one of the main pillars on which the *illiberal* state has been erected, and through which security, equality and human rights have been redefined; 3. *illiberal* transformation operates through the appropriation of key concepts, tools and funding channels of liberal equality politics which have been crucial to women's rights. The article describes some new and distinct challenges illiberal governance poses to the women's rights, feminist civil society and emancipatory politics in Hungary and Poland.

1. Introduction

In the years after Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán's famous 2014 declaration that the era of transnational hegemony of liberal democracy¹ is over and Hungary is building an "illiberal democracy" (Simon, 2014) instead, the academic and journalistic articles discussing 21st century illiberal states have proliferated. In this paper, we contribute to these discussions by looking at *illiberal* transformations in the region through a gender-sensitive lens which has so far been largely neglected by previous contributions (see e.g. Dawson & Hanley, 2016; Krastev, 2016; Kubik, 2012). Comparing the developments in post-2010 Hungary under the Fidesz (Fidesz) - Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt (KDNP) coalition government and post-2015 Poland under Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) we argue that the illiberal transformation cannot be fully comprehended without employing what Cynthia Enloe (2004, 2007) calls a feminist curiosity — the critical tool of inquiry about the gendered nature of political processes. In this paper, we therefore propose to conceptualize illiberalism

as a deeply gendered political transformation which is reliant on a certain gender regime – constructions of gender as well as institutionalized relations of power between them – and which transforms the meanings of human rights, women's rights and equality in a way which privileges the rights and normative needs of families over women's rights.

Illiberal democracy is usually defined as a regime which combines certain democratic procedures such as multi-party system and general elections with a disregard for constitutional limits to power, and a lack of protection of citizens' individual rights (Zakaria, 1997). A more detailed definition is provided by Jan Kubik (2012) who lists three principles illiberalism is based on: populism, (organizational) antipluralism, and ideological monism. Drawing from works looking at structural, systemic causes behind the illiberal shift (e.g. Berezin, 2009; Fiala & Tamás, 2016; Ost, 2016), we argue that *illiberalism* can best be understood as a majoritarian nationalist response to the failures of the global, neoliberal model which has shaped the relationships between individuals and the state during the last four decades. In Central Europe,

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¹ Unless stated otherwise, the terms liberalism and liberal democracy are not used in this article in a sense of political philosophy or political theory but rather to denote the dominant mode of governance and accompanying ideology in post-1989 Central Europe.

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this model was implemented in the framework of the post-communist transformation and subsequent EU accession, and merged human rights and liberal democratic standards with neoliberal economic policies and governance principles. The accompanying language of rights-based governance focused on individual rights, civil liberties and recognition which made it ineffective in opposing ongoing structural changes (see Gregor & Grzebalska, 2016). For voters of illiberal parties, rejection of liberal democracy is a way of opposing globalization, neoliberalism, the monopolization of political processes by elites, as well as the influence of transnational institutions like the EU or UN on national politics and values.

One prolific strand of discussions about the current resurfacing of illiberalism has revolved around where these emergent regimes fall on the political systems typology and the usefulness of historical analogies. While some authors see predictive merit in discerning whether illiberalism is the rebirth of European fascism (see e.g. Chotiner & Paxton, 2016), a backslide into a form of competitive authoritarianism (see e.g. Zgut & Przybylski, 2017), a new type of mafia state (e.g. Magyar, 2016), or an amalgam of old non-democratic governance traditions (Leszczyński, 2017), others have long warned about analogies becoming “over-encompassing explanatory frameworks” (Mercer, 2016) which obscure rather than illuminate the character of the processes in question. For heuristic reasons, in this article we choose to take current Central European illiberalism seriously as a new and unique form of governance both in terms of its underlying conditions connected to the challenges created by neoliberal globalization (see Kováts, 2016), its counter-hegemonic project, and with respect to its *modus operandi*. Therefore, rather than engaging in theoretical discussions about the nature of the political regime in question, we critically investigate the gendered workings of the ongoing illiberal transformation: the policies, mechanisms and rhetorical tools employed by Hungarian and Polish illiberal governments. It is our conviction that looking at the specific ways in which the political system is being transformed can give us ideas about how the ongoing processes can be halted or resisted on this operational level.

Investigating the gendered *modus operandi* of the illiberal transformation, the structure of the article is as follows. In the first section we introduce the concept of gender as symbolic glue and argue that illiberalism is a project fueled by the rejection of liberal emancipatory politics — both in the narrow policy sense and as a symbol of a progressive vision of the future. In the following Sections 3 and 4 we look closely at other two politico-ideological building blocks of the illiberal counter-proposal – the securitization of progressive activism and the promotion of familialist politics – and argue that they, too, are gendered, as they rely on an anti-modernist vision of a secure community and citizens' empowerment. In the last section we trace how the transformation to illiberal governance is perpetuated and sustained on the technical policy level — through the redefinition of key concepts, tools and mechanisms of liberal equality politics which are crucial to women's rights.

