



New
Direction

the Foundation for European Conservatism

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THE DIVORCE OF DEMOCRACY AND LIBERALISM? EUROPEAN POLITICS BETWEEN ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND UNDEMOCRATIC LIBERALISM



New Direction

the Foundation for European Conservatism



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INTRODUCTION

On 3 September 2025, an article appeared in the Czech weekly *Echo* summarising a series of recent voting intention surveys from across Europe. In the three biggest Western European countries — Germany, France and Great Britain — the leading position was occupied by a party of the so-called ‘populist right’: Alternative for Germany, National Rally, and Reform, respectively.¹ Even though none of these countries is planning to hold elections anytime in the near future, the results of the polls have reflected a wider discontent with the state of democratic governance across the Western world. A 2024 Pew Research Centre survey showed a further decline in satisfaction with the functioning of the democratic system in Western Europe, from 49 per cent in 2021 (which was considered extremely worrying at the time) to just 36 per cent.²

On the same day as the above-mentioned article was published, a meeting took place in Washington between Donald Trump and the newly elected president of Poland, Karol Nawrocki. During the press conference, President Nawrocki emphasised the ‘shared values’ of Poland and the US: ‘independence, sovereignty, and democracy’. This passing comment by Nawrocki provided a telling contrast to the usual usage of the ‘shared values’ narrative. In countless speeches and documents from the European Commission or the Council of Europe, ‘shared values’ almost always occur in the triad ‘democracy, rule of law, and human rights’. Nawrocki’s shift towards ‘sovereignty and democracy’, whether preconceived or accidental, reveals a significant change in the political discourse. As a Polish philosopher Michał Kuź puts it, this is a shift in which the marriage of liberalism and democracy can no longer be taken for granted.³

Over the past decade, it has become commonplace to speak of the crisis of liberal democracy. For a long time, however, it

was considered a temporary malaise inflicted by the economic downturn of 2008 and the migration wave of 2015. Events such as Donald Trump’s defeat in 2020 and the Polish elections of 2023 were cited as proofs that things were returning to normal and history was ‘back on track’.⁴ However, it has recently become increasingly difficult to ignore the systemic nature of socio-political change in the West. Ivan Krastev draws a parallel between today’s atmosphere and that of 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe — a time of decisive transformation of the political order.⁵ According to John Gray, it seems that it was rather the liberal counter-offensive that ‘passed as a blip’, to be followed by a definitive ‘turning point’ marking the ‘end of the liberal project’ and paving the way for ‘systematically constructed and deeply embedded illiberal democracy’.⁶ Similarly, Chantal Delsol argues that the second Trump election cannot be dismissed as merely an outflow of ‘anger and frustration’ but, rather, needs to be seen as a moment in which long-brewing illiberal political tendencies crystallised into a fully-fledged political alternative to the current order.⁷

This essay draws upon a growing corpus of academic research and public discourse on the subject of illiberalism, encompassing both the theoretical articulation of illiberalism within contemporary political philosophy and its practical political implementation. In an attempt to avoid the ideological bias often associated with discussions of this topic, the essay focuses not on illiberalism as an isolated phenomenon, but on the growing tension between the liberal and democratic elements of the Western political order. It is this tension that has triggered a polarising drift on *both* sides of this new political divide, pushing them towards the extreme poles of *illiberal democracy* and *undemocratic liberalism*.

1 Po AfD a Farageovi i Le Penová. Národní sdružení vede v průzkumu k možným předčasným volbám, *Echo24*, 3.09.2025, <https://www.echo24.cz/a/HFneU/zpravy-zahranici-farage-vede-drtive-francie-le-penova-nemecko-afd-pravice-migrace>

2 Richard Wike, Janell Fetterolf, Satisfaction with democracy has declined in recent years in high-income nations, 18.06.2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/06/18/satisfaction-with-democracy-has-declined-in-recent-years-in-high-income-nations/>

3 Michał Kuź, Liberalizm boje swoją żonę, *Magazyn Kontra*, 07.2024, <https://magazynkontra.pl/liberalizm-bije-swoja-zone/>; Michał Kuź, Liberalismus versus demokracie, *Kontexty* 1/2025.

4 Kacper Szulecki, Jak osłabić drugą falę populizmu, *Kultura Liberalna* 856 (22/2025) 3.06.2025 <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2025/06/03/karol-nawrocki-wygrwa-jak-oslabic-druga-fale-populizmu/>

5 Ivan Krastev, Proč se liberálové tak těžko smířují se změnou epochy, *Respekt*, 7.01.2025, <https://www.respekt.cz/tydenik/2025/3/ivan-krastev-proc-se-liberalove-tak-tezko-smiruji-se-zmenou-epochy>

6 John Gray, Trump and the Triumph of Illiberal Democracy, *The New Statesman*, 24.11.2024, <https://www.newstatesman.com/international-politics/2024/11/donald-trump-triumph-of-illiberal-democracy>

7 Chantal Delsol, Illiberalizm buntem ludu przeciwko narzuconemu procesowi uniformizacji, *Wszystko Co Najważniejsze* 66/2025, <https://wszystkoconajwazniejsze.pl/prof-chantal-delsol-illiberalizm-buntem-ludu-przeciw-narzuconemu-procesowi-uniformizacji/>

1.1 Combating the extremists: The mechanisms of delegitimization

The emergence and rise of the illiberal ‘counter-revolution’ has been a subject of debate for some time. In his 2018 book, the Oxford-based scholar Jan Zielonka claims that Brexit is ‘one of the episodes heralding the mighty movement aiming to destroy the narrative and political order that has prevailed on the continent since 1989’. He correctly identifies the comprehensive nature of this ‘counter-revolution’, stating that ‘not only is the EU under attack, but so are all the other symbols of the current order, including liberal democracy, neoliberal economics, migration, multiculturalism, historical truth, political correctness, moderate political parties, and the mainstream media’. He also notes that, despite regional variations, a similar discourse based on the ‘rejection of the people and institutions that have ruled Europe for the last three decades’ is emerging across the continent.⁸

Zielonka recommends that the liberal mainstream conduct a thorough self-examination in order to confront the growing tide of ‘counter-revolution’. This necessity has been repeatedly emphasised by other prominent liberal thinkers, from Mark Lilla to Ivan Krastev, who have pointed to the ‘ideological petrification’ of liberal discourse. In a manifesto marking its 175th anniversary, *The Economist*, one of the symbols of the liberal world, wrote: “It is the moment for a liberal reinvention. Liberals need to spend less time dismissing their critics as fools and bigots and more fixing what is wrong.”⁹

Nevertheless, a decade has passed and we are still more or less in the same place. In terms of the terminology used by politicians and the media in public debate, there is still a tendency to push any criticism of the liberal order (and the political forces that adopt this critical stance) outside the legitimate political spectrum by means of terms such as ‘populism’, ‘far-right’, or ‘authoritarian’. In everyday political life, this attitude manifests itself in the form of *cordon sanitaire* tactics and ever-widening coalitions of ‘the establishment’ against ‘the anti-system’, a phenomenon occurring throughout Europe, from Romania to Germany and France. In terms of political rhetoric, language that portrays politics as an apocalyptic struggle between good and evil obscures any attempt at public debate, turning each election into a crusade. As Konrad Szymański wrote, almost every election in the Western world in recent years, from Paris to Bratislava and from Los Angeles to Warsaw, has been presented as a ‘decisive battle to save democracy’. Or, as Anne Applebaum puts it: ‘Every election is now existential’.¹⁰

When the surge of illiberal political forces could no longer be ignored, two types of explanation often emerged in mainstream public debate. The first perceives the illiberal wave as just another chapter in the age-old clash between liberal democracy and authoritarianism. The rise of ‘anti-liberal, right-wing populism’ is often described as a sign of fascist resurgence. Experts on 20th-century totalitarianism, such as Timothy Snyder and Anne Applebaum, perceive the American MAGA movement as a re-enactment of fascism. In his 2019 essay *The Strongmen Strike Back*, Robert Kagan speaks of ‘the backlash mounting across the globe’ against liberalism, encompassing both explicitly authoritarian non-Western regimes and authoritarian tendencies within the liberal world. According to Kagan, a key driver of illiberal tendencies is the fascination with successful non-Western autocracies such as China and Russia. Furthermore, any challenge to the liberal order is, by definition, authoritarian because ‘there is no democracy without liberalism.’ ‘If they win, there will be no more elections’ is a phrase we hear repeatedly in different countries and languages.¹¹

The identification of the current illiberal wave with fascism or authoritarianism is based mainly on its re-embrace of nationalism and the concept of the nation state as the foundation of politics. ‘The language of blood and soil, which has once again become central to public debate in many democracies, is very powerful. It helps many people to make sense of a complex world. It cannot easily be defeated or dismissed in one electoral cycle,’ says Anne Applebaum, commenting on the last Polish presidential elections. She identifies the problem as consisting in the shift from liberal technocracy towards cultural and identity issues becoming the centre of political struggle: ‘Although many had hoped otherwise, it seems that we are not returning to a world in which the centre-left and centre-right compete over tax rates or budgets. Economic and policy arguments just don’t matter as much to people right now as these deeper cultural divides.’ Ultimately, it must be concluded that the persistent presence of ‘nationalism’ in ‘Polish, American, or European politics’ is due to cultural (i.e. non-rational) divisions that the rationalism of the Enlightenment failed to eradicate completely. As Philip Manow points out, it is often explained as a ‘pathology of perception’ caused by some individuals’ inability to cope with the complexity of the modern world.¹²

Why have those irrational instincts of the demos resurfaced in the current circumstances? The second part of the

8 Jan Zielonka, *Kontrewolucja. Liberalna Europa w odwrocie*, transl. J. Bednarek, Warszawa: PWN 2018.

9 Cf. Ivan Krastev, Stephen Holmes, *The Light That Failed*, London: Penguin 2020; Mark Lilla, The End of Identity Liberalism, *New York Times* 18.11.2016; A manifesto for renewing liberalism, *The Economist* 13.09.2018. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2018/09/13/a-manifesto-for-renewing-liberalism>

10 Konrad Szymański, Odrzucenie liberalizmu nie zapewni nam szczęścia, *Rzeczpospolita*, 16.08.2024; Anne Applebaum, Every election is now existential, *The Atlantic*, 6.06.2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2025/06/existential-election-poland-nationalism/683051/>

11 Robert Kagan, The Strongmen Strike Back, *The Washington Post*, 14.03.2019; Anne Applebaum, Trump Is Speaking Like Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini, *The Atlantic*, 18.10.2024.

12 Applebaum, ‘Every election is now existential’..., Philip Manow, *Demokracja liberalna pod lupą* [Unter Beobachtung. Die Bestimmung der liberalen Demokratie und ihrer Freunde], Poznań: Instytut Zachodni 2025.

interpretation identifies the current crisis as essentially cognitive. The horizontalization and radicalisation of public debate, caused in part by social media, has created opportunities to manipulate public opinion on an unprecedented scale. The undeniable fact that its opponents, mainly Russia and China, are conducting inimical activities against the Western bloc in the information sphere is nowadays widely used to explain the crisis. It provides a useful tool for explaining the changes and justifying the securitization of the public debate under the banner of 'fighting disinformation'.

The narratives of 'authoritarian leanings', 'the irrational instincts of blood and soil nationalism', and 'disinformation orchestrated by the external enemies of the West' are united by the idea that the current socio-political turmoil is caused by factors external to the liberal order, such as non-Western powers or pre-Enlightenment sentiments prevalent in some sections of the Western public. All three categorically equate 'democracy' with the 'current liberal democratic order'. They all rigorously exclude the possibility that the crisis may be arising from the system's internal dysfunctions.

At a closer look, however, doubts begin to multiply. Firstly, the discourse of the return of authoritarianism obliterates numerous surveys revealing that the general public, while becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the functioning of particular democracies, still embraces the idea of democracy as such (see, for example, the PEW Research surveys quoted above). Shortly after Trump's election victory, AP News published a survey entitled 'Democracy was a motivating factor not only for Harris voters, but also for Trump voters'. This was in response to a wave of post-election commentary contrasting Democratic voters, who were driven by an idealistic vision of 'democracy under threat', with Trump supporters, who were mainly concerned about 'their bellies and their phobias' – economy and migrants. According to Jakub Eberle, the current trend is characterised by a steady rise in electoral participation and public activism rather than growing apathy. From the perspective of the AP News commentary, both sides defended democracy, they just define it differently. One camp wants to regain popular sovereignty, while the other identifies democracy with today's liberal order.¹³

As Czech political scientist Jan Holzer notes, the adamant certainty that 'democracy is under threat' stem from the fact that, in current political-science discourse, there is a growing tendency to substitute the 'liberal discourse of rights' for the democratic core principles of 'plurality and competition' and, consequently, to deride any political programme based on anti-liberal sentiments as undemocratic. Similarly, Philip Manow argues that the current 'crisis of democracy' is inextricably

linked to the identification of democracy with the liberal system of 'individual rights' and 'constitutionalism', dedicated to 'effectively limiting the executive power'. Many warnings about democratic decline or backsliding are actually connected to transgressions of liberal dogmas rather than influencing any measurable procedural data of democratic systems, especially the mechanism of democratic elections.¹⁴

Secondly, rejecting illiberalism as 'undemocratic' on the basis of its 'irrational nationalism' ignores some fundamental socio-political realities of Western political systems. As Samuel Huntington noted already in 2004, there is a 'growing gap' between the elites and the public in globalising societies, which can be defined as a distinction between 'cosmopolitanism and nationalism'. According to Huntington: 'The public is overwhelmingly concerned with the protection of military security, societal security, the domestic economy and sovereignty,' stressing especially the notions of national sovereignty and of 'societal security', fittingly defined as 'the sustainability – with-in acceptable conditions for evolution – of existing patterns of language, culture, association, religion and national identity'. This gap is most blatantly revealed in connection with the issue of mass migration, which is pursued on the basis of the economic and ethical paradigms of current liberalism and protected from the exercise of public will by the mechanisms of liberal democracy. This consequently increases a sense of cultural and societal insecurity and provokes a tendency towards stronger expressions of national identity. Another fact that has been overlooked is that, in the Western tradition, there is an inherent connection between democracy and nationalism. Pierre Manent describes this as 'the reciprocal dependence of democracy and the nation'. The nation-state is not only a natural ecosystem for a functioning democracy, but the idea of modern nationalism is also inevitably linked to the concepts of popular sovereignty and universal suffrage.¹⁵

Thirdly, although the concept of external influence via disinformation is undoubtedly rooted in the well-evidenced activities of Russian or Chinese propaganda, it can hardly be used to explain the roots of current discontent and its trigger moments. These range from the economic crisis of 2008 and the migration crisis of 2015 to the EU's climate policies, culminating in the so-called European Green Deal, as well as the import of the woke cultural offensive. In this wider historical perspective, Russian propaganda is not a mysterious demiurgical power able to create conflicts ex nihilo, but rather a parasitic form of influence that preys on internal weaknesses and tensions already present in Western social and political systems. Moreover, the way in which the topic of disinformation is handled in Europe nowadays – epitomised by Macron's claim that fighting disinformation is necessary 'to save democracy', or by the European Court

13 Garry Fields, Linley Sanders, Democracy was a motivating factor for both Harris and Trump voters, but for very different reasons, *AP NEWS*, 10.11.2024; Jakub Eberle: Is liberal democracy under threat? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJEiOpmyvmg>;

14 Jan Holzer, *Čtyři politologické poznámky o některých pozoruhodnostech v současné teorii (re-, de-) demokratizace*, Brno 2026; Philip Manow, *Demokracja liberalna pod lupą...*

15 Monika Bartoszewicz, *Festung Europa*, Kraków: OMP 2018; Pierre Manent, Populist Demagoguery and the Fanaticism of the Centre, *American Affairs*, Summer 2017, vol. I, no 2; Samuel Huntington: Dead Souls. The Denationalization of the American Elite, *The National Interest*, 1.03.2004, <https://nationalinterest.org/legacy/dead-souls-the-denationalization-of-the-american-elite-620>

of Human Rights' ruling in the case of Belgian politician Daniel Feret, which stated that 'some uninformed parts of society' should not even be exposed to certain 'harmful information' – problematises one of the crucial foundations of the democratic order: the concept of the citizen as an entity capable of autonomous decision-making.¹⁶

Summing up, narratives that situate the origins of the illiberal turn in Western politics outside the system largely seem to be exercises in denial, on the one hand, and in consolidating one's own ideological camp, on the other. To grasp the issue, it is much more fruitful to analyse it in the context of internal tensions within the liberal democratic order and the current form

of liberalism and democratic legitimacy. Following Michal Kuź's matrimonial metaphor, the potential divorce between liberalism and democracy allows us to reconfigure the political spectrum rather than making spurious attempts to exorcise its rapidly growing fraction to the margins of the political forum. Rather than focusing solely on the perception of liberal democracy being threatened by 'barbarians at the gates', this approach provides a more nuanced perspective that considers the evolutionary changes occurring on *both* sides of the new divide. As Kuz puts it, it is not clear whether this relationship crisis started because democracy flirted with the 'populists' or, rather, because liberalism mistreated its spouse.¹⁷

1.2 Democracy and Liberalism: Marriage of Convenience, not of Love

Democracy, a system based on the will of the majority, has been a part of political thought ever since it emerged in ancient Athens. From the outset, however, political philosophers viewed democracy with a considerable degree of distrust. Plato, Aristotle, and their numerous successors highlighted the flaws of a regime based on the will of the majority, primarily its instability and susceptibility to demagoguery, which ultimately deteriorates into tyranny. The classical tradition of Western political philosophy is based on the search for a 'mixed regime', which avoids the inherent flaws of each 'pure type' while enhancing their benefits.

