Protests against the Lex CEU in Budapest in spring 2017: the slogal reads "new regime change, European democracy!"
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# Illiberal Consensus without an Authoritarian Core: The Case of Bulgaria

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As part of the special issue on 'Lex CEU', the present article argues, that the antiliberal tendencies in Bulgarian politics and society and apparent recourses to nationalism are not really a new phenomenon. Instead, the developments in the country over the last decade and more rather point to a stable trend towards increasing illiberalism that is accelerated by rampant elite corruption and an ever decreasing media independence.

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# Illiberal Consensus without an Authoritarian Core: The Case of Bulgaria

The news about the recent Hungarian legislation that threatens the existence of the Central European University (CEU), known as 'Lex CEU', was received with mixed, sometimes strong feelings in the Bulgarian public. Bulgaria is a country that has its own love/hate tradition with George Soros. Its political class has profited quite a lot from his support over the years, even if many former grant recipients today would rather contest Soros' visions of an open society. Indeed, the current state of affairs in Bulgarian politics and society suggests clear anti-liberal tendencies and a recourse to militant nationalism. Yet, as I will argue in this article, this is not really a new phenomenon. Instead, the developments in the country over the last decade and more rather point to a stable trend towards increasing illiberalism that is accelerated by rampant elite corruption and an ever decreasing media independence.

In a mediascape where press freedom is estimated to be the lowest in the EU (Bulgaria is ranked 109 in the 2017 World Press Freedom Index)[1] and where the Media Pluralism Monitor assesses media pluralism to be at high risk on crucial indicators, the news from Hungary in the spring of 2017 were eagerly internalized by the national discourse. The media group of Delyan Peevski – an epitome of Bulgarian oligarchy – which controls nearly 80 per cent of print media distribution along with an unknown number of news sites, and which is flagged in reports on media non-transparency and political collusion, caught on to the forthcoming Hungarian legislation already in February. Quoting its own sources among Hungarian political analysts and Fidesz representatives, the news agency Monitor ran a story of international NGOs (examples including Amnesty International) engaging secretly in politics through illicit funding, thus constituting potential security threats such as "bringing down governments, purchasing arms or even sponsoring terrorists".[2] In a typical move to deflect accusations against their own practices of non-transparency, oligarchic influence and state capture, the publication used the arguments of Hungarian sources to implicate its own critics at home in all of the above. While for Peevski's media the CEU was a target of secondary importance next to foreign-funded NGOs, it was nevertheless inscribed in the overarching narrative as an "incubator of cadres from all over the world who are then planted into various NGOs and institutions to serve Soros' interests".

While Peevski's media – frequently referred to as "media baseball bats" – normally provide an extreme tabloid version of events, the frame used to report on 'Lex CEU' in Bulgaria overall was Victor Orbán's affront on liberal values. As evidence of the mixed feelings for liberal values among the Bulgarian public, this was underscored equally in publications criticizing Orbán's legislation, and in those that approved of it. A Facebook post by the controversial national radio host Petar Volgin, who had already been sanctioned by the Bulgarian media regulator for violating media pluralism, praised Orbán's attack against what he called "an incubator of liberal Taliban". A long time vocal opponent of the EU, Volgin elaborated upon his opinions in a series of publications that retargeted the events in Hungary against liberal enemies at home. In his words, 'Lex CEU' is "a law to stop the destructive influence of a Soros university on original thought […] [by] producing liberal broilers". He also found it to be an inspiration for how to fight the foreign NGOs' "takeover of Bulgarian culture" in their attempt to "lobotomize [people in Eastern Europe] with the clichés of Euro-Atlanticism". After Volgin's latest controversial Facebook post in July raised demands for his dismissal from national radio, he refuelled his rant against foreign NGOs and their "ideological servants" in Bulgaria, who in his words, impose "the norms of the liberal sharia" on the country. In his view liberals are nothing less than "liberal jihadists"; thus emerges Orbán as a positive


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role model for the sovereign defence of national interests.

