Literature Review: Illiberalism, Authoritarianism and Populism

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Radoslaw Markowski, Piotr Zagorski, Marta Zerkowska-Balas, Ben Stanley, Zsolt Enyedi, Bálint Mikola, Jan Rovny

in collaboration with
Stephen Whitefield and Marta Vukovic

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Please, contact Radosław Markowski: rmarkowski@swps.edu.pl

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1. Introduction

Equal political and universal human rights, pluralism, popularly elected legislatures, accountable executives whose scope is constitutionally constrained, rule of law, protected privacy, neutral state, and a level playing field for candidates are institutions and principles that have centuries old pedigree in political thought. But the history of what is sometimes called liberal democracy, other times simply labelled as democracy, that is, the integrated system of all the listed elements, is a relatively novel construct. The principles of liberal democracy have never been universally accepted, but between 1945 and 2000 their scope and appeal gradually expanded across the globe. Since the turn of the millennium, however, we are witnessing a robust counter-trend. In parallel to the decline of the quality of democracy in many countries, there is also a growing body of normative criticism of liberal democratic ideas, institutions, and practices.

Social science has recognized the need to update its conceptual tools to be able to describe and explain these new developments. Many of the concepts of the 20th century social science discourse have been redefined, and new categories and typologies have been invented. In the following literature review we make an attempt at summarizing the relevant theoretical advances, without claiming comprehensive coverage. After all, this document aims at describing the state-of-the-art of major threads in an immense and many times contradictory and disordered literature, which forces us to depict stretched concepts in a concise way.

In our view, three concepts stand out from the literature: illiberalism, populism, and authoritarianism. All of them are, in principle, applicable to regimes, ideas, ideologies, attitudes and behaviour. For AUTHLIB all five aspects are important, but because ideas form the core of the project, the focus will be mainly on ideational elements. Additionally, because the term of populism applies to anti-elitist approaches and thereby excludes elitist discourse and structures

and because authoritarianism tends to be understood either as a psychological phenomenon or as a regime that is largely non-democratic, our focus is on illiberalism, a concept that is mainly used to grasp ideas and practices that are formally compatible with but are undermining and challenging democratic rule. Moreover, in contrast to the vast literature on authoritarianism and populism, conceptual work on defining illiberalism is still in its infancy and our aim is to add to this nascent line of research.

Even though the terms of authoritarianism, illiberalism and populism are often used interchangeably, the sections below attempt to delineate their conceptual boundaries and define their potential intersections. We also argue that AUTHLIB's main contribution should address the varieties of illiberalism. This objective will also inform the operationalization of our core concepts, further elaborated in the project's "Guidelines for empirical data collection".

In the following sections, we start by discussing the existing definitions of illiberalism both as a regime type and as an ideology or a set of ideas. Subsequently, we briefly describe the key characteristics of authoritarianism and populism and illiberalism, mapping them against each other. What follows is a discussion of existing varieties of illiberalism and dimensions on which they vary. Next, a discussion of the so called 'post-liberal' authors and of the paradoxical phenomenon of illiberal liberalism is offered. Finally, in the last section, we identify some dilemmas brought up by this literature review and some tasks awaiting AUTHLIB.

2. What is illiberalism?

The term illiberalism is typically conceptualized as either an antithesis to liberal democracy or to liberalism ("Some elements of illiberalism attack democracy while others attack liberalism", Laruelle 2022: 308). If the latter, then liberalism is understood in a broad sense, not as the program

of one particular party family but as the tradition of Enlightenment, tolerance and constitutionalism (Main 2022, Holmes 2021). But because both liberal democracy and liberalism can be defined in various ways, there are also many understandings of illiberalism.

Broadly speaking, there are two main approaches in the extant scholarship to defining illiberalism: the first one is related to illiberal practices that go against the procedures of liberal democracy and the second considers illiberalism as a set of ideas, and an ideology.

2.1. Illiberalism as regime type: Illiberal democracies

The first conceptualization of illiberalism grows out of the literature on regime types, hitherto dedicated to explaining mainly shifts from authoritarianism to democracy and democratic consolidation, and, more recently, focused on the inverse process of democratic backsliding into authoritarianism. The term 'illiberal democracy' was coined by Fareed Zakaria in his influential 1997 *Foreign Affairs* piece to describe political regimes with free elections but without liberal institutions and practices (constitutional liberalism) (Zakaria 1997). There is a consensus in the subsequently developing literature that illiberal regimes undermine democratic norms, the rule of law and the checks-and-balances mechanisms of horizontal accountability. Takis Pappas (2016) and Paul Blokker (2021), for example, use the term 'illiberalism' to denote a system of government that holds multiparty elections but does not protect basic liberties and does not respect limits on government and rule of law.

While the term 'illiberal democracy' is used frequently, for many scholars it is an oxymoron (Müller 2016, Ekiert 2017). Their objection is based on the insight that democracy requires some degree of liberalism (meaning especially rights and equality). Systems that do not guarantee such preconditions are not democracies at all or are simply autocracies "in the making".