Liberal democracy, as it has gradually evolved since the time of Locke, Montesquieu, and the Federalists, achieving its final form throughout the 20th century, especially in connection with the turning points of 1945 and 1989, is merely the latest in a line of 'mixed' projects and is essentially a relatively recent phenomenon. The democratic core (the idea of popular sovereignty demonstrated via the electoral process) is limited by the concept of a representative system (as opposed to direct, plebiscitarian democracy), primarily, however, by the system of 'checks and balances', the separation of powers between the executive, legislative and judicial branches, and the principles of fundamental rights. Nevertheless, from the outset, there has been an awareness of the potentially contradictory nature of this union. Tocqueville, who is said to have coined the term 'liberal democracy', devoted much of his work to describing and explaining this inner tension.¹⁸

The hegemony of liberal democracy is a consequence of the West's victories in World War II and the Cold War. The latter victory reinforced the belief that liberal democracy is universally

the best form of government. The reality of an international liberal political order based on the same values and rules and secured by the economic and military superiority of the West was for Kagan 'an indisputable proof of the correctness of the Enlightenment's view' of the progress of human history.¹⁹ This belief found its ultimate expression in Francis Fukuyama's concept of liberal democracy as 'the end of history'. It was only in the final stages of the concept's development that public perception merged the two components completely. Liberal democracy simply became 'democracy' without any further qualifiers. This has contributed to the present-day confusion of terms.

Over the past three decades, we have witnessed a gradual shift away from Fukuyama's optimistic vision. The first shock came with the realisation that much of the non-Western world does not share this belief and that there is no necessary connection between civilisational development and the adoption of the liberal democratic model. Fareed Zakaria coined the term 'illiberal democracy' to describe this new system, which involves separating the 'electoral mechanism' from the 'principles of liberal constitutionalism'. Most importantly, Zakaria locates the sources of illiberal democracy outside the cultural sphere of the West. 'From Peru to the Palestinian Authority, from Sierra Leone to Slovakia, from Pakistan to the Philippines, we see the rise of a disturbing phenomenon in international life – illiberal democracy. It has been difficult to recognize because for the last century in the West, democracy – free and fair elections – has gone hand in hand with constitutional liberalism – the rule of law and basic human rights. But in the rest of the world, these two concepts are coming apart.' It is worth noting that Zakaria also warned against the threats posed by the 'illiberal'

¹⁶ Nathanael Garstecka, *Macron zapowiedział walkę z mediami społecznościowymi, Wszystko Co Najważniejsze*, 31.10.2025; Adam Růžicka: *Nazíráme na lidi jako na idioty. Rozhovor s Natalií Alkiviadou, Týdeník Echo*, 24.10.2025.

¹⁷ Kuź, *Liberalizm bije żonę...*;

¹⁸ Michal Kuź, *Liberalismus versus demokracie, Kontexty* 1/2025; Marek Cichocki, *Demokracja w czasie wojny, Rzeczpospolita* 9.12.2024; Marek Cichocki, *Precedensowe unieważnienie wyborów w Rumunii, Rzeczpospolita* 10.01.2025.

¹⁹ Kagan, *The Strongmen Strike Back...*

tendencies in the West, pointing to the growing popularity of direct democracy.²⁰

The second shock came with the gradual emergence of illiberal tendencies within the political spectrum of several EU member states. For some time, it was possible to argue that the signs of the malaise were evident primarily in the ‘new’ (and therefore immature) liberal democracies of the former Eastern Bloc. The ‘democratic backsliding’ of Poland and Hungary has been widely discussed in the context of the fragile institutional backbone that has enabled populists to hijack the state and dismantle its incomplete system of checks and balances. As Ivan Krastev points out, the term ‘backsliding’ is derived from religious practice and denotes ‘the reversion to a sinful way of life prior to conversion’. In *The Light That Failed*, Krastev and Holmes describe the Central and Eastern European post-1989 story as an ‘age of imitation’, followed by ‘great disappointment’ at the failure to catch up with and replicate the more advanced West precisely. This necessarily resulted in resentment towards the imitated model. The relationship between the model and the imitator is necessarily hierarchical, and the rejection of ‘modernisation via imitation’ on the European peripheries, as Holmes and Krastev demonstrated, was often cloaked in the language of *regaining sovereignty*.²¹

Nevertheless, the rise of anti-system parties and movements across Europe, the Brexit referendum, and Donald Trump’s first and especially second electoral victory have shown that the situation cannot be dismissed by pointing to ‘Eastern European backwardness’. The same trends are evident across Western societies, indicating a shared pattern of development and the ongoing nature of the current crisis.

The first European politician to publicly endorse the concept of ‘illiberal democracy’ was Victor Orban, which appeared to support the intuition that we are dealing with a problem that is unique to post-communist peripheries. Moreover, in his 2014 speech, he explicitly listed the economic successes of autocratic states, such as China, Russia, India, Singapore, and Turkey, as one of the impulses for Hungary’s illiberal project (although he only mentioned the economic efficiency of these countries, not their political systems).²²

‘Illiberal democracy is an oxymoron and, in politics, serves as an excuse for autocrats’, says Czech political scientist Karel Müller. Michał Kuź points out that the reaction of many

commentators to Orbán’s declaration was based on the conviction that ‘there is no democracy other than liberal democracy’ because both terms are ‘inexorably linked’ and thus (the critics claim) ‘illiberal democracy is as much a fantasy as a unicorn’.²³

When we consider the political realities of the 19th and 20th centuries, such a statement seems obviously ahistorical. However, it mainly signals the innate inability of liberalism to recognise the profound change in the understanding of democracy that has occurred in recent decades. As Jan Holzer points out, democracy has ceased to be identified primarily with ‘pluralism and competition’ and has instead been monopolised by the liberal (and not democratic) notion of rights. ‘Actors pushing for the expansion of rights were identified as pro-democratic. Those sceptical of the expansion of rights were identified as undemocratic.’ Although ‘de-democratisation’ has become one of the most widely discussed concepts in political-science discourse in recent years, the Czech author suggests that the majority of phenomena described as elements of democratic backsliding are actually linked to the liberal pillar of the edifice of liberal democracy. Therefore, we may be dealing more with tendencies to de-liberalise democracy.²⁴

Philip Manow goes even further, claiming that, in reality, around 1990, we witnessed the birth of a new evolutionary phase in the history of democracy. This phase is founded on the notion of the priority of ‘individual rights’ (and the mechanisms of non-democratic, mainly judicial, control which were created to protect them) over the principle of popular sovereignty, as expressed through majoritarian voting. This new phase of democracy is characterised by the delegation of political decisions to non-majoritarian institutions (such as constitutional courts) and by the belief that ‘democracy’ is perfected by ‘disabling democratic institutions’, i.e. ‘reducing the scope of politics’ and ‘providing a counterbalance to the hegemony of the nation’. However, due to the belief that ‘liberal democracy is a pleonasm and illiberal democracy an oxymoron’, any reflection on the current crisis must, by definition, rule out the possibility that it is caused by a surplus of liberal constitutionalism rather than its opposite. In reality, as Manow argues, it is the very emergence of this new model of liberal democracy that have given rise to its opponents. What seems as a proliferation of the zones of conflict within the liberal democratic system is proportionate to the proliferation of the zones protected from the political influence via majoritarian mechanisms.²⁵

20 Fareed Zakaria, *The Rise of Illiberal Democracy*, *Foreign Affairs*, 1.11.1997.

21 Ivan Krastev, *What’s Wrong with East-Central Europe?: Liberalism’s Failure to Deliver*, *Journal of Democracy* 1/2016; Krastev, Holmes, *The Light That Failed*...

22 ‘We had to state that a democracy does not necessarily have to be liberal. Just because a state is not liberal, it can still be a democracy.’ <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>, accessed 18.09.2025.

23 Nevertheless, it must be added that the condescending perspective of ‘Eastern Europe’ as ‘one of the biggest threats to liberal democracy’ lives on, as demonstrated for example by a recent (December 1st 2025) edition of Fareed Zakaria’s CNN GPS, featuring Ivan Krastev. Zakaria’s repeated questions about why the region once considered ‘liberal democracy’s brightest horizon’ is full of ‘populism and resentment’ finally led Krastev to a declaration that in reality ‘there’s now little difference between West and East, only instead of them becoming more like the Western Europe, Western Europe became more similar to the East.’ Compare also: Karel Müller, *Neliberální demokracie je protimluv*, CEVRO Arena 12.09.2025, www.cevroarena.cz/post/esej-karla-b-müllera-neliberální-demokracie-je-protimluv-a-v-politice-funguje-jako-výmluva-autokra; Kuź, *Liberalismus versus demokracie*...

24 Jan Holzer, *Čtyři politologické poznámky o některých pozoruhodnostech v současné teorii (re-, de-) demokratizace*...

25 Mannow, *Demokracja liberalna pod lupą*...



GENEALOGY OF ILLIBERALISM

2.1 Three narratives of the anti-liberal revolt

Krastev and Holmes' intuition that the rise of illiberalism is driven by a reaction to humiliation and a desire to regain sovereignty seems to be on the right track. The Brexit slogan 'Take back control' has reappeared in many variants across the Western world, alongside a second slogan calling for a return to 'the politics of common sense'. This makes it easy to present illiberal sentiment as just another version of the Luddite revolt against a world that is 'too complex to comprehend'. However, on closer inspection, these slogans reveal a deeper diagnosis of the overall crisis of the Western political system, indicating a reduction in the democratic aspect of the liberal democratic order. As Philip Manow has recently stated, illiberal populism 'is not an enemy of liberal democracy', rather a 'phantom of politics suppressed by liberalism'.²⁶

To provide a more complex genealogy of illiberalism, we will examine three texts, namely, Jan Zielonka's *Counter-Revolution*, written at the very beginning of the illiberal wave, Chantal Delsol's writings on populism and illiberalism, and Patrick Deneen's *Regime Change* from 2023, heralding the American public debate on Donald Trump's 'second coming'.

Starting with the last of the three, Patrick Deneen's argument centres on his diagnosis of the decline of the American Republic. This decline is demonstrated by three processes: political polarisation; the economic impoverishment of the lower strata of society, accompanied by their moral disintegration; together resulting in the collapse of the liberal American Dream. The liberal narrative, based on the belief in linear progress, postulates politics as an endless process of removing borders, freeing the individual from the limitations of social life (family, local community and religion), and creating space for limitless economic activity. This process of removing borders finally transcends the physical limits of the national community, globalisation being the final stage of economic borderlessness and the project of a multicultural society its socio-political equivalent.

Having overcome the opposition of the old aristocracies and the Church, the emancipatory discourse of liberalism identified as its major enemy the 'instinctive conservatism of the *demos*', which had to be appeased with the promise of constant material

improvement while being deprived of any effective influence over the government. This 'effective control' over the 'capricious sentiments of the *demos*' was achieved, on the one hand, through the meritocratic limitation of political power and, on the other, by narrowing the political spectrum to a competition between 'left- and right-wing liberals', who differed in the part of the emancipatory equation (social or economic) that they emphasised but would never have questioned the logic of the emancipatory project itself.

According to Deneen, the cycle of left- and right-wing liberalism was first disturbed by the fact that the promise of constant economic growth turned into a steady decline of the American middle and lower classes. Secondly, it was shattered by the advance of the woke revolution, i.e., the emergence of an aggressive form of progressive liberalism, enhanced by an alliance with corporate capitalism to promote the final stage of liberal emancipation. The central premise of 'woke progressivism' – the absolutisation of John Stuart Mill's 'harm principle' – was considered to justify the use of coercive power to promote the emancipatory project. Deneen calls this a 'new titanic form of power and control', which has awakened an unexpectedly strong reaction from the *demos*. As this reaction was triggered by the combination of economic globalisation and cultural progressivism, the 'political consciousness' of this popular anti-liberal revolt also merged the two dimensions, taking the distinct form of the MAGA movement in which, as J. D. Vance has said, 'culture war is class war'.²⁷

In his book *Counter-Revolution*, Jan Zielonka, writing from the perspective of a liberal concerned with current developments, provides a concise overview of the internal issues facing Western European liberal democracies that have led to the rise of illiberalism. According to Zielonka, after the triumph of the liberal order in 1989, European politics came to be viewed increasingly in terms of 'institutional engineering' rather than 'the art of negotiation between elites and electorate'. There has been a steady tendency to shift power to expert bodies and institutions that lack electoral legitimacy. These shifts were explained as being necessary for political/administrative decisions to be governed 'by reason and not by passions'. Unelected experts were deemed best placed to define the public interest.

²⁶ Manow, *Demokracja liberalna pod lupa...*

²⁷ Patrick Deneen, *Regime Change. Toward a Postliberal Future*, Sentinel 2023; Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, Yale University Press 2019.

In this respect, citizens should not be listened to but, rather, educated.²⁸

According to Zielenka, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, liberalism became the dominant ideology, ‘the only player on the pitch’. He claims that this triumph of liberal ideas resulted in many different liberal currents merging into a single ‘pan-European ideological project’, gradually diminishing the difference between centre-left and centre-right political parties, which merged into a single ‘liberal camp’. This evolution transformed liberalism from a project dedicated to protecting minorities against the will of the majority into ‘a minority ruling the majority and telling it what is best for it’. He highlights the double disempowerment of people, pointing out that by passing more and more power to institutions beyond democratic control, liberals have deprived voters of the capacity to influence politics. And, ‘by deregulating and privatising the economy, they deprived them of the capacity to change economic policies.’ Listing the institutions that have led to this disempowering effect, he groups together economic institutions such as central banks and global corporations, judicial institutions such as constitutional courts, and institutions controlling the discourse – the media. In the European context, particular importance must be assigned to the disenfranchising effect of European integration. Zielenka may not subscribe to Pierre Manent’s radical stance that ‘the European Union has a jurisdictional and procedural legitimacy which excludes democratic legitimacy and which is incompatible with it.’ Nevertheless, he also notices that the EU epitomizes a meritocratic and procedural rather than democratic form of rule.²⁹

Chantal Delsol discusses the current crisis of European political systems by examining the topic of ‘populism’. Often used as a derogatory term rather than an analytical tool, the word has come to denote any political attitude that diverges from the liberal consensus of post-1989 Europe. According to Delsol, the resurgence of ‘populism’ reflects the internal tensions of liberal democracy, stemming from the dual crisis of the two pillars of social order: the fundamental psychosocial need for ‘rootedness’ and the fundamental precondition of democracy – representation.

Delsol describes maintaining a balance between a sense of rootedness (the particular) and an emphasis on emancipation (the universal) as a fundamental aspect of the liberal democratic order. This task depends on the ability to exercise self-restraint

and the willingness to negotiate compromises on both sides of the balance. In the last decades of the 20th century, ‘the spirit of the West mobilised its powers and convictions with a very precise goal: to foster globalisation, search for a global identity and negate local traditions’, using all the instruments of ‘elitist centralisation of power’ to achieve this goal. According to the French sociologist, liberalism’s obsession with ‘removing borders’ ran havoc after the end of the Cold War, resulting in the idea of a ‘world without boundaries’ and ‘particular identities’, and triggering a response in the form of ‘popular revolt against liberalism’.

The popular reluctance towards (or outright rejection of) liberalism’s emancipatory and unifying project results in growing disdain among elites for the *demos*. This disdain is rooted in the perceived ‘inertial conservatism’ of the people, who are seen as an obstacle to the endless cycles of emancipatory progress, and as incompetent to influence public affairs. According to Delsol, it is these factors together that properly explain the nature and intensity of illiberal sentiment.