There is a specific difference in these two positions of support for 'Lex CEU': in the first case, anonymous content from a news agency is circulated through shady websites thereby giving it the appearance of 'news'; in the second case, a journalist's self-marketing as being censored by liberals gives his radical views the appearance of unmasking a supposedly powerful cabal of transnational elites. The commonality between the two is that the domestic policies of Orbán, including 'Lex CEU', are made instrumental in delegitimizing liberal organizations and individuals at home, thus their transparency and personal/institutional record of engagement with a cause is discredited as being merely a shell for faceless global interests. At the same time, the reference to Orbán's policies provides reverse legitimation – after all, if a government acts in defense of national interests the threat must be real.

Similar to Hungary, the mimicry of Orbán's rhetoric in Bulgaria is in the service of oligarchy and corruption aiming to discredit any public opposition to their operation. Along with media monopolies, another area highlighted as a structural impediment for Bulgaria's anti-corruption strategy is the judicial system, where profound reforms have long been pending. The crux of such reforms is to increase the accountability of the prosecution and the independence of the judiciary. Although Prosecutor General Sotir Tsatsarov is regularly implicated in political collusion, most recently this April, proponents of judicial reform from within the legal system are branded "Sorosoids", including by Tsatsarov himself[3], are under attack from the so-called "media baseball bats".[4]

If, in Hungary, the recent legislation is a step forward in consolidating a power centre with authoritarian sway, then in Bulgaria the anti-NGO rhetoric combined with reform evasion is a sign of a weak political system perpetuating corruption. Bulgarian corruption seems to thrive well in a pluralistic political terrain which, according to political analyst Daniel Smilov, is characterized by the "ongoing trend [of] fragmentation of political parties and coalitions" and "continuing political instability".

The Bulgarian political system remains at this point pluralistic and non-majoritarian, even if both the political class and society at large embrace a vision of majority rule that is intolerant to minorities and any pluralism of values, opinions and cultures. Commentators like Ivan Krastev have linked this trend to the recent refugee crisis that exacerbated a deeply seeded Eastern European distaste for multiculturalism and propelled the rise of populist nationalism and identity politics.[5] The ensuing propensity for minority exclusion and closed borders in some ways reverberates as right-wing nostalgia for communism. Proposals to revive hitherto abolished communist policies along the lines of remilitarization (e.g. border fences and military conscription) are gaining popularity as they channel an existing public preference for tight order over "liberal permissiveness".

The anti-communist version of this stance (as represented in public debates and media op-eds) champions the narrative of a "traditional Christian civilization" of Europe against its current "multicultural decay" and draws a parallel between "Soviet subjugation" of the past and the "EU dictate" of the present. Whereas this stance is not against Bulgaria's EU membership as such, and indeed chimes with Russophobia, it still shares much, socially and culturally, with the Russophile streak of Euroskepticism. The latter advocates Bulgaria's realignment in the Eurasian sphere by emphasizing the country's "natural alliance" with Russia ("our double liberator") over the artificiality of the European Union. Yet, this Russophile/Russophobe dichotomy[6] is rather superficial, concealing actual consensus on traditional, patriotic and mono-cultural values over the derogatory "liberasty".


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There is no doubt that in Bulgaria radical critiques of liberal values are gaining momentum across seemingly irreconcilable political divides. But to what extent are we witnessing an illiberal transformation of the post-1989 order? If we summarize the current state of affairs in Bulgaria, we can easily find all the symptoms of such a development. Yet, isolating these signs from longer-term trends might be misleading since current events are consistent with the political course from the 1990s onwards. So let me recap the latest high-water marks of Bulgaria's illiberal tendencies and then contextualize them against the canvas of the post-1989 era.