Alongside labels such as electoral authoritarianism (Schedler 2015), defective democracy (Merkel 2004, Bogaards 2009), hybrid regime (Diamond, 2002; Erdmann 2011), competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way 2002), or neo-authoritarianism (Wodak 2019), the popularity of 'illiberal democracy' as a regime label reflects the lack of clear dividing lines between dictatorship and democracy in contemporary politics. In this sense, delineating the consolidated democracies from the moderately defective ones proves to be a challenging task. Furthermore, from a dynamic perspective, there is scepticism in the literature concerning whether illiberal regimes can stabilize. According to many scholars (e.g., Plattner in Vorman and Weinman 2021) they either turn to a full-blown authoritarian regime or move back towards a more democratic system over time. Wojciech Sadurski (2019), when describing Poland after 2015, posits that even if an illiberal democracy surfaces after free and fair elections, it usually lasts only four years or so, as the consequent elections are typically not considered to be fully free and fair.

A significant part of the literature on illiberal regimes is dedicated to the undermining of constitutionalism and the rule of law (Dixon and Landau 2021; Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała 2022; Issacharoff 2015; Landau 2013; Sadurski 2019; Sajo 2021; Tushnet and Bugaric 2022). Instead of introducing an openly non-democratic regime, executives in illiberal democracies usually follow the path of gradual democratic backsliding. Importantly, this account offers a key insight for conceptualizing illiberalism from the institutional side: constitutional institutions are subverted to achieve a political change and the existing constitutional organs change their mode of operation – they become façade institutions and do not perform proper constitutional functions. This process is referred to in the literature as abusive constitutionalism (Landau 2013, Kosar and Sipulova, 2018), populist constitutionalism (Tushnet and Bugaric, 2021), authoritarian constitutionalism (Tushnet 2015) or "ruling by cheating" (Sajó, 2021). At the same time, Gabor Halmai (2018)

claims that constitutionalism is just liberal democratic constitutionalism; using other adjectives makes the whole notion an oxymoron.

In illiberal regimes, “institutions are not being dismantled or destroyed or demolished, but are instead being hollowed out, eroded, and emptied: their sense and meaning, which confer value on them, are all but lost, but their shells remain” (Sadurski 2019: 249, also see Greskovits 2015). A considerable body of scholarship is devoted to the methods of changing the nature of constitutional institutions and bodies, such as the by-passing of constitutional regulations (Uitz 2021), the constitution-hostile interpretation of selected norms (Wyrzykowski and Ziółkowski 2021) or a set of legislative acts that alter the operation of constitutional bodies and other institutions, i.e., "statutory anti-constitutionalism" (Bernatt and Ziółkowski 2019), or to the way how different institutions and ideas of liberal democracy (such as e.g. constitutional courts) may be used as instruments of transition to authoritarianism (Dixon and Landau 2021).

It has been argued that the teleological approach to the rule of law, developed by Martin Krygier (2008; 2016), in which the rule of law is understood as a commitment to restraining arbitrary exercises of public power, may serve as protection against abusive constitutionalism or the misuse of liberal constitutional ideas (Dixon 2019). Renáta Uitz (2019) insists that we should look beyond the typical understanding of constitutional notions and to start to focus on hidden intentions, purposeful abuse of norms and the true intentions of constitutional actors to facilitate an adequate response and reaction by defenders of the rule of law.

Given the hollowing out of institutions and the severe limits imposed by illiberal governments on checks-and-balances mechanisms, illiberalism – once in power – is characterized by the practical lack of accountability, especially of the horizontal type (Sadurski 2019). Unlike in

dictatorial regimes, the opposition has a chance during elections, but the conditions of electoral competition are not fair and *between* elections, there is no accountability (Levitsky and Way 2002).

Also, the relationship to other, liberal, political actors seems to be a crucial component of illiberalism, as illiberal actors, in a strong anti-pluralist stance, deny legitimacy to their political opponents. Indeed, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project's initial illiberalism index was later renamed to anti-pluralism index, and it conceptualizes illiberal actors as forces that "lack commitment to i) the democratic process as the legal means of gaining and losing power; ii) the legitimacy of political opponents; iii) peaceful resolution of disagreements and rejection of political violence; and iv) unequivocal support for civil liberties of minorities" (Lührmann 2021; Lührmann et al. 2021). The peculiarity of this approach is that it places the relationship to the political opponent at the very heart of the operationalization of the concept.

Finally, it should be noted that fair competition and other basic democratic practices can be undermined not only from above, but also from below, by the citizens themselves. Many voters seem to turn a blind eye to the authoritarian tendencies of illiberal leaders if they implement policies that are in line with their ideological leaning. It has been shown that, especially in polarized electorates (Svolik 2019), citizens are willing to trade off democratic norms such as judicial independence, checks-and-balances mechanisms, or civil liberties, for partisan interests and goals.