Mistrust of the competence of the people fosters the tendency towards liberal technocratic rule via unelected expert bodies. The concept of a borderless global economy widens the gap between society’s upper strata and the masses. The implementation of borderless Europe encourages mass migration from the Global South and disrupts a sense of rootedness. The concomitant pressure on the value system of the masses, undertaken in the name of liberal emancipation, is, Delsol concludes, depriving them of what is left – their identity and dignity.

Importantly, populism, as understood by Delsol, does not emerge as an opponent of democracy; rather, it develops in response to a democratic deficit. It demands real alternatives in a system that has turned freedom of choice into an illusion and real representation into ‘a de facto monopoly hidden under the guise of a pluralistic discourse’. It is an inherently democratic and political impulse, rather than an authoritarian and anti-political one. Secondly, she emphasises that, although the relationship between liberalism and democracy has always been complex, today’s illiberalism is a reaction to a specific phase in the development of the liberal project. This phase is characterised by the rise of economic globalisation, the dominance of technocratic politics, as exemplified by the institutions of the European Union, and the radicalisation of universalist tendencies in the cultural and identity spheres.³⁰

28 In a similar vein, another liberal critic of contemporary liberalism, Marc F. Plattner, speaks about ‘a clear weakening of the view that popular majorities should play a more active role in deciding on governmental policies. This heightened suspicion of popular majorities was reflected in the global spread of judicial review and the rise of independent agencies (such as central banks) explicitly intended to be insulated from the branches of government most responsive to popular sentiment.’ (Plattner, *Illiberal Democracy and the Struggle on the Right*, *Journal of Democracy*, 1/2019).

29 Jan Zielenka, *Kontrewolucja. Liberalna Europa w odwrocie*, transl. J. Bednarek, Warszawa: PWN 2018; Manent, *Populist Demagoguery and the Fanaticism of the Centre...*

30 Chantal Delsol, *Illiberalizm...*; Przemysław Piotrowski, The contemporary dispute of the ‘right-wing populism’ and the liberal democratic consensus, *Przegląd Zachodni* 2023; Michał Rydlewski, *Sens populizmu*, *Nowy Obywatel* 46/2025.

2.2 Migration as a trigger

According to Zielonka, the migration issue may serve as an epitome of new liberalism as perceived by actors of the anti-liberal revolt. It demonstrates the weakening of nation-state sovereignty from above, through the prioritisation of supra-national bodies in the regulatory process, and from below, through the ideology of ‘open borders’ and the ‘humanrightization’ of migration debate. It shows how liberals prioritise the rights of minorities over the will of the majority. Ultimately, it combines value-based arguments (a new definition of human rights) with the interests of globalised neoliberal economy, which aims to lower work costs, in a blatant disregard for the common good of society.

As early as 2004, Samuel Huntington (writing about the American reality, but with implications for the entire globalised liberal order) remarked that ‘elites are cosmopolitan, but people are local’. He observed an increasing moral critique of nationalistic thinking among the elites, stating that ‘the moralistic approach decries patriotism and nationalism as evil forces, arguing that international law, institutions, regimes, and norms are morally superior to those of individual nations. Commitment to humanity must supersede commitment to nation.’ This creates a ‘gulf between elite advocacy of multiculturalism and stubborn mass support for assimilation to a common national identity’. According to Huntington, this tension would become a defining feature of politics in the next decades. And he was proven right.³¹

The cultural and social changes in Western European cities, caused by mass migration, are often cited as the main reason for the growing sense of ‘uprootedness’ experienced by many in Western societies. Since at least 2016, mass migration has repeatedly been listed as the main problem facing Western European countries in all public opinion polls. Actually, it could be argued that the events of the 2015 migration crisis were merely the culmination of a process of social unrest that had been brewing under the surface for a long time and until then had been excluded from public debate. In her pioneering work *Festung Europa*, Monika Bartoszewicz highlights the key role of societal or cultural security in the foundation of every society. According to liberal authors such as Will Kymlicka, the state is required to actively ensure a level of public respect and legal adjustment for all minorities, including newly arrived ones. The concept of ‘multicultural citizenship’ has been adopted by European countries, resulting in the suppression of open debate on migration and a passive approach to the transformation of public spaces into disconnected minority enclaves. This has led to a widespread sense of cultural

disruption and insecurity. Attempting to handle the growing crisis solely through securitisation, following a series of Islamist acts of violence, misses the point entirely. The threat posed by migration extends beyond security policies because it is perceived as an existential threat not only to the physical safety of individuals, but also to communal identity and sense of rootedness as described by Delsol.³²

When the core identity of a society is under threat – Bartoszewicz argues – there is a need for that identity to be expressed more vocally. While each individual normally functions with a complex constellation of identities lacking any stable hierarchy, in situations of crisis and conflict identities become hierarchised. The consolidation of national/cultural identity, triggered by a sense of endangerment, leads to the politicisation of culture. Even in the postmodern, post-Christian, and often post-national societies of Western Europe, this consolidation of basic societal identity involves a ‘reconstruction out of symbolic material’ present in the deep layers of ‘national and religious memory’.³³

In the political reality of Europe in recent decades, the urge to vocally rearticulate insecure identities has been confronted by monopolistic practices of hegemonic liberalism, particularly the gradual ‘narrowing of the political mainstream’. This has involved the marginalisation of alternative voices and the gradual merging of centre-left and centre-right political forces into a single camp. This ideological narrowing occurred simultaneously with the technocratization of European politics connected to the process of the EU integration. ‘Societies have discovered that unelected bureaucrats... announce decisions bearing potentially irrevocable social changes ex cathedra, claiming them to be inevitable and suggesting that people would be best advised to accept and adapt to them as quickly as possible’. Therefore, alongside the popular sense of loss of ‘rootedness’, there has been a growing sentiment of being politically un-represented. Invoking Huntington’s aforementioned article again, the growing gap between the worldviews of elites and the public – most blatantly visible in the case of migration – has produced a new type of democracy, one based on free elections, but otherwise unresponsive to popular perception. ‘It has become an unrepresentative democracy because on crucial issues – especially those involving national identity – its leaders pass laws and implement policies contrary to the views of the American people. Concomitantly, the American people have become increasingly alienated from politics and government.’ As Bartoszewicz concludes, ‘societies that feel unrepresented will search for new representation’. These dynamics

31 Huntington, *Dead Souls. The Denationalization of the American Elite...*

32 Monika Bartoszewicz, *Festung Europa*, Kraków: OMP 2018.

33 Bartoszewicz, *Festung Europa...*

have opened the gates to a crisis of liberal democracy and the ‘radicalisation of European politics’.³⁴

Through the prism of the migration crisis, we can view the illiberal turn in European politics in all its complexity, as an issue

of representation (the tension between technocratic liberalism and democracy as the principle of rule based on the notion of popular sovereignty) and of culture (rootedness), with an important socio-economic dimension (tension between the elite and the people).

2.3 Re-mapping political spectrum

Drawing on the above narratives that delineate the genesis of illiberalism in Europe, we can now address the issue of the terminological chaos that these processes have brought to public debate.

Steve Bannon, one of the early ‘prophets’ of American illiberalism, attempted to define the new political divide in the West by coining the terms ‘somewheres’ and ‘everywheres’. Jan Zielonka, looking in a similar direction, speaks of the ‘party of globalisation’ and ‘the party of territoriality’. Deneen’s *Regime Change* outlines another way of grasping the issue, claiming that we are witnessing a great return of the oldest and most common division in Western history, namely, that between ‘the few’ and ‘the many’. The Polish political sociologist Jarosław Flis reaches a similar conclusion, describing the new division in Polish society as ‘those at the top’ versus ‘those at the bottom’. Adopting Deneen’s and Flis’ viewpoint would make populism the most obvious term by which to describe the current trend. However, ‘populism’ is a term burdened with too many negative connotations; it often denotes a political style or tactic rather than ideological content.³⁵

Since at least the 2008 financial crisis, we have been witnessing a gradual disintegration of traditional political spectra in Western European countries. The petrification of economic inequality, which has become more palpable across the West, has provided a powerful incentive to search for new political parties that could voice the resentment of the lower strata of society. At the same time, the ideological narrowing of the political mainstream demonstrated itself more vividly, as described by Jarosław Flis: ‘old left came to terms with the demolition of the Western European welfare state, whereas the old right accepted the sexual revolution and multiculturalism’. This emptying of political competition has created space for new forces on both sides of the spectrum. At the early stages of the illiberal surge, several new political movements emerged that could be categorised as anti-system liberal/left, including the Five Stars Movement in Italy or the Czech Pirate Party (in its initial phase). However, the label of ‘illiberal populism’ (with the concomitant classification as a threat to liberal democracy) was mainly attached to those parties whose agenda united all the aforementioned ‘anti-liberal’ sentiments – cultural,

economic, and political. Consequently, these movements came to be identified as ‘far-right’, ‘alt-right’, or ‘new conservatism’ in the Western media. At the same time, these labels were applied to any and all consistent critics of the liberal order, even if their ‘conservative’ or ‘rightist’ credentials were highly questionable, as in the case of Slovakia’s social democratic prime minister, Robert Fico. Moreover, apart from the obvious propaganda motives, such classification strengthens the perception of illiberalism as an isolated, marginal phenomenon rather than as part of a wider tectonic shift in the political sphere in the West.

As early as 2017, Polish political scientist Michał Kuź proposed reconfiguring the political field to reflect current changes in a more holistic way.³⁶ For many decades, the Western political landscape was defined by the left-right divide. Left-wing political parties were associated with terms such as ‘peace, internationalism, democracy, economic planning and public ownership, protectionism, social security, education, and trade unions’. Right-wing parties prioritised policies such as ‘armed forces, national way of life, authority and morality, free market, free trade, social harmony, freedom, and rights’.

Kuź argues that the major political division nowadays is between globalism and localism. On the globalist side of this divide, the central principles are emancipatory individualism and faith in international organisations such as the UN and the EU. The buzzwords of political parties are: ‘investors’, ‘internationalism’, ‘liberal democracy’, ‘trade agreements’, ‘flexibility’, ‘free trade’, ‘compensation equal to competencies’, ‘tolerance’, and ‘multiculturalism’. Drawing from the experience of the last decade, we may also add to the list the concept of ‘rule of law’, as it is understood by liberal political thought today.

Defining localism, Kuź invokes Donald Trump’s 2018 UN General Assembly speech. The President of the United States declared: ‘We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism. Around the world, responsible nations must defend against threats to sovereignty not just from global governance, but also from other, new forms of coercion and domination.’ Later on, he explicitly interconnected democracy, economic prosperity, and national sovereignty: ‘Sovereign and independent nations are the only vehicle where freedom

34 Bartoszewicz, *Festung Europa...*; Huntington, *Dead Souls...*

35 Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution...*; Deneen, *Regime Change...*; Jarosław Flis, *Polskie podziały – paradoksalne czy prekursorskie?* *Salon24*, 12.10.2015, <https://www.salon24.pl/u/jaroslawnflis/673589.polskie-podziały-paradoksalne-czy-prekursorskie>

36 Michał Kuź, *Globalism and Localism in the Perspective of Polish Politics*, *The Warsaw Institute Review*, 27.06.2017; Kuź, *Globalists versus Localists*, *Nowa Konfederacja*, 22.12.2020.

has ever survived, democracy has ever endured, or peace has ever prospered. And so we must protect our sovereignty and our cherished independence above all.³⁷

The definition of localism is based on the belief that the sovereign nation state is the fundamental organisational framework of democratic human communities. The set of priorities, contrasted with the buzzwords of globalist discourse, include small and medium-sized businesses (as opposed to foreign corporations), a rooted way of life (as opposed to cosmopolitanism), direct democracy (as opposed to bureaucratic rule and dilution of responsibility), protectionism (as opposed to globalized free trade), stability, social security and solidarity (as opposed to the neo-liberalism), local traditions, national identity, and state sovereignty (as opposed to the dominance of the international organisations such as the EU). From the perspective of the last decade, during which we have seen the first examples of 'localists in power', we should also mention the tendency towards charismatic leadership, as opposed to bureaucratic and procedural rule.

Of course, there are countless 'local variations' of localism. Protectionism is a specifically American response to globalisation, whereas localist parties in Europe more often advocate various modes of redistribution — anathema to American thinking. The concept of 'rootedness' can take on different meanings in different societies. Economically peripheral post-communist countries in Eastern Europe, for example, place a greater emphasis on economic solidarity, whereas French and German

localists are more concerned with preserving the cultural stability of their societies in the face of uncontrolled migration. In more traditional societies, the focus is on protecting against the influx of progressive ideas about family and gender. In more secularised environments, it is fostered by a fear of the aggressive intrusion of foreign cultures and lifestyles. But at the end of the day, the new pitch of Western politics nowadays oscillates between the poles of 'the globalist myth of the universalist liberal progress and the localist myth of the idyllic homogeneity'.³⁸

Recognising that what we observe in Western societies is not an anomaly, but rather a comprehensive reconfiguration of the political spectrum, enables us to grasp the nature of the change more accurately. Firstly, rather than being an instrument of moral/political condemnation, this new division can serve as a neutral analytical tool better suited to describing the current reality. Secondly, it shows that the change we are experiencing cannot be described using the 'barbarians at the gates' metaphor, rather, it consists of parallel evolutionary processes on both sides of the divide. Thirdly, it highlights the issue that we identified as the core of the current crisis: the tension between the liberal and democratic elements of the current order. Fourthly, it reflects the internal diversity of the localist movement, ranging from traditional conservatives to alt-right and even some representatives of the traditional left.

To visualise the manifold processes of the crystallisation of localist political movements, let us examine three cases of their development in the USA, Poland, and Slovakia.

2.4 Many paths leading in one direction: three case studies of the localist turn

In an attempt to provide a basic outline of political change, Patrick Deneen speaks of a 'profound reassessment of conservatism' based on demands from working- and lower-class voters, and a rejection of 'elite class commitments', including both 'free market libertarianism' of the right and 'sexual libertarianism' of the left. His depiction closely follows Michal Kuź's definition of localism: 'protecting jobs and industries within nations', 'more controlled immigration policies', and social conservatism that rejects 'identity politics' based on 'racial or sexual identities', supporting, instead, the family and rejecting the ethos of globalisation as both an economic and cultural process, in favour of 'patriotism' and 'distinct national identities'.³⁹

Nevertheless, illiberal tendencies manifest themselves in many local varieties across the West. The discourse of the illiberal localist revolt is adopted by a wide range of political actors. The majority are relatively new political forces that utilise the

shifting sands of contemporary politics to escape the margins of political debate. However, we will also find parties of the 'old right' that are transforming their programme and rhetoric, as well as some representatives of the 'old left'. Moreover, on the localist side of the spectrum, as among their opponents, adherence to illiberal premises is a gradable quality that can result in various practical policies, ranging from providing corrections to today's political order (the most common approach) to striving for profound regime change.

2.4.1 MAGA – the American trendsetter

The takeover of the Republican Party by the MAGA movement surrounding President Donald Trump provides a primary example of the dynamics of illiberalism. Trump's second electoral victory has so far provided the most powerful impetus for localist movements across the Western world. The MAGA

37 Kuź, Globalizm, lokalizm i nowe średniowiecze...; Remarks by President Trump to the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly | New York, 25.09.2018, <https://trump-whitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-73rd-session-united-nations-general-assembly-new-york-ny/>

38 Kuz, Globalizm, lokalizm i nowe średniowiecze...

39 Deneen, *Regime Change*...

movement is thus both an outcome of the rising tension within the liberal-democratic relationship and a trendsetter, greatly influencing the momentum of the illiberal tide in other parts of the West.