## Illiberalism in Bulgaria Today: Militant Nationalism and Anti-Minority Violence

In the last years, vigilante gangs have been "hunting refugees" along the southern border of Bulgaria with a brutality that gained their leaders much media publicity across Europe as well as acclaim from far-right parties as far away as Russia, Germany and the UK.[7] At a time when such thugs are gaining in popularity for "defending the motherland", human rights activists consequently find themselves ever-more vulnerable to extremist violence for "betraying the national interests". In October 2016, Krasimir Kanev, chairman of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, the largest human rights organization in the country, was attacked in broad daylight just outside the National Assembly in Sofia. While the crime was condemned by various international organizations, foreign diplomats and local NGOs, only one representative of the Bulgarian state institutions, the national ombudsman Maya Manolova, issued a statement of condemnation. According to the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, the attack was a "natural continuation" of broad tolerance for hate speech in Bulgaria, thus linked to the upsurge of the far-right.

After the latest parliamentary elections on 26 March 2017, the Bulgarian far-right United Patriots (UP) is not just in government as a junior coalition partner of the centre-right GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) but in fact holds ministerial seats.[8] The UP consolidates three nationalist parties: Ataka (Attack), VMRO-BND (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Bulgarian National Movement) and NFSB (National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria). In addition to the UP heading the ministries of the economy, defence and the environment, Valery Simeonov, leader of the NFSB, was appointed vice prime minister for demographic policy and chairman of the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues despite mounting protest from civic organizations. Thus, somebody with a chilling record of overtly racist statements about Roma – including proposals to relocate them in isolated settlements – will effectively decide on policies of non-discrimination and inclusion. Regarding the other sizeable ethnic minority, the Bulgarian Turks, the UP are no less radical. On the eve of the elections, they organized a blockade at the Bulgarian-Turkish border to prevent Bulgarian citizens who reside in Turkey to vote in their home country.[9] Simeonov himself engaged in physical violence against the incoming voters, which he later justified by describing his victims as "too impudent" in knowing their rights.

The diaspora of Bulgarian Muslims in Turkey is a product of the nationalist policies of ethnic assimilation in the late 1980s, when the communist regime launched the so-called 'revival process', a campaign of the forced renaming of Bulgaria's Muslims and de facto expulsion to Turkey of 360 000 citizens who refused to change their names. While the post-communist parliament adopted a declaration condemning this gross human rights violation as ethnic cleansing (albeit as late as 2012), this chapter of Bulgaria's recent history is still a contentious issue. The latest reopening of it – seen on a nationally televised debate in May 2017 – demonstrated that it can still stir apologetic revisionism based on national security arguments and even retroactive references to Islamic terrorism. Valery Simeonov's affront on the civic rights of Bulgarian voters in Turkey, therefore, has to be understood against this

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communist-era legacy as well as against the ambivalent interpretations of it in the post-communist decades.

The continuity of discrimination despite the regime change in 1989 applies not only to Bulgaria's ethnic minorities, Roma and Muslims, but also to sexual minorities. While the LGBT community is trying to raise awareness about their sustained vulnerability in Bulgaria, the annual Sofia Pride parade is being met by neo-Nazi marches. Although under heavy police protection, Sofia Pride receives no support from public institutions other than the required administrative permission.[10] In June 2017 the parade took place against the backdrop of a parliamentary proposal for the full disclosure of "MPs' homosexuality"; equated to substance addictions and compared to economic conflicts of interests.[11] While Sofia Pride has long been a target of right-wing hate, the most elaborate offense in 2017 came in a widely circulated social-media statement by the President's wife. Her lengthy anti-Pride tirade ended with an accusation that the event usurped what should have been a national day of mourning for an officer killed during an army exercise.[12] Seemingly, this closed the circle of a parliamentary season where the sheer existence of minorities, let alone their equal rights, had been juxtaposed to national interests and public good.

Added to this gloomy picture, in the last days of June, ethnic tension exploded in the town of Asenovgrad after a fight between several local Roma and a group of Bulgarian teenagers escalated quickly into a city-wide ethnic conflict. This was followed by days of anti-Roma demonstrations in Asenovgrad where thousands of people from all over the country gathered, including football hooligans who attempted pogroms against the local Roma neighbourhood. Police from the region and beyond were mobilized to restore order, while the political solution was to raze illegal houses in the Roma ghetto. Bulgarian MEP Angel Dzhambazki from the VMRO-BND commented on the arrest of Roma in Asenovgrad on social media with one word – "euthanasia". While a Bulgarian petition to the EU Parliament demanded sanctions against Dzhambazki, including his suspension from committees and delegations[13], hate speech against minorities no doubt has a strong populist appeal at home and is hardly a tool of the far-right alone.