2.2. Illiberalism as ideology

A separate strand of literature considers illiberalism to be an ideology or at least a connected set of political ideas. In this sense, illiberalism is a denial not of democracy, especially not of the formal institutional makeup of democratic regimes, but rather of the liberal values underpinning

modern democracies. The ideational element was emphasized by Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes (2019: 196), according to whom illiberalism is an "anti-liberal ideology confronting Western liberalism on the plane of ideas". Accordingly, Marlene Laruelle (2022: 319) argues that "we should look at illiberalism as a (thin) ideology and dissociate it from the literature on regime types, democratic erosion, authoritarianism". Illiberalism is related to regime types only to the extent that the rise of illiberal ideology *precedes* democratic backsliding.

What would be the core features of such a (thin) ideology of illiberalism? According to the majority of the observers, illiberalism implies the direct or indirect attack against the values of political liberalism such as: "human rights, justice, equality and the rule of law, its commitment to multiculturalism and tolerance, ideas of Isaiah Berlin's 'negative liberty', Karl Popper's 'open society', John Rawls' 'overlapping consensus', or Ronald Dworkin's equality as the 'sovereign virtue'" (Halmai 2021: 813). Illiberalism also targets the "liberal habits of tolerance, dissent, debate, openness" (Stern 1972 cf. Holmes 2021: 23), and it is particularly hostile to individualism and universalism.

Illiberalism sees little value in constraints on government and political pluralism. According to Nate Schenkkan (2018:1), for example, illiberalism is "an ideological stance that rejects the necessity of independent institutions as checks on the government and dismisses the idea of legitimate disagreement in the public sphere."

Other scholars discussing illiberalism emphasize exclusion, discrimination and, in general, the intolerant attitude towards minorities. Jasper Theodor Kauth and Desmond King (2020:378) posit that "rather than being designed to undermine democratic institutions outright, ideological illiberalism is aimed at demarking who is and who is not a full member of society based on ideological constructions of the societal in- and out-groups." Illiberal policies are carried out

through politics of exclusion of the out-groups (Kauth and King 2020: 399). For Petra Guasti and Lenka Bustikova (2023: 2), illiberalism is "a set of principles opposed to pluralism, minority accommodation, and ideological heterogeneity."

Marlene Laurelle (2022: 309) offers one of the most detailed definitions of illiberalism as ideology:

> "(1) Illiberalism is a new ideological universe that, even if doctrinally fluid and context-based, is to some degree coherent. (2) It represents a backlash against today's liberalism in all its political, economic, cultural, geopolitical, and civilizational scripts, often in the name of democratic principles and by winning popular support. (3) It proposes majoritarian, nation-centric or sovereigntist solutions, favoring traditional hierarchies and cultural homogeneity. It proposes to restore national sovereignty in various spheres: internationally, by rejecting supranational and multilateral institutions in favor of the sovereign nation-state; economically, by denouncing neoliberal orthodoxy and promoting protectionism at the nation-state level (while at the same time, when in power, sometimes implementing neoliberal reforms); and culturally, by rejecting multiculturalism and minority rights in favor of majoritarianism. This majoritarianism advances a "traditional" vision of gender relations (what is defined as "traditional" covering a vast range of practices depending on the local context) and a vision of the nation that—whether essentialist and nativist or assimilationist—takes from nationalism the division between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft and sees the latter only as the product of the former. (4) Last but not least, it calls for a shift from politics to culture and is post-postmodern in its claims of rootedness in an age of globalization."

This definition locates illiberalism to a specific time period (basically, the last decades), it considers illiberalism to be a backlash to liberal progress and it also associates illiberalism with (radical) right-wing ideas. In a similar vein, according to Ruzha Smilova (2021: 193) the ideational core of illiberalism consists of "unrestrained popular sovereignty", "ethno-nationalist 'common good' anti-individualism and anti-pluralism", and "anti-liberal anti-globalism". The latter definition is less explicitly right-wing, but it excludes those actors who base their illiberal demands on non-nationalist arguments.

2.3. Bringing values and practices together

An important contribution to studies of illiberalism is the distinction between disruptive and ideological illiberalism offered by Kauth and King (2020). Following the two strands of literature – the one on regime types and the other on ideology – outlined above, these authors suggest that "what is commonly referred to as 'illiberalism' can be separated into two phenomena marked by distinct logics" and that illiberalism "represents either an opposition to procedural democratic norms—as disruptive illiberalism—or constitutes part of an ideological struggle—termed ideological illiberalism" (Kauth and King 2020: 367).

The Illiberalism Studies Program at George Washington University brings together the regime type and ideological perspectives. They define illiberalism as "a strain of political culture, a set of institutional reforms (such as assaults on an independent judiciary) and broader societal processes (such as declining trust in liberal democratic institutions) that, over the past two decades, has emerged in response to liberalism as experienced by various countries".[1] In a similar fashion, *The Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* (Sajo, Uitz and Holmes eds. 2021), offers this all-encompassing definition: "Illiberalism refers to a set of social, political, cultural, legal, and mental phenomena associated with the waning of individual liberty (personal freedom) as an everyday experience" (Sajo, Uitz and Holmes 2021: xxi). According to these authors, "illiberalism is not an ideology or a regime type"; it is a broader phenomenon that undermines freedom. Obviously, the broader the definition, the more difficult it is to arrive at an unequivocal operationalization, a challenge that AUTHLIB needs to confront.