Although the MAGA movement is internally extremely diverse, it has always shared a master narrative that begins with a diagnosis of the decline of the American republic. The outlines of this narrative were described earlier in this essay, based on Patrick Deneen's argument. As Deneen summarises: 'Current discontent is directed both towards an ungovernable administrative state and towards global, denationalised economic forces. It is called undemocratic, but in reality, it represents a democratic impulse.' Consequently, the MAGA movement is attempting to transform the Republican Party by merging a parallel emphasis on defending the 'rooted way of life' with economic protectionism. The Republican Party thus evolves from its traditional 'old right' positions towards a new identity – as a party that is, as Kevin Roberts sums up, 'pro-worker, pro-family, pro-God, pro-nation'.⁴⁰

Examining the conflation of the movement's political philosophy with the political practices of Trump's second administration, we can identify several key points. It is an offensive movement dedicated to taking over and profoundly changing the system in all possible fields, from the economy to culture and education, and reconfiguring the basic institutional and power structures of the state.⁴¹ In practice, the instrument of change is 'unleashing the power of the executive' and confronting the forces attempting to limit it: the administrative 'deep state', its judicial backing, the liberal discursive dominance in the public sphere, and the limits set by the international order and institutions. This 'unleashing' is to be realised through a series of disruptive moves based on the so-called 'unitary executive theory', which emphasises the powers vested in the President under Article 2 of the U.S. Constitution. According to the authors of *Project 2025*, the reality today is that the incoming president faces a federal bureaucracy that too often implements its own plans and preferences rather than his. Trump's task is to 'bend the entire executive structure to the will of the people'. This explains why his second term began with a flurry of executive orders, many of which aimed to gain full control over the policies and personnel of the government agencies, while others openly challenged the authority of the Congress and, particularly, of the judiciary.⁴²

Trump's second term is characterized by a frequent use of various emergency powers, as seen for example in the case of

the anti-migration policies. Long before the 2024 elections, J.D. Vance indicated that such mode of operation could lead to a clash with the judiciary. 'It's a minor constitutional crisis compared to when an elected president cannot exercise their powers because they do not control the bureaucracy,' he said. 'The latter is a denial of democracy.'⁴³

'He who saves the Nation does not violate the Law,' Donald Trump wrote on the platform X a few months ago. 'Judges have no right to limit the legitimate powers of the executive,' Vance added. It seems that both of them echoed another key figure in the MAGA movement, the legal theorist Adrian Vermeule. In recent years, Vermeule has proposed a new – though, in fact, very ancient – view of the law. This view places the spirit of the Constitution and the concept of the common good, to which every government decision must relate, above the jumble of positive law and judicial decisions. Vermeule points out that the executive branch is entrusted with caring for the common good and argues that the legal system 'can and should be interpreted to allow the president and his agents broad leeway to act and act swiftly'.⁴⁴

2.4.2 Poland: the European pioneer

Already in 2015, the Polish political sociologist Jarosław Flis claimed that the development of the Polish political spectrum over the previous ten years had preceded processes occurring throughout Europe. A new division had emerged between 'the establishment' and 'those below', who are affected by 'neo-liberal globalisation', experience a 'glass-ceiling' of the new class distinctions created by the capitalist economics and, at the same time, are afraid of 'social disintegration' (symbolised by mass migration and progressive cultural revolution). Thus, Poland may be considered a pioneer in the transformation of the political landscape in Europe.

Polish society and political debate are often said to share more common features with the US than with other EU countries, mainly due to the stronger and more assertive presence of a conservative/Christian perspective in social and political life. This tendency towards American-style cultural wars has been combined with the experience of post-communist economic transformation, which has left a substantial section of society with a deep sense of systemic injustice. A third crucial element contributing to the formation of Polish localism is an ingrained emphasis on national independence, shaped by decades of struggle for national emancipation. This combination of factors resulted in a political spectrum that, from the outset, only

40 Kevin Roberts, *America's Golden Age. The Return of Permanent Things*, Heritage Foundation 10.06.2025; <https://www.heritage.org/conservatism/commentary/americas-golden-age-return-the-permanent-things>; Deneen, *Regime Change*...

41 Roberts, *America's Golden Age*...

42 Russell Vought, *Renewing American Purpose*, *The American Mind*, 29.09.2022, <https://americanmind.org/salvo/renewing-american-purpose/>

43 Ian Ward, Is There Something More Radical Than MAGA? *Politico*, 15.03.2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/03/15/mr-maga-goes-to-washington-00147054>; James Pogue, Inside the New Right, *Vanity Fair*, 20.04.2022, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/04/inside-the-new-right-where-peter-thiel-is-placing-his-biggest-bets>

44 Adrian Vermeule, *Common-Good Constitutionalism*, Polity Press 2022; Maciej Ruczaj, Trump jako beranidło, *Tydenik Echo*, 27.09.2025; Randy Barnett, Deep-State Constitutionalism, *Claremont Review of Books*, Spring 2022, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/deep-state-constitutionalism/>

partially reflected the traditional Western right-left axis. On the contrary, the legacy of the anti-communist Solidarity movement – often described as a ‘right-wing workers’ movement’ that combined social justice, Christian ethics, and national independence – provided fertile ground for a future shift in the political landscape towards a globalist-localist axis.

Since 2005, the country’s political scene has been firmly divided between two parties with roots in the anti-communist opposition but with different interpretations of this heritage: the conservative Law and Justice party and the liberal Civic Platform party. Although the parties were initially expected to cooperate (prediction based on the traditional political divisions on the left-right axis), the dualistic nature of the political scene pushed them towards a bitter conflict, while simultaneously shaping them into vivid manifestations of the tension between globalism and localism. The Law and Justice party has gradually become strongly associated with the tradition of popular Catholicism and the national struggle for independence. It is now also demonstrating a more assertive stance towards the unifying policies of EU institutions. Since around 2010, a strong emphasis on national sovereignty in both cultural and political terms has been accompanied by the adoption of socially conservative economic policies, with particular attention given to family policies and regional development. As Michał Kuź points out, the party’s original right-wing, free-market economic programme has evolved into new localist positions that emphasises social security and reducing the social gap. Particular attention was given to the active role of the state in the economy. This was demonstrated, for example, by the expansion of state-owned energy companies, the state’s expansion into the banking sector, and major infrastructure projects designed to boost the country’s growth.⁴⁵

When Law and Justice ascended to power in 2015, it was confronted by a powerful alliance of liberal opposition parties, the mainstream media, and sections of the judiciary, all of them backed by EU institutions. Attempts to reconfigure the Polish political order, including the relationship between the executive and the judiciary, were met with a strong reaction from Brussels, eventually leading to a prolonged *stasis* in their relations. On the grounds of ‘protecting the rule of law’, European institutions gradually limited the government’s political manoeuvring space, implicitly supporting the liberals’ return to power in 2023.

Meanwhile, Law and Justice’s attempts to normalise relations with the EU, including compromising on issues such as the European Green Deal and judicial reforms, flexible migration policies dictated by the country’s dynamic economic growth, as well as efforts to formulate a unified response from the collective West to Russian aggression in Ukraine, have opened space on the right of the political spectrum. A new political force has emerged in the form of the Confederation party, which is gaining prominence by taking advantage of the ‘mainstreamisation’

of Law and Justice politics and adopting a more radical stance on issues of national and cultural sovereignty.

2.4.3 Slovakia: the ‘far-right social democrats’

Robert Fico, Slovakia’s long-serving Prime Minister, is an unlikely candidate for the title of ‘conservative’ or ‘far-right’ leader. Yet he has repeatedly been given this label in the foreign press following his return to power in 2023. Fico is the leader of the Smer party, which was founded in 1999 as a new social democratic party combining post-communist nostalgia with a strong desire to join the Western European family of social democratic parties. As Prime Minister, Fico steered his country into the eurozone in 2009 and remained in the mainstream of the European left for a considerable time. Toppled by corruption and organised crime scandals in 2018, he returned in 2023 as a leader of a considerably changed political force. This change is signalled by a small but meaningful alteration to the party’s name, from ‘Social-Democratic Party Smer’ to ‘*Slovak Social-Democratic Party*’. In Fico’s new rhetoric, the word ‘sovereignty’ occupies a central position (‘We will conduct a sovereign Slovak policy’, he said in one of his first public appearances), paired with the traditional Smer preoccupation with social security. ‘Sovereign’ Slovak policy is demonstrated especially through vocal (though often toothless) resistance to the Migration Pact, the European Green Deal, and the federalisation of the EU, as well as a dissident view on the Russian-Ukrainian war (in stark contrast to Poland’s Law and Justice).

Adopting a localist position, Fico – a former communist and lifelong social democrat – has embraced criticising progressivism and taken a firm stance in the culture wars. His party initiated and successfully passed a constitutional amendment nicknamed ‘the barrier against progressivism’, which includes a declaration of Slovak sovereignty in the area of ‘national identity, especially cultural issues’. The amendment is now under European Commission’s scrutiny.

As in the case of Poland, Fico can also rely on the specific social background of most Slovak voters. Unlike in Poland, an important element of this background is post-communist nostalgia, due to the different trajectories of the communist regimes in both countries. This nostalgia is paired with a strong current of popular Catholicism and a powerful attachment to national folk culture, which has been a vehicle for community survival during centuries of stateless existence.

It remains to be seen how successful Fico’s attempt to harness anti-liberal sentiment within society will be. His government remains highly unstable and seemingly unable to respond to the country’s worsening economic situation. It is burdened by repeated charges of corruption and a clan mentality, and in its opposition to European institutions is rather toothless, partly due to Slovakia’s chronic dependence on European funds. At the same time, as in the case of Poland, the government’s poor

⁴⁵ Kuź, *Globalism and Localism...*

performance has resulted in a shift in popular support towards more radical localist movements, particularly a far-right party Republika. Most importantly, as many conservative Slovak commentators point out, Fico's adherence to the localist programme (as is the case with many European leaders) stems from his pragmatic attitude and his willingness to follow socio-political trends of the day. In times of trouble, this political identity could easily be exchanged for another.

2.4.4 Localists' dilemmas

In all three cases, the illiberal turn in the evolution of those political parties could be attributed, among other things, to the strong Christian undercurrents in American, Polish, and Slovak society. Nevertheless, similar trends occur in environments far more secularised. In the Czech Republic, the increase of support for the various types of anti-liberal political forces has been motivated, among others, by a deeply embedded mistrust of multiculturalism and a strong opposition to climate policies forced upon EU member states. In such cases, adherence to 'Christian values' is exchanged for a 'common sense' discourse and invocation of patriotism/national interest, targeting the dogmas of progressivism and the disintegration of state sovereignty in the context of the EU. Nevertheless, when defining the new Andrej Babiš government in the Czech Republic, his aide, Karel Havlíček, described it as 'centre-right with a social corrective and built on conservative foundations', which fittingly reflects the localist identity of the project.⁴⁶ Similarly, within the French Republican political tradition, the most successful illiberal project, the National Rally of the Le Pen family, adopts a relatively liberal stance on many ethical issues (e.g. abortion), primarily emphasising those aspects of the localist creed related to defending the political sovereignty of the nation state against the EU and safeguarding the socio-cultural integrity of society against multiculturalism.⁴⁷

Localist movements have very different genealogies and points of departure. Apart from such spectacular cases of rewriting one's identity in view of the new circumstances as Slovak Smer and Andrej Babiš's Czech ANO (which has, within a decade, moved from the ultra-liberal Renew group to the Patriots for Europe in the European Parliament), we are mostly dealing with parties that can be categorised within the traditional right-wing spectrum. Some evolved from 'traditional conservatism' towards a more localist version, as the Polish Law and Justice party. Others, on the other hand, started their path on the far-right margins of the political spectrum. They gain momentum from illiberal sentiments while attempting to move towards the centre of the political spectrum, as seen with Brothers of Italy and National Rally. Each operates in a society with different memories and customs, yet they share a similar diagnosis of the crisis and draw on a similar motivation for growing social

protest. They also offer similar solutions to current economic, cultural, and political challenges (geopolitics and international relations are distinctly absent from that list). Decisive differences arise when localists succeed in entering government. Local circumstances, the effectiveness of state power, the level of dependence on supranational institutions, and the willingness to pursue a radical course provide a stress test that significantly differentiates between parties and movements whose rise to power was generated by similar sentiments.

To put it mildly, the results are debatable. Periods of localist parties' ascendancy are often accompanied by growing social polarisation and repeatedly lead to electoral strengthening of opposing liberal forces, as happened in Poland in 2023 and the Netherlands in 2025. In his *Regime Change*, Patrick Deneen rightly observes that, while their diagnosis of the current crisis is closest to the socio-political reality of today, the concrete solutions proposed remain rather vague and inconclusive. Chantal Delsol highlights the tendency to adhere to charismatic rather than procedural forms of governance as a defining feature of the illiberal mindset, resulting in seemingly chaotic and hesitant outcomes once in power. She also mentions a specific 'personal' feature of the majority of illiberal movements. The process of strengthening the 'liberal orthodoxy' and 'narrowing the mainstream' has resulted in the marginalisation and ostracism of all dissenting or critical voices in liberal democratic public debate, thereby silencing the 'old conservative' opposition to the discourse of infinite progress. This has led to a situation where explicitly illiberal movements must operate 'without intellectual elites and doctrinal foundations', attracting people who not only tolerate but even rejoice in their pariah status. In short, localists who come to power are usually better at destruction than construction and lack the cadres to undertake the promised transformation and intellectual potential to justify their moves.⁴⁸

Thirdly and most importantly, brief periods of localist ascendancy occur in circumstances that present severe obstacles to the implementation of their programmes. In the European context, the executive exercising power beyond the sphere delineated by the liberal definition of the rule of law necessarily leads to confrontation with the supranational bodies guarding the political, legal, and financial boundaries of the liberal order – from the EU institutions and the European Court of Human Rights to international financial supervisory authorities. In the case of Poland, this has led to a combination of compromise-seeking and confrontation that has exhausted much of the capacity of the Law and Justice government. In the case of Meloni's Italy, the country's dependency on international financial institutions has resulted in a substantial moderation and mainstreaming of government policies. Orbán's Hungary gained the widest manoeuvring space in internal affairs by entering into open

46 EU by si měla dát pozor, *Parlamentní listy* 25.10.2025; Maciej Ruczał, *Nowa vláda z nowego świata*, *Echo24*, 2.11.2025.

47 Kacper Kita, *Ku przewyższeniu demokracji liberalnej. USA i Francja jako punkt wyjścia*, *Polityka Narodowa* 32/2025.

48 Deneen, *Regime Change...*; Delsol, *Illiberalizm...*

confrontation with Brussels, but the 'besieged fortress' mindset led to degenerative processes within the ruling political camp, the growth of clientelism, and a desperate search for allies among autocratic regimes.⁴⁹

The combination of internal weaknesses and external pressures has so far rendered the localist projects inconclusive. According to many authors associated with localist movements, this may reflect the fact that localists 'function within

the system designed by their opponents', attempting to 'rule over the institutions' which, in reality, perpetuate liberal hegemony. According to Ryszard Legutko, attempts 'to contest the mainstream and to stay within the mainstream at the same time' are in fact 'capitulation'. A major stress test may be ahead of us, with the results provided by the second Trump administration – arguably the first localist return to power with a more consistent and pre-prepared schedule of regime change.⁵⁰



49 Kacper Kita, Itálie Giorgie Meloniové: Syntéza populismu a liberalismu? *Kontexty* 1/2025; Kacper Kita, Giorgia Meloni – radykalna pragmatyczka, *Rzeczpospolita* 7.11.2025.