2. Gender as symbolic glue

The recent entrenchment of *illiberalism* by FIDESZ in Hungary and PiS in Poland has followed a similar pattern; it led from obtaining majority in democratic elections to the blurring of the separation between the party and the state through such steps as the paralyzing of the Tribunal Court, amendments or plain violation of the Constitution, the subordination of the judiciary to the ruling party, taking control over the media, state-owned companies and the education system,² followed by the creation of a parallel civil society sector and attempts to support and enrich ruling party's allies and voter base. While all of these

elements of the illiberal transformation have received significant attention from scholars and commentators alike, what has been largely neglected is the role gender politics has played in this paradigm shift by enabling right-wing actors articulate and entrench their counter-hegemonic project. We argue that gender functions as a symbolic glue (Pető, 2015a,b; Grzebalska, Kováts, & Pető, 2017); equality politics functions in the illiberal transformation as a symbol of everything that is wrong with the current state of politics. It is a metaphor for the insecurities and injustices created through the process of socio-economic transformation guided by the principles of the neoliberal policy consensus. Firstly, using the concept of ‘gender ideology’ as an enemy-figure has allowed illiberal actors to unite under one umbrella term various issues attributed to the liberal agenda, among them reproductive rights, rights of sexual minorities, gender studies and gender mainstreaming. Secondly, the demonization of equality politics implemented during the EU accession process has become a key rhetorical tool for defining political antagonism by neoconservative actors struggling for cultural hegemony (see e.g. Gramsci, 1971; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). A way of constructing a new political *common sense* for a wide audience, that is, a consensus about what is perceived as normal and legitimate. The counter-proposal offered by right wing actors has instead been built around an anti-modernist rejection of what is seen as the destructive consequences of liberal progress (see e.g. Versluis, 2006); this counter-hegemonic project has been centered on the nation, the family and religion instead. Last but not least, the opposition to the so-called gender ideology has allowed illiberals to build a broad front comprised of actors who have not always been eager to cooperate in the past, among them mainstream conservatives and far-right groups as well as fundamentalist Christian and Muslim groups (on these religious alliances see e.g. The Telegraph, 2012).

Yet the articulation of the opposition to the liberal project in anti-gender terms would not have been so successful, if it had not been grounded in very real inequalities and contradictions created by the globalized, neoliberal model. In the realm of gender relations these failures took the form of what Beatrix Campbell (2014a, 2014b) called “neoliberal neopatriarchy”. While this gender regime waved gender equality on its banners, it simultaneously dismantled the welfare state using austerity rhetoric for legitimization, undermined social solidarity, and rejected any structural reforms which are needed to reach genuine equality (Campbell, 2014b, Fraser, 2009, 2013, for Central Europe see e.g. Gregor & Grzebalska, 2016). The narrow, market-oriented and culturalist vision of equality promoted by the mainstream strand of feminism has resulted in the overemphasis on emancipatory aspects of paid employment and ignoring the value of care work, as well as the fetishization of choice and individualism at the expense of aiming for structural changes. This tendency has also been observed in the case of EU policies, which have largely incorporated the gender perspective as a tool serving economic goals by increasing flexibility and effectiveness rather than a critical perspective serving equality per se (Elomäki, 2015; Stratigaki, 2004). The result has been a system which accepts some token women in positions of power, but leaves masses of women behind. As Nancy Fraser (2017) argues, “the talk of ‘diversity,’ ‘empowerment,’ and ‘non-discrimination’ (...) equated ‘emancipation’ with the rise of a small elite of ‘talented’ women, minorities, and gays in the winner-takes-all corporate hierarchy instead of with the latter's abolition”. Moreover, the hegemony of identity politics with its focus on individual empowerment and the recognition of minority groups has to a large extent hindered a meaningful critique of progressives' own entanglement in the neoliberal logic. In consequence, according to EIGE Gender Equality Index (EIGE, 2017) and United Nation's DESA (UN, 2015), in many areas such as employment, education, health and unpaid care, advancements in reaching gender equality have stagnated in the last two decades. Moreover, the changes have tended to profit professional women more than those working in unskilled positions (IPPR, 2013). These tendencies have added to a feeling of frustration and disappointment with equality politics in general, leading many

² See e.g. Shekhovtsov (2016) for a step-by-step analysis of the initial phases of the institutional takeover in Poland and Hungary.

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