[1] https://www.illiberalism.org/definition-of-illiberalism/ [Online access on February 1, 2023]

3. How is illiberalism different from authoritarianism and populism?

Illiberalism is a concept closely related to authoritarianism and populism. In fact, these terms are often used interchangeably to describe the phenomenon or as coexisting phenomena/correlates. Hence, setting boundaries between these concepts and showing how they overlap/interact is a necessary step towards defining the core characteristics of illiberalism.

3.1 Authoritarianism

There are several conceptualizations of authoritarianism at different levels of analysis. At the macro level, there is a vast strand in the literature on the varieties of authoritarian regimes (Glasius 2018; Linz 2000), and processes leading to them (Bermeo 2016; Mechkova et al. 2017; Tomini and Wagemann 2018; Vachudova 2020). Authoritarian regimes limit political pluralism, suppress the opposition, and legitimize their rule in emotions or identification with the regime (Linz 1964, 2000). The literature emphasizes that such regimes, while being less oppressive than totalitarian systems, demand obedience to a central authority, constrain individual freedoms, and disrespect the rule of law. Marlies Glasius (2018) defines authoritarian practices as "patterns of action that sabotage accountability to people over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by means of secrecy, disinformation and disabling voice" (Glasius 2018: 517).

At the level of individuals, one can speak of authoritarian attitudes and values. Originally, this line of research was rooted in the theory of authoritarian personality (Adorno et al. 1969), but today the most of political science literature eschews deep psychological motivations. Authoritarianism is typically conceptualized as the endpoint of the libertarian-authoritarian political attitude scale (e.g. Evans and Heath 1995), defined by deference to authorities, subordination to the collective, rigid compliance with rules, and placing order and tradition above

other values (Mudde 2007: 23). The non-political layer is typically represented by preference concerning child-rearing practices (e.g. Stenner 2005).

3.2 Populism

Populism is defined either as discourse, style/strategy, an ideology, or an attitude. When understanding populism as a discourse, its main constituting elements are being "anti-elite" in nature and articulated "in the name of the sovereign people" (Aslanidis 2016: 96). In a similar fashion, the Manichean nature of populist discourse is also often highlighted in that it "identifies Good with a unified will of the people and Evil with a conspiring elite" (Hawkins 2009: 1042), thus depicting the world as a dualistic, antagonistic struggle between two camps, the good and the evil one (Laclau 2005).

Second, several authors claim that populism is a folkloric style of politics used by leaders who behave improperly and break taboos with the aim of building a connection with (certain segments of) the electorate (Ostiguy 2017). Even more specifically, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2016) define populism as a style of rhetoric, a form of discourse about who should rule, based on two claims: (i) the only legitimate democratic authority flows directly from the people, and (ii) establishment elites are corrupt, out of touch, and self-serving, betraying the public trust and thwarting the popular will. Closely linked to the 'style' conceptualization, many think of populism as political strategy employed by a charismatic leader who seeks to govern based on direct and unmediated support from their followers (Weyland 2017), or as a policy-making style characterised by policy heterodoxy, paradigmatic reforms, and excessive majoritarianism (Bartha et al. 2020).

Third, according to representatives of the ideational approach, populism can be defined as "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde 2004: 543). Accordingly, the three most referred components are people-centrism (the 'will of the people' as the highest principle in politics; glorification of 'the people'), anti-elitism (anti-establishment stances) and anti-pluralism (importance of one's own national group; Manicheism, good-versus-evil view of politics). The thin-centeredness of populism means that it has a limited programmatic scope and, therefore, it can be combined with other (more or less radical) ideologies – usually radical right or radical left – but also centrist populist parties (e.g., technocratic populism in CEE), and therefore it is different from classical ideologies such as fascism and liberalism (Stanley 2008). Hence, its "chameleonic" nature is frequently emphasized.

Fourth, a growing strand of literature measures populist attitudes among citizens. Populist attitudes are conceptualized as being alternatives to pluralist and elitist attitudes (Akkermann et al. 2014) and are operationalized through the above given ideational definitions (Castanho Silva et al. 2018; 2020).

Finally, it is important to mention that some scholars discuss populism in the context of representative models of politics. According to Nadia Urbinati (2019), for example, populism is an idea of government that combines an anti-pluralist form of "anti-establishment sentiments" with an attempt at equating the (manufactured, seeming) majority with the "will of the people", which is embodied in the populist leader. Populists find the mandate representation model of party democracy inadequate and call for the return of power to the people, albeit typically not advocating

pure direct democracy. Consequently, Urbinati considers populism as a "disfigurement" of democracy, a special form of representative government.

3.3. Mapping illiberalism against authoritarianism and populism

To bring together the essential characteristics of all three concepts, illiberalism, authoritarianism, and populism, and map them against each other, *Figure 1* plots those features which are typically ascribed only to one of the concepts, those shared by any pair among the three and, finally those shared by all. The border lines in this figure should not be treated as impermeable, as it can be argued that some of the features should also be placed in other parts of the diagram. Also, the diagram includes features at different levels of analysis (regimes, policies, ideas, etc.). Nonetheless, this was done consciously to reflect up to some point the conceptual confusion in the extant literature and we deem this exercise a necessary first step to defining and operationalizing the phenomena under scrutiny. Beginning with the latter category, anti-deliberation, anti-pluralism, restrain of judicial oversight, disregard for the rule of law and checks-and-balances, strong leadership, executive aggrandizement, the glorification of the in-group and the demonization of the political opponents are frequently associated with each of these concepts.