50 Chadwick Hagan, Konzervativcům nescházejí nápady, ale instituce schopné je realizovat, *Konzervativní noviny*, 6.11.2025, <https://www.konzervativninoviny.cz/konzervativcum-neschazeji-napady-ale-institute-schopne-je-realizovat/>; Ryszard Legutko, Vytvořili člověka, který je zároveň poslušný a arogantní, *Konzervativní noviny*, 11.11.2025, <https://www.konzervativninoviny.cz/vytvorili-cloveka-ktery-je-zaroven-poslusny-a-arogantni/>



THE MECHANISMS OF UNDEMOCRATIC LIBERALISM

3.1 Liberal de-democratization?

The implementation of an illiberal political programme includes radical transformations of the current order, which are implemented by the executive power. Conversely, domination of the liberal order can be exercised in a much more subtle and less explicit manner. Among recent authors, there are numerous attempts to grasp the elusive nature of this hegemony, the most extensive being probably Deneen's description of the 'managerial class' in *Regime Change*. This class prefers to exercise control via 'private or semi-private entities', such as schools, universities, NGOs, and the media, rather than state institutions; via procedures rather than the direct exercise of power; and via the distribution of respect and mockery rather than orders and regulations.⁵¹

In illiberal discourse, rejection of the liberal monopoly on the term 'democracy' is followed by numerous attempts to expose the alleged liberal tendency towards autocratic – or at least anti-democratic – methods of governance. 'Liberalism both needs and fears democracy', claims Adrian Vermeule. It needs democracy for the legitimacy it provides and fears it on account of the 'fundamental difference' that endangers the dominance of the elite. As multiple authors point out, from Patrick Deneen to Michał Kuź, liberalism has always contained an inherent critique of 'undisciplined' demos, viewing the primary aim of the political system as securing the interests of the elite against potential threats from the capricious multitude. 'Fear and loathing' of 'the many' was as crucial a motivation of classic liberalism as the rejection of 'ancient privileges', says Deneen. Liberal democracy is thus a typical 'mixed regime', combining democratic elements with aristocratic/oligarchic ones to restrict the potentially destructive capacity of the demos. According to Vermeule, its current form arises from a consistent effort to 'redefine democracy' so that 'mere majoritarianism never counts as truly democratic'.⁵²

In official, mainstream liberal discourse, this tension is usually ignored or transformed into a warning about the 'tyranny of the majority', which must be limited to protect individual

liberties and rights. Nevertheless, the emergence of illiberalism has prompted a clearer delineation of the liberal position in this respect. In Fareed Zakaria's pioneering text on illiberal democracy (at the time limited to the non-Western context), the conflict between democracy and liberal constitutionalism is acknowledged and resolved in favour of liberalism. 'We need less, not more democracy' is the book's key message. However, most importantly, a process of 'the fanaticization of the centre' (as Pierre Manent calls it) was set in motion after liberalism's triumph over all its rivals. Concomitant processes of 'deepening class divide' and strengthening of the universalist 'liberationist ethos', dedicated to dismantling every obstacle to the full emancipation of the individual – from the family to the nation state – have led to the dogmatization of the liberal mainstream. As Krastev and Holmes point out, in the context of post-communist Central Europe, it seems that 'communist orthodoxy' has been replaced by 'liberal orthodoxy'. As Deneen puts it, liberalism in its final phase 'unmasks itself', turning from a 'mutually shared comprehensive system that always allows self-determination' into a 'particular partisan set of commitments' that, in order to gain dominance, does not shy away from forcing 'those who oppose it into submission'. This final phase, apparently identified with the 'woke' revolution in the US, transformed liberalism into a radical ideology that aims to 'delegitimise the very expression of belief in limits' to the project of liberal emancipation and is willing to 'invoke institutional power' on behalf of advancing its ethos. Deneen calls this trend 'an increasingly illiberal liberalism'.⁵³

According to Jan Holzer, the mainstream discussion about the current crisis of liberal democracy is limited to the concepts of 'de-democratisation' (or 'democratic backsliding') and 're-democratisation' (i.e., how to reconstruct 'proper' democracy after a period of illiberal or authoritarian rule, or how to stop the process of de-democratisation). However, to gain a complete understanding of the processes occurring within Western countries, we must consider a fourth 'ideal type', in addition to liberal and illiberal democracy, and illiberal non-democracy

51 Deneen, *Regime Change*...

52 Adrian Vermeule, *Liberalism's Fear*, The Josias, 9.05.2018, <https://thejosias.com/2018/05/09/liberalisms-fear/>; Deneen, *Regime Change*...

53 Deneen, *Regime Change*...; Krastev, Holmes, *The Light That Failed*...; Manent, *Populist Demagoguery and the Fanaticism of the Centre*...

(autocratic regimes). The author calls this fourth ideal type 'liberal non-democracy'. Although seemingly an oxymoron, this model naturally fills the gap necessary to reconceptualise the debate from a linear, quantitative perspective represented by various 'quality of democracy indexes', towards a more complex picture in which the crisis is not ascribed to 'backsliding' but, rather, to a tension between the 'liberal and democratic pillars' of the system. This concept was first developed by Martti Koskeniemi as the conflict between 'rights and politics', but it is also implicitly present in Fareed Zakaria's theory of 'illiberal democracy'. Zakaria considered human rights (or, rather, their liberal foundations) to be an important characteristic of democracies, but found them lacking in illiberal democracies.⁵⁴

In Holzer's view, the key transformation in Western political theory in recent decades has been the identification of democracy with its liberal dimension, i.e., the dimension of rights, and the assertion of its priority over the democratic dimension.

The term 'democratisation' has become inextricably linked with concepts of a new generation of human rights, such as gender equality and minority rights. In contrast, 'autocratisation' is commonly associated with the persecution of ethnic minorities, anti-gender ideology, and the limitation of women's rights. The terminology associated with the fundamental distinction between democracy and autocracy for decades, namely the concepts of 'plurality and free competition', has been completely marginalised in the new understanding. Therefore, if democratic procedures, primarily elections, cease to generate the desired effects within these categories, liberal aspects should in the resulting conflict take precedence. Holzer summarises this new perspective on liberal non-democracy by quoting a recent speech by Manfred Nowak, head of the Centre for Human Rights and Democratisation in Venice. According to the renowned academic, 'The time is coming when we, as human rights defenders, will have to defend these rights against democratically elected governments.'⁵⁵

3.2 Political cartelization, judicial supervision, and the decline of democratic legitimacy

According to Michał Kuź, two major mechanisms serve to protect the liberal hegemony in the political sphere: political cartelisation and various forms of bureaucratic and judicial supervision. The mechanism of political cartelisation is clearly evident in the pan-European discourse of the *cordon sanitaire*, which aims to isolate 'populists' from the rest of the political spectrum. As Pierre Manent suggests, the reconfiguration of the political spectrum from left-right to globalist-localist (he actually uses the term 'populist' in his text) is triggered by a shift in the notion of legitimacy. The traditional left-right axis was based on the idea that all political forces on the axis were equally legitimate (with the exception of radicals at either end). The new axis, however, is based on the belief that legitimacy is unequal, with one side representing 'the only respectable form of politics'. 'The new order, now imposing itself more and more upon us, rests on the contrast between legitimate opinions and illegitimate opinions', paving the way for a completely new reality in which the pendulum of democracy swings towards a confrontation between 'political orthodoxy and heresy'. As Manent summarises, 'If this were true, then we would be in the process of departing from democracy as it has thus far been known.'⁵⁶

In a functioning electoral democracy, it is clear that such a strategy can only be sustained if popular support for anti-liberal parties does not exceed a certain level. At the same time, the mechanisms of 'the fanaticization of the liberal centre'

remain at work, transforming the 'respectable' political spectrum into a besieged citadel. In Germany, voters punished Olaf Scholz's Social Democrats for their performance in office, only to see them reinstalled in Merz's coalition owing to the need to 'raise a barrier against the radicals from the AfD'. In France, we have already witnessed more than a year of repeated failed attempts to form a government coalition that would exclude 'extremists', bringing the country to the brink of ungovernability in the process. Any attempt at cooperation between mainstream and extremist parties is severely punished, as in the case of Friedrich Merz's delayed nomination for chancellorship (a first in German history). He lost the initial vote of confidence, seemingly as a punishment for passing the migration bill the previous week with the support of the AfD. A similar ostracism of the 'transgressors' occurred in Slovakia when the Christian Democratic party supported Fico's constitutional amendment concerning Slovak sovereignty in cultural and ethical matters. 'European politics in many countries often forge rather illogical coalitions, allowing negotiations to last many months just to prevent the far right from participating in government,' claims Czech journalist Katerina Safarikova approvingly. This very principled approach to political bargaining forces political parties to make 'eternal vows' of 'non-cooperation' with 'extremists', and it remains a common feature of many European countries. The *cordon sanitaire* ideology currently seems to be a more sacred principle of liberal politics than the old 'free competition of

54 Holzer, *Čtyři politologické poznámky o některých pozoruhodnostech v současné teorii (re-, de-) demokratizace...*

55 Jan Holzer, *Čtyři politologické poznámky o některých pozoruhodnostech v současné teorii (re-, de-) demokratizace...*

56 Kuź, *Globalizm, lokalizm i nowe średniowiecze*, Kraków: OMP 2024; Kuź, *Liberalismus versus demokracie...*; Manent, *Populist Demagoguery and the Fanaticism of the Centre...*

political parties', and it is pursued even when costs for the government stability keep rising.⁵⁷

Although the *cordon sanitaire* ideology is prominent at the level of the nation state, it is epitomised in its ideal form by power politics within the European Parliament. For decades, the Parliament has been ruled by a cartel of the two strongest political groups, the Socialists and the Christian Democrats, with various smaller liberal groups acting as a complement. The rigid nature of the EP ruling majority is mirrored by a vision of European integration that lacks an alternative to its official course. The logic of inevitability surrounding public discourse on the evolution of the Union was recently summed up by German commentator Ulf Poschardt, who points out the prevailing mentality of ideological monopoly within the current concept of the EU that automatically dismisses any search for alternatives: 'Anyone who criticises the EU is quickly accused of promoting right-wing or right-wing populist narratives.' Polish President Karol Nawrocki alluded to this aspect of the European project, presented as an inevitable march of progress, in his speech at Prague's Charles University: 'Contrary to popular belief, Poland – including the conservative camp, to which I proudly belong – is not the enemy of the European Union. We merely oppose the currently dominant political ideals. Just like in any democracy, the opposition is not the enemy of the state, but rather represents a programme and political line that differs from the dominant one... This is the nature of democracy.' Nawrocki's appeal was, quite symbolically, ostentatiously ignored or sharply criticized due to its 'notoriously anti-European character'.⁵⁸

If the strategies of marginalisation and the *cordon sanitaire* fail, there is still another instrument that can be used to limit the scope of democratic politics. Michal Kuž describes this as 'bureaucratic and judicial supervision'. Drawing on the research of Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, Kuž demonstrates how the mechanism of the liberal 'rule of law' actually protects the interests of the few against potential threats from the many, primarily through the increasing tendency to transfer more and more powers from the executive to the 'administrative state' and the judiciary.⁵⁹

At the level of political and bureaucratic practice, the question was most explicitly articulated in the American MAGA debate over the issue of the 'deep state', in which it is described as the autonomisation of the bureaucratic apparatus. Rather than being an instrument for implementing politics designed

by elected representatives of the people, it aims to pursue 'its own goals', which are legitimised by its expertise. Curbing the power of the 'deep state' remains central to Trump's 'unitary executive' attitude. This inevitably leads to confrontation with the judiciary which, in both the American and the European contexts, remains the guardian of the 'rule of law'.⁶⁰

As Czech analyst Jan Hroudny points out, it is quite telling that, in recent official discourse of the European elites, the 'rule of law' has gradually come to overshadow 'democracy' as the core principle of our political systems. The rapid increase in the prominence of this term signals its usefulness in the growing tension between liberalism and democracy. Due to its inherent vagueness, the rule of law discourse opens the door to an introduction of the 'illiberal democracy's' inseparable twin: undemocratic liberalism. While the latter can be defined as 'democracy without rights', a system prioritising 'rule of law' can easily do without democracy as a procedure while still claiming to protect rights fully.⁶¹

Pierre Manent claims that 'the democratic system, which rested on a certain equilibrium between executive power and legislative power, tends to be substituted by a system dominated by a scattered and diffused judicial power which derives its legitimacy from itself'. He goes as far as to refer to the current domination of the judiciary as a form of 'enlightened despotism'. On the one hand, the transfer of power from the executive and legislative branches reflects the dominance of procedure and expert knowledge over politics in liberal discourse. On the other hand, it stems from the current dominance of the liberal pillar over the democratic pillar (i.e., the prioritisation of rights over politics), whereby democracy is identified not with the principle of political plurality, but with the 'protection and expansion of individual rights'.⁶²

The technocratic and procedural pressure on democratic politics is multiplied by various forces active outside the framework of nation-state political life: multinational corporations and an international 'expert community' exerting their influence via the non-governmental sector and, most importantly, via international organisations. Samuel Huntington highlighted the connection between the primacy of the liberal individual rights and the concept of a transnational, borderless 'democratic humanism' that should supersede the nation state as the primary object of allegiance. He linked this concept to the belief in international organisations bound to prevent governments from violating the 'individual sovereignty' of each person, as

57 Manent, *Populist Demagoguery and the Fanaticism of the Centre...*; Bartoszewicz, *Festung Europa...*; Kateřina Šafaříková, *Babiš povede vládu, které se jinde bojí jako čert kříže*, *Seznam Zprávy*, 5.10.2025, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/volby-do-poslanecke-snmovny-komentar-babis-povede-vladu-ktere-se-jinde-boji-jak-cert-kriz-288204>

58 Lecture of President Nawrocki 'At the crossroads – a defining post-Cold War moment for Europe?' at Charles University in Prague (24.11.2025), <https://www.president.pl/news/lecture-of-president-nawrocki-at-the-crossroads--a-defining-post-cold-war-moment-for-europe-on-karols-university-in-prag.110846>; Ryszard Legutko, *Vytvořili člověka, který je zároveň poslušný a arogantní*, *Konzervativní noviny*, 11.11.2025, <https://www.konzervativninoviny.cz/vytvorili-cloveka-ktery-je-zaroven-poslusny-a-arogantni/>; Ulf Poschardt, *Diese EU hat keine Zukunft*, *Die Welt*, 22.12.2025, <https://www.welt.de/debatte/plus69442d1260138990784c1bca/europaeische-union-macht-kaputt-was-euch-kaputt-macht.html>

59 Kuž, *Globalizm, lokalizm i nowe średniowiecze...*

60 Russell Vought, *Executive Powers of the President of the United States of America, Mandate for Leadership. The Conservative Promise - Project 2025*, Heritage Foundation 2023.

61 Jan Hroudny, *Nedemokratický liberalismus*, *Kontexty* 2/2025.

62 Manent, *Populist Demagoguery and the Fanaticism of the Centre...*; Manow, *Demokracja liberalna pod lupą...*

well as to the notion of ‘customary international law’ allowing the judiciary to transcend ‘territorial jurisdiction’.⁶³

Unlike in the US, where confrontation between the executive and the judiciary takes place within a single political system, the expansion of judicial power in Europe is interlinked with the interaction between member states and the European Union. The tendency to substitute politics with the judiciary is closely connected to the tension between state/popular sovereignty and the international liberal order, as embodied by the EU. The unresolved and vague division of competences between the EU and member states allows the European judiciary organs to turn gradually into a supranational body of control over the member states’ policies. In this scenario, the judiciary effectively becomes the final authority on any political decision, bolstered by the support of the European institutional framework. The European Court of Justice is gradually attempting to acquire the position of ‘supreme arbiter’, which Jan Rokita has compared to that of an emperor in the medieval Holy Roman Empire.⁶⁴

The present discord surrounding the Italian government’s agreement with Albania regarding the ‘outsourcing’ of asylum procedures beyond the Italian borders might be an illustrative case, reflecting both dimensions of the ‘judicial supervision’ (internal and international) and its inevitable conflict with the localist political programme. The dispute centres on the Italian state’s apparent inability to deal with the influx of illegal migrants. Ending this powerlessness was Giorgia Meloni’s main electoral promise, and it was one of the main sources of her political mandate. The conflict first hit the headlines in autumn 2024, when Italian court orders blocked Meloni’s plan to ‘outsource’ illegal migrants to neighbouring Albania, where they would await the outcome of asylum proceedings outside the Italian territory. Admittedly, it was a rather moderate plan intended to apply only to adult men from ‘safe countries’ where there is no armed conflict. Nevertheless, the judge decided that he was better able to determine which countries were safe and which were not. He referred to a ‘higher authority’, namely the European Court of Justice’s decisions in similar cases, which confirmed his position a few months later. The representatives of the judiciary stressed, for example, that it is not possible to detain anyone ‘for the sole purpose of ascertaining the right to enter the territory of the State’. This denies the basic principle of sovereignty in the Westphalian order: the right to decide who is allowed to enter the territory of the state. As Meloni summarised, ‘The problem is not Albania or whether this or that country is safe. The problem is that, according to them, no

one should ever be repatriated. Under no circumstances can you send people back. The problem is that you cannot implement any programme to protect your own borders.’ Later, when the decision of the Italian court was upheld by the European body, she added that ‘once again, the judiciary, this time at the European level, claims spaces that do not belong to it, in the face of responsibilities that are political’.⁶⁵

Speaking in Rimini in August 2025, Giorgia Meloni alluded to the case of Italian migration policies, indicating resistance to infringements of executive powers: ‘No politicised judge, no politician or bureaucrat can stop us from enforcing Italian law and ensuring the security of our citizens.’ It is visible that such a conflict becomes gradually a new leitmotif of European politics.⁶⁶

In the case of Donald Trump’s confrontations with the judiciary, for example, over the institution of the ‘nationwide injunction’, the use of extraordinary powers to deal with illegal migration, or the introduction of tariffs without the agreement of the Congress, the conflicts would be resolved within the American republic’s single political ecosystem. In the case of Europe, however, the issue remains considerably more complex. Therefore, it is considerably easier in the US to argue in favour of curbing the expansion of the judiciary and reclaiming the executive’s role as a ‘guardian of the common good’ (as do legal theorists such as Adrian Vermeule in his ‘common-good constitutionalism’). In the case of Europe, however, the issue remains considerably more complex. There is a growing tendency to view the European Union itself as an obstacle to such a recalibration of the system. According to Philip Manow, the major conflicts about the essence of democracy are now being fought at the intersection of national sovereignty and the power of supranational institutions. The institution of judicial control within a nation-state, Manow argues, is influenced by a mechanism of auto-limitation, whereby both sides consciously avoid the escalation of the conflict that may prove harmful to their authority. Nevertheless, in the new reality of the ever-closer integration, a supra-state level was introduced in the form of the EU judicial organs, that by definition “moves beyond the formal democratic structures of accountability and control”. Thanks to the interaction with a supra-national judicial authority, individual courts within the member states gain a new leverage against the government, while simultaneously losing their tendency to self-limit and avoid direct confrontation.⁶⁷

According to Manow such a system, based on “checks but no balances” is inherently prone to the conflict, especially if the

63 Huntington, *Dead Souls: The Nationalization of the American Elite...*

64 Rokita, Jak eurokraci próbują przejąć kontrolę nad Polską, *Tygodnik TVP*, 15.10.2021; Petr Fiala, Politika, jaká nemá být, Brno: CDK 2010; Manent, *Populist Demagoguery and the Fanaticism of the Centre...*

65 <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-court-giorgia-meloni-reject-asylum-seekers-italy-albania-migration/>; Nicholas Farrell, Giorgia Meloni is going to war with Italy’s judges, *The Spectator*, 24.10.2024; Jan Rokita, Karasia szamotanina, *Wszystko Co Najważniejsze*, 7.02.2025.