## Illiberal Turn or Consistent Trend

While the current events in Bulgaria clearly indicate an affront on liberal values and a recourse to militant nationalism, can the situation be qualified as an 'illiberal turn'? The notion of a turn implies a crumbling commitment to the fundamental principles of liberal democracy. But if we consider political developments in the country over the last decade or more, we might discern a stable trend rather than a breaking point. This, then, raises the question Have we ever been liberal? Or, phrased in another way, did the post-1989 transition to democracy and free market actually entail a commitment to liberalism in the sense of civic values and not just in economic terms?

The first far-right political victory came back in 2005. Under the leadership of Volen Siderov, whose public persona is described by commentators as a "studied imitation of Hitler"[14], Ataka made its debut briefly before the parliamentary election in June that year. The climax of its campaign was a rally slogan "Gypsies into soap", which the party subsequently refuted by claiming it was a misunderstanding of the original "Gypsies to Saturn".[15] The short-spanned campaign of Ataka apparently did not hinder its electoral chances and the party came up fourth with an 8 per cent share of votes. In the election season of 2005, VMRO-BND finally entered parliament too, though on a joint ticket with moderate parties. A year later, during the 2006 presidential elections, Siderov made it to the second round where he confronted the reigning president. Since then, nationalist formations have been a force to be reckoned with in

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national politics and often a silent coalition partner. Thus, the novelty in the last election cycle is not their parliamentary representation but their unification under the UP umbrella after years of fragmenting their voters.

Since the far-right rise might be considered a phenomenon at the fringe of the political process, let us place recent events into the longer perspective of policy-making with regard to the main targets of Bulgarian illiberalism today: refugees/immigrants, ethnic minorities, the LGBT community, and human rights activists/NGOs.

Prior to the refugee crisis, post-communist Bulgaria had never experienced a migration inflow – even today it is less a destination than a transit route for asylum seekers entering Europe. Yet, since the early 1990s, dark-skinned foreigners – mainly tourists – have regularly been victims of hate crimes on the streets of large cities.[16] As was stated in a 2015 report by Amnesty International, hate crimes against Roma, Muslims and gays have been even more common – yet systematically overlooked as hate crimes by the Bulgarian courts and instead mitigated to acts of hooliganism. Finally, ethnic clashes like the recent one in Asenovgrad have exploded more than once over the years mobilizing lynching mobs. 'Solutions' in the form of evicting entire communities and demolishing their homes are also a tested approach despite legal objections from human rights organizations.[17] In recent years, the same pattern of xenophobic violence has erupted around refugee centres.[18]

Although hate speech has become a trademark of far-right mobilization, parties that position themselves much closer to the centre, or even construe a liberal identity, do not shy away from embracing discriminatory rhetoric and reifying structural injustice as 'inequality by nature'. By appealing to moderate voters rather than ultras and using technocratic language rather than shouting obscenities, centrist politicians come out in the mainstream media as voices of reason and competence – often depicted as speaking with 'honesty' that their public office might otherwise curtail. While, for example, Siderov's outbursts of aggression against minorities are widely disapproved of, a 2014 proposal of healthcare minister Petar Moskov of the liberal-leaning Reformist Bloc to bar ambulances from entering Roma neighbourhoods, thus denying healthcare service based on ethnicity, was received by many as a brave attempt to "loudly raise an issue" of public interest.[19]