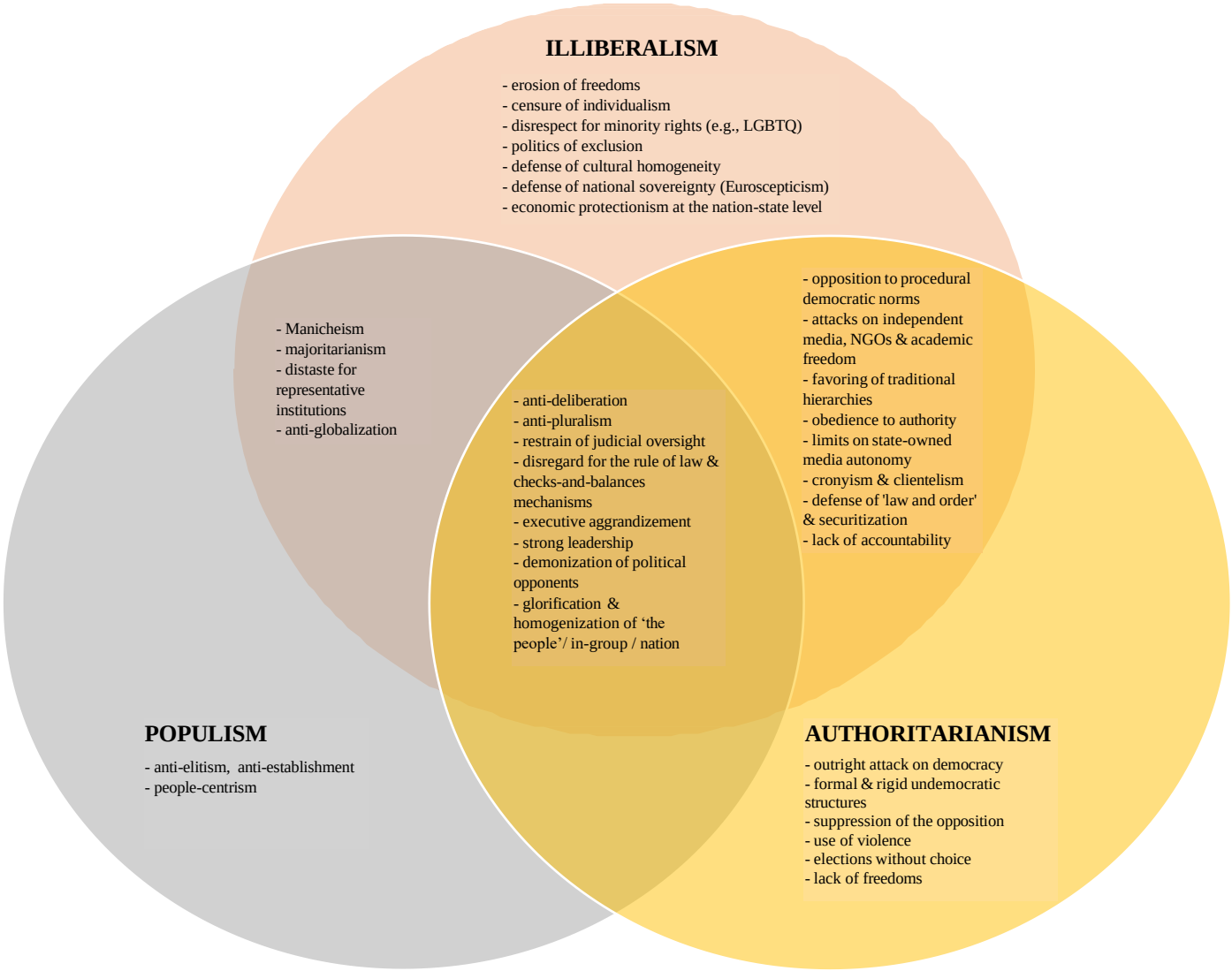

Figure 1. Mapping illiberalism against authoritarianism and populism.

Source: Own elaboration.

As *Figure 1* above illustrates, illiberalism and populism share many aspects, i.e., Manichean outlook, majoritarian conception of democracy, distaste for traditional representative institutions, and anti-globalization stances. There exist important differences too. Anti-elitism, anti-establishment and people-centrism are central to populism but not to the other two phenomena. While illiberal leaders restrict minority rights and curtail the autonomy of democratic institutions, the relationship between populism and democracy is less clear (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012), especially at the level of attitudes (see Meijers and Zaslove 2020; Rovira Kaltwasser and van Hauwaert 2020).