66 President Meloni’s speech at the 2025 Rimini Meeting, 25.08.2025, <https://www.governo.it/it/node/29777>

67 The Supreme Court Sides with Trump Against the Judiciary, *The New Yorker*, 27.06.2025, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/the-lede/the-supreme-court-sides-with-trump-against-the-judiciary>; Manow, *Demokracja liberalna pod lupą...*

hegemonic model of European integration is now “integration through law”. An answer to “the rule of law crisis is – more law, though this time armed with sanctions”. Therefore, European Union, in its current form, employs all the instruments that today’s liberalism uses to curb democratic politics: cartelisation, bureaucratic limitations, and the power of the judiciary. In Manow’s view, it represents a logical consequence of the new model of self-disciplined democracy adopted in the last decades of the 20th century. This model was driven by a tendency to limit the power of the demos manifested via electoral mechanism. The transfer of power further, to the unelected supra-national institution, was a logical step in ‘cementing the liberal-democratic system’, upholding the notion of democracy as a ‘substance’ rather than ‘procedure’, substituting ‘representation’ with ‘values’. Small wonder, that in a recent speech, Polish philosopher Ryszard Legutko claimed that ‘overcoming the political and ideological monopoly in Europe is all the more difficult because it is protected by the European Union, so that any move against it immediately provokes conflict with European institutions’.⁶⁸

In recent years, the first voices have emerged that highlight the disturbing conflation of the unelected judiciary (EDJ) and the unelected executive (the European Commission), which creates a new power dynamic in European politics. As Pierre Manent points out, both institutions derive their legitimacy from meritocratic and juridical sources, however, they are gradually usurping the position of the controlling bodies over the democratically elected governments of member states. Following the Lisbon Treaty, the EU witnessed a series of steps in which both institutions gradually expanded their influence over the governments of member states. This culminated in the introduction of the Next Generation EU plan, which granted the EU full oversight over economies and budgets of member states. The conditionality mechanism transformed the European institutions into political supervisors over member states. Finally, the notion of absolute primacy of the EU law over national law was gradually established, including a premise that any conflict between norms may be interpreted

solely by the the EU judicial institutions (as was made clear in the ECJ’s ruling against the Polish Constitutional Court in January 2026).⁶⁹

The inner workings of power in the EU employ two key instruments of the liberal subjugation of democratic politics: political cartelisation and bureaucratic and judicial supervision. Currently, the tension between the discourse of European centralisation and the regaining of sovereignty by member states reveals the struggle between globalist and localist tendencies in European politics most prominently. Significantly, Ryszard Legutko refers to the recovery of national sovereignty as a ‘first necessary step’ for any political change: ‘Of course, sovereignty alone does not guarantee good order in the state, just as self-control does not guarantee good order in the soul’. But these are only preliminary conditions.”⁷⁰

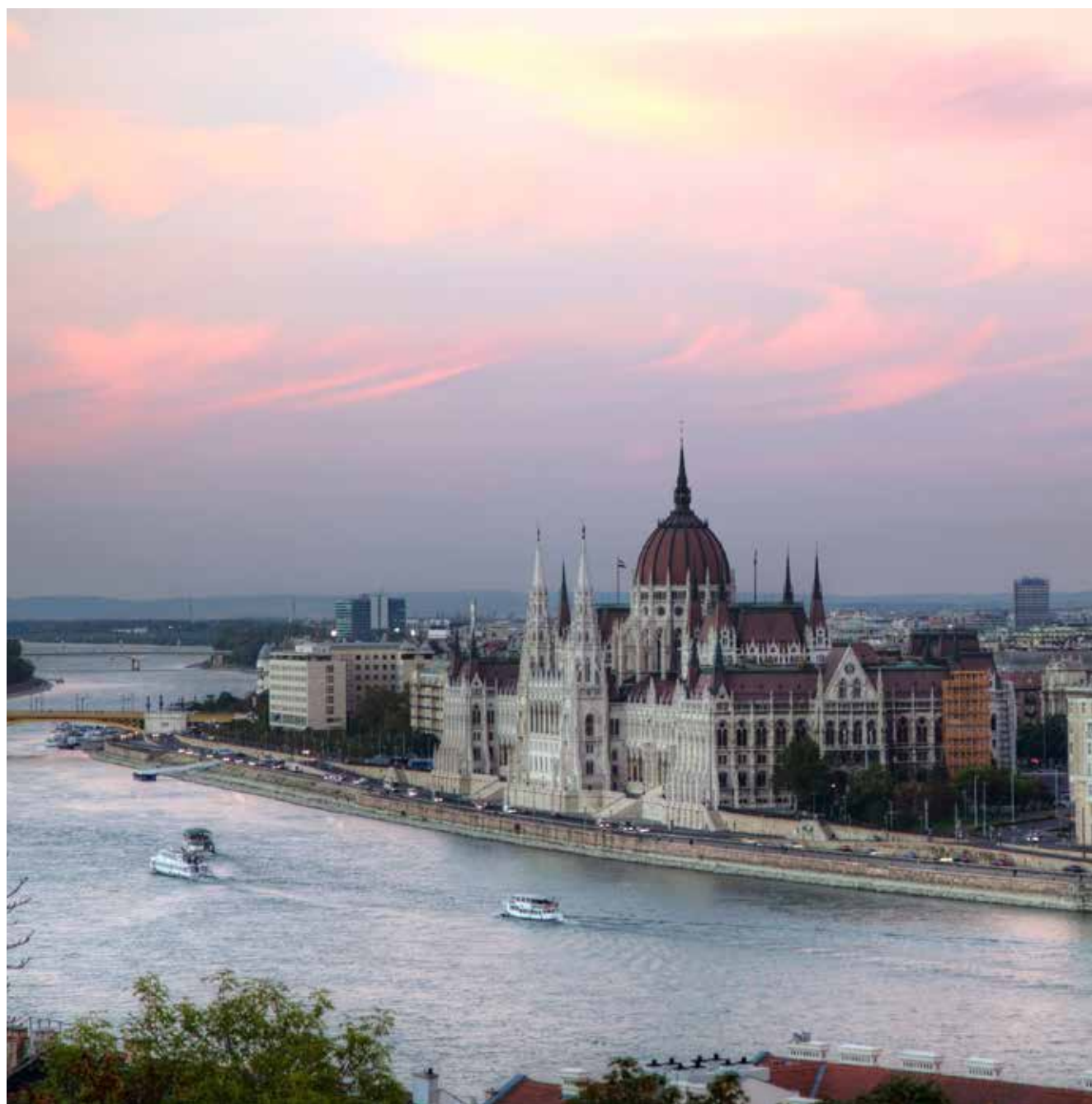
Commenting on the current liberal European discourse on the rule of law, Jan Hroudny claims that it is hard to ignore the fact that, in recent years, it has often been used as a ‘political weapon against governments that deviate from the European mainstream’, particularly in connection with the so-called ‘mechanism of conditionality’. The Czech lawyer says that the ‘obvious selectivity and political bias’ of the European institutions’ approach has left a ‘bitter taste in the mouth’, particularly with regard to their policies towards Poland under the Law and Justice party and its liberal successors. Similarly, many experts have criticised European Court of Justice decisions confirming the priority of the European law over the constitutional order of member states (such as the decision in January 2026), seeing them as attempts to take on new competences never assigned to European institutions in the EU’s founding documents. Despite rhetorical emphasis on procedural and legal legitimacy, crucial actions are repeatedly being taken on the basis of various extraordinary ad hoc measures. The practice of undemocratic liberalism, just like the practice of illiberal democracy, seems to be leading to the ‘normalisation of the state of exception’.⁷¹

68 Ryszard Legutko, *Vytvořili člověka, který je zároveň poslušný a arogantní...*; Manow, *Demokracja liberalna pod lupą...*

69 Manent, *Populist Demagogy and the Fanaticism of the Centre...*; Jan Rokita, Nawrocki i Polski plan dla UE, *Kanal Zero*, 27.11.2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9RiCpVy-js&list=PLvLrA9jH7wQjV91qHnulygAAAnPpflyAgj&index=10>

70 Legutko, *Vytvořili člověka, který je zároveň poslušný a arogantní...*

71 Hroudny, *Nedemokratický liberalismus...*; Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, transl. K. Attell, University of Chicago Press 2005.



DEMOCRACY IN TIMES OF THE STATE OF EXCEPTION

4.1 Between Schmitt and Lowenstein

In the aforementioned case of Italian ‘asylum procedure outsourcing’, it will be interesting to observe how the ECJ’s position develops in relation to the growing mainstream political consensus on the need to crack down on illegal migration. The consensus that crystallises around this issue among representatives of the ‘liberal mainstream’ is indicative of the changing situation in European politics. In most EU member states, there is a growing awareness, at least among the political elite, that attempts to tame the illiberal wave by ostracizing its political representatives and educating their electorate are highly ineffective. One response is the rise of a specific ‘liberal populism’ that attempts to take over the key topics of illiberal critique. Ivan Krastev calls the transformation of the current liberal order ‘unstoppable’, stressing the necessity to embrace it, rather than oppose it for the sake of the future. ‘We must prove that we are as good at listening to people as they are. We must focus on the issues that concern them. And [show] that we are more effective in dealing with them while not undermining rights and freedoms,’ summed up Rafał Trzaskowski, the liberal candidate for president of Poland, during the 2025 Munich conference. ‘Tusk has taken the lesson of Kamala Harris’s failure to heart,’ wrote Michał Szuldrzyński of the liberal Polish government. He downplayed the cultural war issues and ramped up his rhetoric of protecting borders, fighting for the national interest in Brussels, and supporting ‘economic patriotism’.⁷²

This development may be welcomed as an important step in the process that John Gray termed ‘liberalism’s re-gaining of contact with reality’.⁷³ However, it is often accompanied by policies that aim to introduce measures limiting the scope of democratic competition, thereby escalating political conflict. Donald Tusk’s government is again a case in point: although he was a harsh critic of the previous localist cabinet in matters such as migration, climate policies, social redistribution, and their assertive stance towards the EU, he adopted a vast

majority of those positions after returning to power. However, he continues to present himself as a ‘bulwark against anti-liberal populism’, entitled to take any kind of emergency measure in order to rebuild the democratic order.

‘Let the power of the judges prevail over democracy’ – this was the headline used by the Czech newspaper *Deník N* a year ago when referring to the possibility of the courts blocking Trump from running again. ‘It is not certain that voters will stop Trump, so it would be better if the courts did.’ It was a rare moment of honesty. In the Western world, democracy is still fetishised. The headline revealed a growing tendency in current liberal discourse to resolve political competition employing instruments from outside the realm of democratic procedure.⁷⁴

As early as 2018, the Polish philosopher Dariusz Karłowicz drew attention to the expeditious manner in which the entire corpus of emergency laws enacted in France in the wake of the terrorist threat and the subsequent Yellow Vests uprising were tacitly extended without any temporal constraints. The limitation of freedom of expression in the name of combating disinformation is often discussed as a legitimate means of ‘saving democracy’ (as President Macron recently argued). Finally, the use of a variety of legal obstacles to curb the rise of ‘radical’ politicians has become the new normal in European politics, from Bucharest to Warsaw to Paris.⁷⁵

As Paweł Farbisz argues, there has recently been a considerable acceleration in the ‘radicalisation’ of the liberal response to the illiberal wave. In an attempt to counter the rise of illiberalism, emergency measures such as threatening to ban political parties, preventing specific individuals from standing in elections, or even cancelling elections altogether have become acceptable. While the cases of Trump, Marine Le Pen, and Calin Georgescu differ in numerous regards, they manifest the same conviction

⁷² Ivan Krastev, Why Liberals Struggle to Cope with Epochal Change, *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2025/01/liberals-wrong-about-1989/681165/>; Michał Szuldrzyński, Czego w porę nie zrozumiała Kamala Harris, a zrozumiał w Polsce Donald Tusk, *Rzeczpospolita*, 2.11.2025; Ben Stanley, Populizm przestał być marginesem, *Kultura Liberalna*, 24.06.2025, <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2025/06/24/populizm-przestal-byc-marginesem/>

⁷³ Gray, *Trump and the Triumph of Illiberal Democracy*...

⁷⁴ Pavel Tomášek, Necht' soudkocikraje zvíťeží nad demokracií, *Deník N*, 23.12.2025; Vermuele, *Liberalism's Fear*...

⁷⁵ Dariusz Karłowicz, Grozi nam postliberalna dyktatura, *Polska Plus*, 14.09.2018, <https://plus.polskatimes.pl/dariusz-karlowicz-grozi-nam-postliberalna-dyktatura/ar/13490965>; Cichocki, *Precedensowe unieważnienie wyborów w Rumunii*...

that democratic competition can be resolved by measures external to the democratic procedure. The ‘future of democracy’ is at stake, which legitimises the use of extraordinary measures.

According to Farbisz, last year’s events signified ‘opening Pandora’s box of repression against opponents’. Most importantly, in such a discourse, ‘the boundaries of extremism can be expanded at will’. It is no longer just incitement to violence or regime change that fits this criterion, but potentially any view inconsistent with the accepted mainstream political line.’ There is a temptation to ‘get rid of their populist opponents’ without having to engage in the uncertain business of electoral competition.⁷⁶

Marek Cichocki argues that, in recent years, democracy has seemed to be ‘constantly under threat, in a kind of permanent state of exception’. This is a situation in which, in the name of protecting democracy, the boundaries of what is possible and acceptable within the political system are constantly being redrawn. The patrons of this re-drawing the borders of what is possible are two German jurists from the interwar period. Carl Schmitt and Karl Loewenstein.⁷⁷

“The sovereign is the one who decides on the state of exception’ – claims Carl Schmitt in the famous opening sentence of his *Political Theology*. Ten years later, before the NSDAP seized power in Germany, Schmitt expected President Hindenburg to invoke this rule to maintain control of the state. When Hindenburg failed to do so, Schmitt became a staunch supporter of the new leader, Hitler, choosing to be loyal to the ‘idea of the state’ embodied in the sovereign.⁷⁸

Schmitt’s story serves as a warning against the absolutisation of sovereign will and the diminution of procedural and legal aspects of any order. This perspective has repeatedly resurfaced in critiques of Trump’s second administration from the conservative quarters. This was succinctly summarised by Ben Shapiro when speaking to the MAGA audience at the Heritage Foundation event: ‘If America does not protect its borders, America will end. The conservative movement requires borders, too.’⁷⁹

The liberal democratic equivalent of Schmitt’s decisionism, engendered by the experience of the Nazi takeover, took the form of Carl Lowenstein’s concept of ‘militant democracy’. According to Lowenstein, democracy is threatened not only by totalitarian and autocratic tendencies invading from the

outside, but also by those installing themselves treacherously via democratic mechanisms. The essence of militant democracy is therefore the suspension of laws and rights. Those who protect democracy must abandon their ‘legalistic blindness’. ‘Fire should be fought by fire,’ he wrote.

According to Loewenstein, ‘the Trojan horse of totalitarianism’ is the electoral mechanism. Ideally, those who are presumed to be enemies of democracy should not be permitted to participate in the democratic process at all because their participation poses a threat to the system itself. Today, we are faced with a similar situation: the democratic process is a major concern for defenders of liberal democracy. The days when elections were referred to as the ‘feast of democracy’ are long gone: now, they represent a ‘weak point’ in an otherwise consolidated power system in Europe.⁸⁰

The most notable intervention in the ongoing elections was Romania’s Constitutional Court’s decision to cancel the first round of the presidential election in early December 2024. This was followed by the ban on Cătălin Georgescu, who had won the December vote and was leading in the polls for the second round. The media mainly covered the topic as an example of information warfare influenced from abroad. As Jan Rokita argues, ‘If the legality of elections is to be decided based on whether the will of the people was formed correctly or incorrectly, virtually any democratic election could potentially be cancelled.’ However, in its second decision to ban Calin Georgescu from the repeat election, the Romanian Constitutional Court did not rule on the basis of ‘foreign influence’, but referred to the fact that the Romanian president is the guardian of constitutional order and democratic institutions, and must therefore recognise this order as a matter of principle. According to the court, Georgescu’s statements and behaviour did not meet these conditions.⁸¹

During the past year, we have also witnessed repeated discussions in Germany about the possibility of defunding or even banning the largest opposition party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), or the French courts’ decision to ‘preventively’ ban Marine Le Pen, the leader of the opposition, from running for office due to charges related to an abuse of public funds. A telling example of the current atmosphere might be provided by a speech delivered by the German President Frank Walter Steinmeier on November 9, 2025. Speaking on the anniversary of the Crystal Night, he compared the current situation with the 1930s, calling for ‘vigilant democracy’ that is not afraid ‘to

76 Paweł Farbisz, Georgescu, Trump, Le Pen. Jak demokracja walcząca nakręca populistów, *Klub Jagielloński*, 24.01.2025, <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2025/01/24/georgescu-trump-le-pen-jak-demokracja-walczaca-nakreca-populistow/>

77 Cichocki, *Precedensowe unieważnienie wyborów w Rumunii...*

78 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology. Four Chapters on the Subject of Sovereignty*, transl. George Schwab, Chicago University Press 2006.

79 <https://www.jns.org/ben-shapiro-urges-heritage-foundation-to-break-with-tucker-carlson/>

80 Udi Greenberg, The Logic of Militant Democracy, *N+1 Magazine*, 6.07.2018, <https://www.nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/the-logic-of-militant-democracy/>; Carlo I. Accetti, Ian Zuckerman, What’s Wrong with Militant Democracy, *Political Studies* 65/2016.

81 Cichocki, *Precedensowe unieważnienie wyborów w Rumunii...*; Jan Rokita, Rumuński precedens, *Teologia Polityczna*, 17.12.2024, <https://teologiapolityczna.pl/jan-rokita-rumunski-precedens>

take action' against 'the extremists'. 'Let us do what needs to be done,' he finished.⁸²

It is no coincidence that Karl Löwenstein was invoked as a patron of political change in Poland following the liberal return to power in 2023. Donald Tusk's government saw itself as the saviour of democracy, seizing control of the country from the previous administration of the localist Law and Justice (despite the fact that the change had occurred via regular democratic elections) and attempting to purge the state institutions, the judiciary and public media of their predecessors. On the eve of the 'regime change', Jarosław Kuisz and Karolina Wigura wrote that 'Poland's new government must do more than return to liberal democracy: it must also address transitional justice. Prime Minister Tusk and his coalition government must also stabilise the political system *to ensure that populism does not return in the next election.*' [Emphasis added.]⁸³

Tusk himself compared this to the Nuremberg trials. 'It may happen from time to time that we won't conform to the letter of the law,' Tusk claimed. His current Minister of Justice described the process in surgical terms: 'If a broken limb heals badly, sometimes it must be broken again to heal properly.' In political practice, apart from the multiple prosecutions of opposition politicians for alleged abuses of power during the previous period, as well as the forced takeover of many state institutions, from public media to prosecutors' offices, we have seen the government withhold state subsidies from the main opposition party ahead of the presidential elections. The elections themselves were marked, on the one hand, by a massive social media campaign of unknown origin supporting the government's candidate and, on the other, by a disconcerting pressure to invalidate the elections, exerted by the ruling camp after their candidate lost.

Lowenstein was a bitter enemy of Schmitt, regarding him as a Nazi collaborator. Nevertheless, his theory is heavily influenced by Schmitt's decisionism. Schmitt's writings powerfully defend

the political against the de-politicising influence of liberalism and its idea of a borderless 'democracy of mankind', in which politics is reduced to mere administration. The primacy of the political is demonstrated by the sovereign decision to suspend the law. This suspension, often associated with the institution of the ancient Roman dictatorship, can manifest itself in two ways. The first, which Schmitt calls a 'commissarial dictatorship', is introduced to protect the state during times of turmoil and is a necessary exception to reinstate order. However, Schmitt also considers another type of *anomie* – generated by a sovereign decision to create a new order. Between these two types of suspension of law in the name of the 'core idea of the state', we must seek a theoretical framework for Polish 'militant democracy', the Romanian courts' overturning the electoral process, and Trump's policies based on various emergency precedents, motivated by the conviction that 'he who saves the nation does not violate any law'.

All of these cases involve the extensive use of 'extraordinary measures'. Their justification is not based on positive law in any of these cases but, rather, on a higher idea such as the common good, state security interests, or 'constitutional core'. All three solutions stem from the shared belief that liberal democracy is ineffective in responding to deep existential crises. Both camps aim at 'protecting democracy'. However, they define it differently. Paraphrasing the image quoted earlier in the essay from Russel Voight, liberals perceive liberalism as the core of 'democracy', gradually losing the restraints against coercing the will of the people to accept this liberal core. As Jan Holzer suggests, 'The ethos of liberal non-democracy would be based on the belief that this is the right path to restoring liberal democracy.' In contrast, their illiberal opponents aim to bend 'the system' (i.e. the system of checks and balances as it exists today) to the popular will represented in the executive. To some extent, both illiberal democracy and undemocratic liberalism are heading in the same direction: towards a normalisation of the state of exception.⁸⁴

4.2 The spiral of radicalisation and the search for a reset

The main reason for this development is the radicalisation of politics throughout the Western world, which has turned it into an ultimate struggle between good and evil. On the election night after the November 2025 elections in the Netherlands, Rob Jetten from the victorious liberal D66 party said: 'We have shown not only to the Netherlands, but also to the world, that it is possible to defeat far-right movements. Millions of Dutch

people today have said "enough" to the politics of hatred and fear.' As Konrad Szymański argues, the delegitimization of the illiberal camp as a fascist threat to democracy is matched by the illiberals' resort to the fears and emotions of an electorate frightened by the apocalyptic consequences of migration or climate policies. Both contribute to the polarised atmosphere that is overtaking our liberal democracies.⁸⁵

82 Le Pen was barred from running for any public office for five years with immediate effect. This decision took immediate effect, despite her intention to appeal. Steinmeier's speech: "Ensuring democracy can assert itself is the task of our times", <https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/Frank-Walter-Steinmeier/Reden/2025/251109-matinee-9-November.html>

83 Jarosław Kuisz, Karolina Wigura, How to Dismantle an Illiberal Democracy, *The Journal of Democracy*, December 2024.

84 Greenberg, *The Logic of Militant Democracy...*; Schmitt, *On Dictatorship*, transl. G. Ward, Polity 2013; Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, transl. K. Attell, University of Chicago Press 2005; Holzer, *Čtyři politologické poznámky...*

85 Konrad Szymański, *Odrzucenie liberalizmu nie zapewni nam szczęścia...*

Regrettably, the radicalisation of politics, with the resulting effect of increasing polarisation, is advantageous to the political actors in the short-term outlook, dictated by the electoral cycle. It is infinitely easier to mobilise one's supporters by presenting an image of absolute evil on the horizon than by presenting and implementing one's own political programme. As Deneen ironically sums up: 'Each side in our shabby civil war is today thoroughly invested in building up the existential threat posed by its opponent, while relieving itself of the requisite self-reflection to address its own shortcomings.'⁸⁶

Attempts to cross the boundaries of the *cordon sanitaire* are met with violent opposition and calls to 'close the ranks'. In effect, we are witnessing the construction of ideological packages, in which all elements fit together and any crossing over between them is strictly forbidden. In the European context, these packages involve very distant elements, such as security and geopolitical issues (e.g., attitudes towards Russian imperial wars of aggression or the transatlantic bond), attitudes towards expanding the EU's federal competences at the expense of the sovereignty of nation states, issues connected with neoliberal globalisation, and – last but not least – positions in the so-called cultural wars. Venturing beyond the confines of liberal orthodoxy on any one subject invariably leads to being categorised in all the others as well. The same, of course, applies to the 'illiberal package'. This is why, in the Czech public debate, anyone defending a Christian view of family issues may easily be accused of being 'pro-Russian'. At the same time, the Heritage Foundation, a think tank associated with the MAGA movement, may describe Andrej Babiš, a rather cynical post-communist oligarch with no discernible standpoint on cultural war issues, as a defender of 'faith, family, and freedom'.⁸⁷

The logic of ideological packages has two significant implications for the political debate. Firstly, it contributes to polarisation also at the supranational level. As Piotr Skwiecinski puts it, we are witnessing the formation of two 'Internationals' – globalist and localist – united by a strong sense of 'common goal' and common (internal) enemies. 'Parties operating in individual countries are increasingly becoming part of international political camps. They draw support from them, if not materially, then symbolically, together with a sense of legitimacy.' During the 2025 Polish presidential elections, Polish journalist Tomasz Grzywaczewski summed up this sentiment, writing: "There is a growing feeling that we are participating in a struggle that is taking place throughout the Western world today, from the United States to Romania. The world is watching us and waiting for the outcome of this particular struggle because it will affect other battlefields in our civilisation." While the globalists function by definition on a supra-national

level, the illiberals represent a very recent development. It is largely triggered by the ideological criteria that Donald Trump employs in the foreign policy discourse, as he quite consciously attempts to build a network of allied localist governments and parties. In the European context, the stimulus is also a common enemy: the centralising tendencies within the EU that bring together often very disparate political forces. 'A new sense of solidarity among European nations and resistance to the ideas of the Eurocrats is emerging,' tweeted Krzysztof Bosak, leader of the Polish Confederation party, recently from a convention in Paris.⁸⁸

Secondly, the logic of ideological packages paralyses any search for compromise and new consensus. In 2019, Marc Platter wrote that the most dangerous development connected to the illiberal wave in European politics is the temptation it presents to the 'centre-right' part of the political mainstream. He was concerned that these parties might be 'captured by tendencies that are indifferent to or even hostile towards liberal democracy', i.e., that they might align themselves with illiberal discourses and movements. This argument could provide a framework for liberal analysis of current shifts in the political party landscape. He describes the 'normal state' of European politics as the centre-left and centre-right competing over minor technical and economic issues while sharing the same value system. This 'normality' is now being challenged by the rise of illiberalism, but according to the author, the major threat does not come from the decline of the 'traditional left' due to their electorate being 'emptied' by 'populists' who connect 'class wars and culture wars' (to invoke J. D. Vance again), but rather from the possibility of 'betrayal' by the centre-right. This exposes the dilemma facing all traditional right-wing parties who want to preserve their conservative or Christian democratic identity while remaining within the scope of 'respectable politics' (Pierre Manent's term). For a long time, while liberalism remained unchallenged, their response was to move towards the centre while acknowledging that this centre had shifted to the left over time. This opened up space on the right of the political spectrum for the rise of illiberal alternatives and the gradual weakening of traditional right-wing parties. The idyllic picture of 'European normality', in which centre-left and centre-right compete, gradually gave way to the reality of coalitions between the two in order to prevent the rise of anti-system politics. The mentality of the besieged citadel, triggered by the illiberal surge, contributed to the centre-right's unresponsiveness to the questions posed by the current crisis, thereby strengthening their localist challengers even more.⁸⁹

Nowadays, political actors who attempt to reject the logic of binary polarisation, cherry-pick across ideological boundaries,

86 Deneen, *Regime Change...*

87 Maciej Ruczaj, *Identyta v balíčcích*, *Echo24*, 23.02.2025, <https://www.echo24.cz/a/H6uaH/komentar-ruczaj-identita-vbalicich>; Paul McCarthy, *Czech Elections Confirm a Conservative Comeback in Europe*, *Heritage Foundation*, 16.10.2025.

88 Piotr Skwiecinski, *Wojna dwóch międzynarodówek*, *Rzeczpospolita*, 7.06.2025; Zsuzanna Vegh, *Illiberale Internationale*, *Die Tageszeitung*, 5.06.2025; Maciej Ruczaj, *Vzhůru psanci této země*, *Tydeník Echo*, 28.06.2025.

89 Platter, *Illiberal Democracy and the Struggle on the Right...*; Kuž, *Globalizm, lokalizm i nowe średniowiecze...*

or call for moderation are often forced (from both sides of the divide) to accept ideological packages in their totality. It happened with Poland under the localist Law and Justice government of Mateusz Morawiecki, which was trying hard to navigate and seek compromises between the internal urge to reform the system, Brussels' pressure on the issue of 'rule of law', and the security situation on the eastern border, only to be challenged by more clearly localist competitors on the right. The dilemmas of the 'old centre-right' can be seen in Petr Fiala's Czech ODS party, which has been pushed towards a clear-cut globalist position by the transformation of the political spectrum towards an increasingly bipolar globalist versus localist division. Within the liberal camp, as Konrad Szymański observes, significant steps are being taken 'back towards the centre', acknowledging the gravity of the collapse of the progressive liberal project and addressing the current challenges in a realistic manner. Examples include the migration policies of the Danish social democrats and the growing debate about reconfiguring climate policy goals. However, Szymański claims that all attempts at reform are confronted with the problem of 'the colonisation of those policies by political activism and the moral absolutism of identity politics'. Therefore, even if there are moves towards a more moderate and realistic direction, they often occur 'in a concealed way, as if the politicians were ashamed of their policies'.

A telling example might be provided by the European Parliament's largest group, the EPP. After the last European elections, it began the process of gradually abandoning its 'far-right taboo' in favour of occasional cooperation with right-wing localist factions, the ECR and the Patriots, against their long-term coalition partners from the centre and left. On November 13, 2025, the EPP party for the first time voted together with the right-wing fractions of the ECR and the Patriots to defeat the centre-left on the issue of the Omnibus I Directive (part of Green Deal rules). This event was welcomed by the localist groups in the European Parliament as a symbolic breaking down of the cordon sanitaire, 'widening the political pitch in the EU' and ending the 'rhetoric of marginalization' employed against them. Although the process is really underway, it might be a too far-reaching judgment. The shift is still cloaked in the language of 'preventing the surge of the far right' and invoking 'Hitler's rise to power' as a warning. Manfred Weber, the leader of the EPP, summed up this twisted logic: 'We are fighting against the far right... This is only possible if we change our policies to answer what people ask us to do.' Thus, we can see a divisive trend within the liberal camp, which was originally formed from a merger of centre-right and centre-left. One section is the 'populist liberals', who derive the need to accommodate parts of the localist programme from the mood of society.