Illiberalism and authoritarianism are both opposed to liberal democracy, independent media, NGOs, academic freedom, free media, judicial independence, accountability. They are both often associated with some level of cronyism and/or clientelism, the respect of traditional social and political hierarchies, the defense of 'law and order' and securitization. However, whereas 'illiberal democracy' has been increasingly used in the literature, the concept of authoritarian democracy does not exist (unlike competitive authoritarianism, see Levitsky and Way 2002; 2010). "Illiberal democracies" "do not subject their citizens to direct violent oppression, even if options for voicing discontent are limited, participation in the political process is made increasingly difficult, and the rule of law is frequently undermined to serve the government's objectives" (Kauth and King 2020: 369). At the same time, violent oppression of opposition forces is a widely documented feature of authoritarian regimes (Johnston 2012; Boutton 2019). Thus, the use of violence and repressions seems to differentiate authoritarian regimes from 'illiberal democracies'.

Another crucial distinction between the two concepts is that while illiberalism is typically associated with informal and diffuse practices (Smilova 2021: 192), authoritarian regimes put in place more formal and rigid undemocratic structures, and they manipulate elections to a greater

degree (Golosov 2014; Siavelis and Valenzuela 2018). Hence, the degree of electoral integrity is a relevant difference. Also, while we can talk about erosion of freedoms and civil liberties in illiberal regimes, in authoritarian ones they are simply lacking in most cases. In a sense, illiberalism seems to be a step behind authoritarianism in its disregard for democratic procedures, which raises the question of whether illiberalism may simply be conceived as authoritarianism in the making, a point we will return to in the conclusions.

What are then the key characteristics of illiberalism which are not necessarily shared by populism nor authoritarianism? Most approaches to illiberalism emphasize the erosion of freedoms, the censure of individualism, and politics of exclusion which defend cultural homogeneity and disrespect minority rights (e.g., LGBTQ). These aspects may appear as attributes of authoritarianism and populism too, but they are less central to these other concepts. Illiberalism is also a revolt against the liberal world order and globalization, and therefore it tends to be strongly Eurosceptic in Europe. In economic terms it is typically protectionist.

3.4. Sequencing illiberalism, authoritarianism and populism

One of the interesting hypotheses that has been put forward in the literature (Cassani and Tomini 2019, Lührmann 2021, Lührmann and Lindberg 2019) that needs to be tested empirically refers to the sequencing of the three phenomena under scrutiny: populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism. This will be thoroughly tested in our project and its theoretical foundations will be elaborated in the forthcoming document entitled "Guidelines for empirical data collection".

4. Varieties of illiberalism

A logical conclusion from the core characteristics of illiberalism outlined above would be that illiberalism tends to be located on the right wing of the ideological spectrum. Indeed, Laurelle (2022: 318), for example, considers illiberalism to be right-wing by definition: "Whereas populism can be inspired by both rightist and leftist ideologies, this is not true of illiberalism, at least as defined here, which limits itself to calling for the restoration of some traditional hierarchies and culturally homogenous solutions. These two features exclude today's leftist movements, which almost systematically defend cultural liberalism and largely advance an inclusive definition of the nation".

Nonetheless, the possibility of the combination of illiberalism with left-wing orientation is acknowledged by a minority of scholars, especially by the literature on countries such as Nicaragua, Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador (Levitsky 2018, Chaguaceda 2022) or social-democratic leaders like the Czech president Miloš Zeman (Dawson and Hanley 2019). Other observers speak of leftist illiberalism in the context of constraints imposed on free speech in progressive arenas (cf. "The threat from the illiberal left", *The Economist*, Sep 4, 2021). Kauth and King (2020: 366 fn. 6) also acknowledge the possibility that that left-wing "efforts to address structural inequalities could lead to illiberal practices such as censorship", cf. the Letter on Justice and Open Debate (Ackerman et al. 2020).

To some extent, the discussion of both left-wing and right-wing illiberalism is a continuation of the old 'horseshoe' model of politics that sees liberal democracy to be vulnerable to both right-wing and left-wing extremism. The terms left and right can refer to both self-identification and fundamental political goals. On the left such goals can be economic

redistribution, nationalization of industry, severe restriction of freedom of speech in line with progressive values, etc. Right-wing goals calling for illiberal measures typically include the promotion of a traditionalist moral script, the support for a hierarchy between majority and minorities and giving more weight to model citizens in political decision-making.

While in principle both sides of the ideological spectrum may endorse some measures that undermine liberal democracy, one needs to distinguish here between what is possible in theory and what is typical in practice. Milan W. Svolik et al. (2023) demonstrated, for example, that in current day Europe popular attitudes are not symmetric, right-wingers are more ready to endorse unfair competition. These authors conclude about the illiberal right: "its argument is not with liberalism alone" but also against the very foundations of democracy; "the illiberal right is simply more open to authoritarianism overall" (Svolik et al. 2023: 15).

There are some differences even among right-wing versions of illiberal approaches. No typology exists that would summarize these differences, but some subtypes are occasionally identified. Varga and Buzogány (2022), for example, contrast revolutionary conservatives and national conservatives. Both are against liberalism, but "revolutionary conservatives have an affinity for revolution and identity, while national conservatives are inclined toward restauration and order. The first lineage perceives the survival of European nations and Europe as a whole to be existentially threatened by supra-national institutions and trends that are erasing all 'cultural differences'; the second problematizes the perceived loss of normative bearing in modern societies more generally" (Varga and Buzogány 2022: 1100).

A typology of illiberalisms could rely on several factors and could be done at different levels (ideas, institutions, citizens, etc.). One of the elements to consider is whether the criticism of liberal democracy has a religious or a secular background. Religious movements and religious

considerations play an important role in several countries, including in Brazil, Poland, Kenya, United States, in shaping movements that can be labelled illiberal, populist, or authoritarian. At the same time, in Europe the radical right is influenced by (Western) civilizationism. According to Rogers Brubaker (2017), civilizationism can be defined by "a paradoxical combination of 'identitarian' Christianity, secularism, philoSemitism, Islamophobia, and even some elements of liberalism such as support for gender equality and gay rights".

Further dimensions that can help us differentiating between subtypes of illiberalism are individualism vs. collectivism (though illiberalism tends to be more on the collectivistic side), pro- or anti-redistribution (the literature gives no clear indication in this regard), and anti-elitist (populist) vs elitist orientation (Enyedi 2023). As far as the last distinction is concerned, the often found overlap between illiberalism and populism gives the impression that the former combination is more widespread, but this may be so largely due to the Europe-centrism of the literature.

5. Postliberalism

Illiberal or explicitly anti-liberal ideas are sometimes also labelled as postliberal. For some of the authors the 'post' term simply refers to the fact that what they call illiberalism emerged as a response to liberalism. Laurelle (2022), for example, argues that:

> illiberalism must be understood only as a form of postliberalism (Gray 2014; Pabst 2021), i.e. an ideology that looks skeptically at liberalism as it exists today in practice and states that it has, in Putin's formulation, become "obsolete." In describing illiberalism as post-liberal, I mean it pushes back against liberalism after having experienced it; this "post-" aspect is critical because it explains the disillusioned tone of illiberalism. That is, only countries that have experienced some form of liberalism can be considered to have illiberal constituencies, parties, or regimes." Laurelle (2022: 311)

The postliberal label is also applied to describe a particular cluster of conservative intellectuals who claim that liberalism, rather than realizing the promise of pluralism, has created its own monistic and hegemonic political, economic, and cultural structures (Deneen 2019; Legutko 2016). Criticizing the post-Cold War liberal consensus of free markets, individual liberties, and the lowering of borders to the forces of integration, postliberals see the liberal state to be in service of 'a new, rootless oligarchy' that holds in contempt the 'genuine priorities of most people' (Milbank and Pabst 2016: 1). According to this approach, the confluence of neoliberalism with cultural liberalism has created a socially atomizing and authoritarian experience for the citizens, whose interests and values are depreciated and ignored by a narrow, self-perpetuating socio-political elite. The limitations of the liberal model have been exposed by civilizational challenges, in particular the growth of Islamism and the financial crisis of 2008 and after.

As outlined by John Milbank and Adrian Pabst (2016: 1–2), the two theorists who have made perhaps the most important recent scholarly contributions to this intellectual current, the remedy for the deficiencies of liberalism is not the abandonment of liberal democracy (as per populism and authoritarianism) but the cultivation of a different form of representative democracy. This rests on the pursuit of two objectives: the revival of an ethos of virtue among the elite, and on greater popular participation. In place of the 'selfishness, greed, suspicion and coercion' that it associates with liberalism, postliberalism proposes to return to politics 'common benefit, generosity, a measure of trust and persuasive power' (Milbank and Pabst 2016: 2).

The pursuit of postliberalism therefore involves abandoning the nihilistic, vice-oriented tendencies of liberalism in the pursuit of a politics of virtue, which involves assertive definitions of the common good (Vermeule 2022) grounded in Christian heritage, and the restoration of reciprocity and mutuality as political practices. As Milbank and Pabst stress, postliberalism rejects

the antagonistic quality of populism; it 'breaks with the usual contrasts of people *versus* elites' to propose the replacement of self-serving and corrupt liberal elites not with popular government, but with benign elites who are motivated by the politics of virtue (2016: 3).

6. Illiberal liberalism

While illiberalism and liberalism tend to appear as evident polar opposites in most of the literature, a small body of research focuses on the paradoxical phenomenon of illiberal liberalism. Desmond King (1999) argues, for example, that illiberal elements were intertwined in the creation of modern liberal democratic institutions and many times were promoted 'in the name of liberalism'. Kauth and King (2020) point to the tensions inherent in liberal democracies (e.g., individual liberty vis-à-vis equal treatment) and the frequent resort to exclusionary politics (migration policies, race, sexual minorities, etc.). In other words, on the ideological level, "there are illiberal trends inside liberalism itself" (Laurelle 2022: 314), and on the level of regime type, "although it is certainly true that democracy unchecked by liberalism can slide into excessive majoritarianism or oppressive populism, liberalism unchecked by democracy can easily deteriorate into oligarchy or technocracy" (Berman 2017: 30).