The irreconcilables stand on the ground of an 'either-or choice', as demonstrated by Green leader Bas Eickhout. According to him, the EPP 'still has the choice between working with the far right that wants to demolish Europe, or a stable pro-European coalition'.⁹⁰

It would be also interesting to observe how the situation develops in Italy, where Giorgia Meloni, despite initially being labelled a 'post-fascist' and 'illiberal' threat to Italian democracy, is attempting to position her political faction as a mediator between the Italian and European establishments and anti-system localist movements. In the long term, her activities may represent a constructive attempt to expand the sphere of 'respectable politics' again. At the same time, Kacper Kita, for example, argues that the Brothers of Italy's performance after three years in government suggests a gradual abandonment of any more ambitious transformative goals, with no tangible wins for their original localist programme, and a gradual 'mainstreamisation'.⁹¹

In this respect, developments in Italy may provide a testing ground for a new European compromise, just as the second Trump administration represents the most consistent attempt at systemic change so far. Nevertheless, as Konrad Szymański argues, the most common reaction of the political mainstream to any contestation of the liberal orthodoxy remains indiscriminate ostracization, which naturally contributes to the hardening of the political divide. Even Jan Zielonka, writing from the liberal position, points to the fact that, so far, the globalists' camp admits a need only for 'minor corrections' of the system while, at the same time, constantly 'hardening its rhetoric' towards the opponents.⁹²

As a result, the shadowy zone of means and measures that may be accepted or at least overlooked in the name of one camp's overall victory expands. The Polish liberal government under Donald Tusk may disregard the 'letter of the law' as long as its policies are aimed at crushing illiberal opponents and 'saving democracy'. Conversely, the growing executive voluntarism of illiberal leaders, from Trump to Orbán, would be excused by appeals to 'the will of the people' and the urge to 'save the nation'. As Stanisław Starnawski suggests, both globalist progressive liberalism and localist national conservatism are in fact children of postmodernism rather than representatives of the struggle between tradition and enlightenment, as they sometimes understand themselves. They share a tendency towards relativism and deconstruction, which ultimately may leave sheer power as the only tool for resolving conflicting situations.⁹³

90 Szymański, *Odrzucenie liberalizmu nie zapewni nam szczęścia...*; Max Grier, Hitler serves as a warning to today's conservatives, EU's Manfred Weber says, *Politico*, 22.05.2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/adolf-hitler-warning-conservative-european-people-party-germany-manfred-weber/>; Marianne Gros, Max Grier, EU's conservatives hurtle toward reckoning over far-right taboo, *Politico*, 29.10.2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-peoples-party-far-right-european-parliament/>

91 Kacper Kita, *Italię Giorgia Meloniów: Synteza populizmu a liberalizmu?*; Kacper Kita, *Giorgia Meloni – radykalna pragmatyczka...*

92 Szymański, *Odrzucenie liberalizmu nie zapewni nam szczęścia...*; Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution...*

93 Stanisław Starnawski, Skąd pochodzi i dokąd zmierza ruch MAGA, *Klub Jagielloński*, 10.10.2025, <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2025/10/10/skad-pochodzi-i-dokad-zmierza-ruch-maga->

According to Michał Kuź, the politics of individual countries are increasingly driven by the ‘all or nothing’ principle. ‘Defenders of globalist liberal democracy consider any change, even one that would lead to a reduction in social inequalities, as an overture to dictatorship.’ Conversely, localists feel forced into a series of binary choices: ‘Either liberal democracy accompanied by a boundless globalised market, which leads to rapid growth in inequality, forced multiculturalism, and the migration of wealth and jobs from the periphery to the centre; or state protectionism accompanied by brutal repression, militarism, and ethnocentrism.’⁹⁴

Kuź concludes that such forced polarisation may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. ‘Those two extreme options may start winning elections in many countries.’ As Michael Sandel summarises, today’s atmosphere is suffused with a ‘toxic brew of hubris and resentment’. The introduction of chiliastic aspect to democratic politics is bound to exacerbate societal polarisation. As Dariusz Karłowicz points out, rewriting the current political conflict between illiberal populism and the liberal establishment as existential may prove extremely dangerous, as it closes the door to de-escalation. Otherwise, he argues, we may face a rather disconcerting alternative: either the rule of a strong man supported by the people – i.e., illiberal democracy transformed into a kind of charismatic dictatorship – or ‘a form of post-liberal dictatorship’ which, while allowing the current elites to retain their power and possessions, would radically restrict civil liberties (especially freedom of speech, assembly, and association) in the name of stability. This would introduce a kind of permanent state of exception, maintaining the

appearance of temporarily suspended democracy. To avoid revolution, he argues, we must aim for a systemic reset. However, turning politics into eschatology effectively blocks this path.⁹⁵

The necessity of such a reset is becoming increasingly obvious as the spiral of radicalisation accelerates. ‘If we don’t find a third way out’ of the ‘either-or’ choices of the extreme globalist and extreme localist position, Michał Kuz warns, ‘a devastating conflict will escalate.’ Marek Cichocki stresses the fact that historically the liberal democracy was always built on a kind of compromise between the interests of the elite and of the people, such as the idea of the European welfare state. Only such unwritten or written compromises enabled the liberal-democratic project to flourish. Similar stress on re-balancing the system can be found in both Jan Zielonka’s warning to the liberals and Chantal Delosol’s encouragement to recreate a balance between ‘rootedness’ and ‘emancipation’. In Patrick Deneen’s words, liberal democracy as a mixed regime loses its functionality because its two constitutive elements have lost their proper balance. It requires ‘remixing’. This can only be achieved by rediscovering the discourse of the ‘common good’ and returning to the primacy of democratic legitimacy. In the European context, this requires reconfiguring the relations between European institutions and nation states as an initial step. Moreover, it is essentially a *political* task that cannot be solved by law, regulations, or bureaucratic procedures. As Giorgia Meloni rightly observes: ‘Bureaucracy will not get us out of the storm; politics can. Regulations will not make us stronger; ideas can. Ideologies will not liberate our societies, but values – when applied to our reality – can’.⁹⁶

Prague, 7.12.2025

nowa-prawica-w-ameryce-to-pogrobowiec-postmodernizmu/,

94 Kuz, *Globalizm, lokalizm i nowe średniowiecze...*

95 Dariusz Karłowicz, *Reset czy rewolucja? Teologia Polityczna*, 11/2019; Kuz, *Globalizm, lokalizm i nowe średniowiecze...*

96 Kuz, *Globalizm, lokalizm i nowe średniowiecze...*; Deneen, *Regime Change...*; Cichocki, *Bezprecedensowe unieważnienie wyborów w Rumunii...*; Delosol, *Illiberalizm buntem ludu przeciwko narzuconemu procesowi uniformizacji...*; Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution...*; President Meloni’s speech at the 2025 Rimini Meeting...

POST SCRIPTUM 1: THE NEW MIDDLE AGES?

In his latest book, Michał Kuź, an author frequently referenced in this essay, offers a considerably different prediction concerning the future development of the current crisis of the Western liberal democratic model. He claims that both localists and globalists are 'partially right and partially wrong in their diagnoses. We can assume that the level of globalisation achieved in the world around 2005 will not be repeated for many decades to come, even though economic globalisation is far from over.' At the same time, it is difficult to imagine that we will 'return to the golden age of modernity, with its civil social rights and strong democratic nation states'. Neither globalism nor localism will be able to achieve their goals, and their tense rhetoric will ultimately lead to frustration. The reason for these unresolved outcomes is that the conflict between globalists and localists has developed within a world organised by the terminology of Western modernity. However, according to Kuź, this world has already disappeared, having been replaced by what he calls the 'new Middle Ages'. The return of the medieval era is characterised by the plurality and diffusion of power centres: the nation state is no longer a sovereign player, being limited by international organisations, multinational capital, and sub-state actors such as NGOs, organised minority groups, regions, etc. In the neo-medieval era, we see also a resurgence of the imperial idea, culminating in the concept of 'global governance' but, at the same time, growing tensions within states and federations are emerging, such as the increasing disparity between big cities and rural areas or the resurgence of regionalism.

Kuź lists many other signs of the 'return of the Middle Ages', particularly the gradual decline of the middle class – the primary vehicle of liberal modernity. The growing social and economic divide in society is set to produce 'a new kind of feudalism'.

Paradoxically, given the historical roots of liberalism, this new feudalism will be embraced by the globalist liberal elite. The changes that Kuź mentions vary from the evolution of new, multi-centred and multi-layered power structures to growing economic disparity and changes in the definition of equal rights – another pillar of the modern world. These rights are no longer derived from the state's legitimate authority over a given territory and population; rather, they increasingly resemble the model of individual or group privileges typical of medieval law.

According to Kuź, the turbulent times ahead will be characterised by the chaos of narratives unable to fulfil their promises. 'Hyper-liberal globalism' will cease to be 'real globalism' and will gradually turn into 'a kind of cult of very abstract and mysterious progress'. At the same time, localists will realise that their concept of sovereignty is untenable in neo-medieval conditions, and they will have to content themselves with establishing small 'pockets of social equality and republican order'. The second warning, in particular, should be reflected upon at a time when many localist forces are succumbing to the temptation of triumphalism. A telling example of this trend can be seen in the first months of Trump's second term in office. The effects of his policies, particularly in the area of international commerce, remain so far highly debatable. Even the leader of the world's superpower, endowed with considerable executive powers, is finding it hard to implement at least a small part of his policy programme in the face of a concerted opposition from state actors and the mechanisms of the global market. In this context, what can be said about the capacity of the average EU member state to lead sovereign policy?⁹⁷



POST-SCRIPTUM 2: GLOBALISM, LOCALISM, AND GEOPOLITICS

The recent dramatic changes to the international order are conspicuously absent from the above analysis. This is primarily because this argument is often abused by either side of the globalist-localist conflict to marginalise its opponents as a 'security threat'. The shift in the political spectrum towards the globalist-localist axis is happening across the West, not because of the changes in the wider international environment, but in spite of them. Its roots lie in the internal processes of the liberal order, rather than in external influences.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that the geopolitical crisis affecting Europe is by no means an illusion. The new phase of aggressive Russian imperialism, China's growing global assertiveness, and the turbulences caused by the acceleration of the long-declared US policy of 'reducing Washington's global obligations' make a search for a reset in European politics much more urgent. However, the effects of the geopolitical turbulences on the dynamics of European politics seem so far rather unconstructive.

Firstly, geopolitical turbulences provide powerful impetus for an apocalyptic vision of the current competition between globalists and localists. If opponents of liberalism are associated with self-proclaimed enemies of the West, such as China and Russia, in any way – whether ideological or material – it could be the ultimate reason for turning internal democratic political debate into a security issue. However, even if we dismiss the localists as 'useful idiots' rather than 'malicious agents of foreign influence', the conflict is still existential. This perception facilitates the marginalisation of any kind of internal critique on the basis of the call for the necessary unity of Western societies in the face of an imminent external threat. At the same time, it provides a powerful boost to popular support for the existing order: an unstable international environment makes supporting the existing establishment the more rational choice. This seems to be one of the main reasons for the current rise in the discourse of 'populist liberalism' which, while accepting the localist agenda in many respects, calls for decisive action against the political forces that originally presented that agenda.

That being said, it should be noted that a significant proportion of the wider localist movement is characterised by an unhealthy fascination with the various anti-Western and undemocratic regimes in Russia and China, or at least an openness to the discourse produced by the propaganda machines of those countries. This attitude is motivated in different ways. In Viktor

Orbán's 'illiberal democracy' speech, for example, there was a clear motif of respect towards their economic performance and the efficiency of their governance. Some representatives of the Christian and conservative right actually accept the Kremlin's self-proclaimed transformation into the 'protector of traditional values', despite obvious counter-evidence. Some Czech and Slovak localist discourses draw inspiration from historical Pan-Slavic traditions and anti-Western sentiments directed at either Germany or the US, combined with an anti-progressive cultural agenda.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the robust sanctions imposed on Moscow by the West, the localist standpoint is often prompted by its alleged geopolitical realism, as opposed to liberal idealism in international relations. Moreover, there is a powerful drive towards creating the 'ideological packages' described above, based not only on a positive agenda, but also as an automatic reaction to opponents' standpoints. This is clearly visible in the perception of Russia in Polish internal politics: for as long as 'business as usual' with the Kremlin remained a pillar of mainstream European politics, the 'constructive' approach towards Russia was the domain of liberals in Poland, whereas the national conservatives remained firmly "hawkish" in their attitude. However, following the full-scale Russian invasion, when the European power centres moved towards supporting Ukraine and adopting a new-Cold-War attitude, a tendency emerged among some right-wing, localist voters to seek alternative propositions (ranging from 'realist' to overtly pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian), which boosted support for nationalist parties such as the Confederacy and, later, its more extreme rival, the Confederacy of the Polish Crown. At the same time, this created a substantive challenge to the original localist force in Polish politics, the Law and Justice party. As a party rooted in traditional Polish anti-imperialist and romantic ethos, it suffers from the alienation of a part of its electorate which identifies support for the Ukrainian struggle with 'liberal naivety' and the dominance of 'Brussels'.

Finally, it should be noted that Russia has actively sought secret cooperation and networking with several illiberal political parties in Western Europe. Although this argument has also been abused by the liberal mainstream, in several cases it has serious grounds. This cooperation was occasionally welcomed, partly because of the persistent ostracism of those parties by the liberal mainstream, not only in terms of exclusion from public debate, but also by legal and financial means.

The responses of localists to geopolitical challenges, which were already diverse and often contradictory, have become even more complex due to the turbulences accompanying Donald Trump's return to power. Since then, US foreign policy has oscillated between brutal realism, which asserts American economic and military dominance, and a search for an international localist alliance. The traditional US obligations towards NATO and international security have been called into question, generating a sense of insecurity and tension among many European nations. This turbulent development further obscures the picture as far as localist standpoints on the international situation are concerned.

Donald Trump acts as both a disruptor of the international order and a trendsetter of the worldwide illiberal movement. His return to power was widely welcomed by localist leaders in Europe, creating an expectation that an illiberal momentum would also prevail in European politics. However, Trump's assertive policies towards European allies have placed localist politicians in a complex situation. While they welcome Trump's explicit criticism of liberal dogmas and the EU as an epitome of the liberal order, they often reject his imperialist practices and oppose particular decisions that affect the European economy.

Most importantly, Trump's disruptive influence is considered a major electoral drawback for localist parties worldwide, as it intensifies support for liberal candidates and discourages potential voters. 'We are losing European nationalist conservatives,' wrote Rod Dreher, speaking from the perspective of American conservatism about the growing tension among localists from both sides of the Atlantic. Secondly, the abruptness of the conflict between the US and Europe actually provides a very strong impetus for European integration. The EU's visible weakness in the era of new power politics signals to much of the European elite and public opinion that, rather than re-empowering nation states, the continent is heading towards closer union. During the crisis over Greenland in January 2006, Jordan Bardella, leader of the National Rally, claimed, 'The President of the United States is presenting the European Union with a clear choice: accept vassalage under the guise of a transatlantic partnership or become sovereign actors once again, capable of defending our interests and integrity.' Although the National Rally's rhetoric centers around a Europe re-designed, in which national sovereignty is 'placed at the centre', it seems highly likely that a localist triumph in America could strengthen 'globalist' tendencies across the Atlantic.⁹⁸

The ambiguous relationship of Trump's administration towards the Russo-Ukrainian war and towards the future of NATO are another problematic issues, introducing significant differences between various localist parties. The Italian government under Meloni, as well as the subsequent Polish presidents Andrzej Duda and Karol Nawrocki, have attempted to mitigate the growing anti-American sentiment in Europe and the anti-European

sentiment in Washington. They have argued for the preservation of the United States' traditional role in European deterrence, as well as for clear support for the survival of an independent Ukraine. However, others, such as Orbán's government, the German AfD, and the French National Rally, have embraced the American 'realist turn' that allows for a 'constructive' attitude towards Russia, which some of them perceive as a 'victim' of 'liberal interventionism'.

In this respect, the Trump administration seems to hold the key to the future development not only of the security situation in Europe, but also of the localist movement within European politics. In the National Security Strategy published in December 2025, Washington explicitly reiterates the key philosophical principles underlying the localist interpretation of the crisis of the liberal order. The document identifies the European Union as an institution perpetuating the degenerative tendencies of globalist liberalism in Europe ('undermining the political liberties and sovereignty' of democratic nation states) and expresses support for political and social forces cultivating 'resistance to Europe's current trajectory'. However, Trump's administration's consistent downplaying of the Russian threat to its European allies suggests that the emerging 'illiberal international' may encounter opposition from members who view the geopolitical situation in Eastern NATO as existential. Similarly, the American push to consolidate the allies under American leadership in anticipation of a new bipolar rivalry between the USA and China would, by definition, significantly affect the economic interests of some European countries. Finally, Trump's ostentatious displays of American imperial dominance over the allies are already having the effect of either alienating some of his potential localist allies or strengthening the position of the liberal parties in democratic competition.

Solving the challenges posed by the resurgence of Russian imperialism and Chinese economic pressure and recalibrating transatlantic relations are key factors in today's European politics. While these challenges lie outside the globalist-localist ideological debate fuelling tensions within Western societies, they could be pivotal in determining the future trajectory of the localist/illiberal movement. Former Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki described this as the need to reconcile the fight for national sovereignty with the ability to think strategically about the West as a whole. Can the West maintain an element of cooperation towards a common goal while reducing its tendency to breach democratic sovereignty through transnational institutions? Or will it fully embrace the Hobbesian realist worldview, in which the strong devour the weak? Taking a clear, unequivocal stance against the Kremlin imperialism would help localists define their position: combining a democratic reset of the current system, deeply rooted in the heritage of Western thought, with an attempt to navigate between the Scylla of undemocratic liberalism and the Charybdis of Russian or Chinese tyranny.

⁹⁸ <https://www.respekt.cz/zahranici/evropsti-narodovci-se-odvraceji-od-trumpa-a-hledaji-svou-vlastni-radikalni-pozici> ; <https://wszystkoconajwazniejsze.pl/pepites/jordan-bardella-w-jdd/> ; <https://roddreher.substack.com/p/were-losing-european-nationalist>

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