The concept of "illiberal liberalism" refers to an ideological construct or a practice that protects some elements of liberalism while undermines others. Most typically, the label of illiberal liberalism is used for capturing the combination of the defense of freedom of speech and egalitarian (Western) moral position on gender-relations and on the issue of sexual minorities with anti-globalism, 'sovereigntism', and xenophobia (Moffitt 2017: 114; Hadj-Abdou 2017).

Leila Hadj-Abdou (2021) distinguishes symbolic and substantive illiberal liberalism. In the former case liberalism is employed instrumentally, the emphasis is on the exclusion of certain

groups, while the latter aims at safeguarding liberal values with illiberal means. Somewhat differently, Frank Furedi (2021) uses the category of illiberal liberalism to depict the readiness of some liberals to treat populists as morally inferior enemies and to suspend democratic rights in fear of those rights being used by the opponents of liberalism.

7. Concluding remarks

Despite the burgeoning literature, there are many open questions concerning the meaning of the reviewed terms and their relationships. One of them concerns whether ideas that are compatible with democratic decision-making and formal equality among citizens but advocate traditionalist, hierarchical and exclusionary visions of social relations belong within the scope of illiberalism. The literature suggests a qualified yes, while it also reminds us of the danger of using individualistic, narrowly liberal, secular, and rational criteria for judging evolving social structures around the globe. Closely related to this is whether tolerance vis-à-vis minorities and non-majority lifestyles should be considered as essential to liberal democracy and, thereby, the opposition to it should be a defining feature of illiberalism. On this point the literature is split. While attacks on the limits of government are seen consensually as illiberal, the cultural resistance against a more progressive and emancipatory approach to equality may or may not belong to illiberalism, depending on whether it is a serious threat to the principle of non-discrimination. To put it somewhat differently, the political challenges to liberal-democratic norms are evidently illiberal, and the cultural challenges need closer scrutiny.

A second question concerns the asymmetric relationship between our main concepts and the left-right spectrum. The literature justifies a focus on right-wing versions of the illiberalism,

populism, and authoritarianism, but it forces us to leave room in our research to left-wing varieties too.

A third question concerns how to research the implementation of these ideas. The study of populism in public policies typically starts with the identification of the relevant political leaders (Casullo 2019, Pappas 2016). But illiberal, authoritarian, or populist policies can be implemented also by actors who are otherwise supporters of liberal democracy, and illiberal, authoritarian, or populist actors can have policies that strengthen liberal democracy. Therefore, we need to keep our conceptual apparatus open in this regard too.

A fourth question re-visits the logic and the spirit of Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan's (1996) idea of whether illiberal regimes have become "the only game in town" in specific countries. Their metaphor was clearly operationalized into mass acceptance, political actors, and respect for the constitutional rules of the game. However, the question arises whether an illiberal system, say in Hungary or Turkey, is already "the only game in town" or if it is somewhere on the road to becoming one but still "unconsolidated, lacking stable institutionalization that aspires to be one, but still is not fully consolidated". Of the three dimensions of consolidated democracy proposed by Linz and Stepan (1996) – behavioral, attitudinal, and constitutional – probably the latter is at greater risk of becoming consolidated in its illiberal form, but whether this assumption is correct will need to be tested empirically. A further, related concern is whether illiberalism is possible without autocratization. Linz and Stepan (1996: 3) point out that "there can be liberalization without democratization" as these processes, though closely linked, can follow different dynamics. Illiberalism can be conceived as liberalization *à rebours*, the inverse of "the process of making effective certain rights that protect both individuals and social groups from

arbitrary or illegal acts committed by the state or third parties" (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 6). But then the question is whether illiberalism can occur without autocratization.

The fifth and last concern relates to the extent to which vertical and horizontal accountability (O'Donnell 1998, Schedler 1999) plays a role in the consolidation of illiberal regimes. Dan Slater (2013: 730) argues that an underappreciated tension between vertical and horizontal accountability lies at the heart of what he calls 'democratic careening.' A concept different from 'democratic collapse', as it is rather "careening between populist and oligarchic modes of politics" than between consolidation of democracy or collapsing into authoritarianism that reflects the tension between vertical accountability (democratic inclusivity) and tighter constraints on the executive of horizontal accountability (democratic constraints). When democracies are born or drift towards oligarchic and exclusivist directions, they become vulnerable to populist upsurges that shake their fundaments (Slater 2013: 732). Hence, to understand illiberalism and its sources better, we propose to put accountability – both before and during the illiberal upsurge – at the centre of our analyses. Even if open sabotage of accountability is characteristic, according to some authors (Glasius 2018: 531), rather of the authoritarian practices than the illiberal ones (related more to infringing personal autonomy and dignity), the latter often provide an incentive for the former, altogether putting the future of some democracies in peril.

While this overview provided some rudimentary understanding of the state-of-the-art and of the main conceptual claims, the close scrutiny of elite narratives, of their diffusion and of the attitudinal responses they trigger in the society will help us to refine further our conceptual toolbox. We need empirical data to see where exactly illiberalism is situated on the democracy-autocracy axis, to what extent it is driven by a coherent set of values, and whether it is a transient phenomenon or if it is here to stay, eventually consolidating into a distinct regime type.

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