Centrist politicians like Moskov construe a gap between the 'goodwill' of public institutions to combat inequality and the 'bad will' of people from minorities – 'non-Bulgarians' – whose nature or culture impedes them from embracing the chance they were generously given. While in public discourses the topic of Roma integration is usually debased to "wasting taxpayers' money", the truth is that the state's commitment to implement integration policies has largely remained on paper, perceived as a formalist fulfilment of the EU-accession requirements rather than an actual priority of social and economic policies.[20] Beneath an avalanche of integration programs adopted by the state administration, there is not much progress in any sector - education, healthcare, housing conditions and employment – that can maintain or break down structural patterns of exclusion.[21] Masking actual institutional inefficiency, therefore, the rhetoric of public administration's 'goodwill', backed by lengthy lists of bureaucratic documents, shifts the blame for the 'failed integration' not only to its presumed beneficiaries, the ethnic minorities, but also to 'foreign meddling in our domestic affairs' – first and foremost the EU and secondly local NGOs who are depicted as agents of 'foreign interests'.

## From a Left-Right Opposition to a Patriotic Consensus


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The notion of an illiberal turn in Bulgarian politics implies that as political forces from the fringe are increasing their weight in governance and public discourse, a pre-existing liberal consensus at the centre is being eroded. In the post-1989 transition to democracy, however, liberal values have never consolidated a broad political consensus. In addition, for a long time the political centre as such has been hollow. This void at the centre has created a welcoming environment for the rise of populist politics and for the consolidation of a patriotic consensus based on ethnic nationalism.

Ever since 1989, politics in Bulgaria have been dominated by a left-right divide that is specific to the region. Within it, both poles of the political spectrum are delineated by reference to the communist past: the 'right' constituting the democratic forces of the anti-communist opposition and the 'left' representing the former communists turned socialists. The identities of the respective parties are exclusively defined by way of mutual opposition: on the right, a struggle to obliterate the 'dark past' of total control and repressions; on the left, a struggle to revive the 'golden days' of social equality and prosperity for all.

While this binary opposition has proved itself an effective device for the political elites at both ends of the political spectrum to mobilize their electorates, it has also concealed the respective parties' gradual divergence from the socialist or liberal values they nominally stood for and, in fact, revealed their striking convergence on fundamental issues – from economic policies, to problems of social justice, and lately, the treatment of refugees.[23] Ultimately, when it comes to the perpetuation of corruption patterns, oligarchic state capture and even the political accommodation of former state security agents – the endemic problems of the Bulgarian transition – the 'left' and the 'right' are equally implicated.[24]

While the left-right dichotomy was caught in the limbo of post-communist transition, the void at the centre was ripe for a populist takeover under the mantel of charismatic leadership and, later, patriotism. The first to attempt to unify the nation beyond established bipartisan divides was the former Bulgarian monarch, exiled by the communists in 1946. Upon his return, Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha was elected prime minister thanks to the impressive electoral victory of NDSV (National Movement Simeon II), which reaped 43 per cent of the vote in 2001, thus putting an end to alternating left and right governments. Because his charisma was largely construed by the mystique surrounding the unknown king, and the expectation that his Western European dynastic lineage qualified him to be deus ex machina for a small non-EU state (at the time) such as Bulgaria, it quickly wore off once he blended into the familiar political setting. Since his premiership served his private interests – most notably through restitution of nationalized royal properties – rather than the anticipated salvation of the nation, the one and only mandate of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha led to the speedy collapse of the NDSV.

Yet, his term gave rise to a new charismatic leader, Boyko Borisov, who would succeed where the ex-king failed in building an image of a strongman unhindered by bureaucratic technicalities or conventions of political correctness.[25] A former firefighter under communism, then bodyguard of Todor Zhivkov and Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in the 1990s, Borisov was promoted to chief secretary of the Ministry of the Interior during the NDSV government (2001–2005). His background in the private security business after 1989 – a sector notorious for breeding the mafia structures of the transition – did not only fail to hurt his further political career, but likely contributed to its upsurge by projecting the image of a strong arm to lead the country out of chaos. After the collapse of the NDSV, Borisov advanced from independent mayor of Sofia to founder and leader of GERB.

By balancing EU compliance, most notably fiscal discipline through austerity, with populism at home, Borisov achieved unprecedented power longevity; he is currently serving his third term as prime minister. Although both of his previous mandates ended prematurely with resignations, and the prospects of the

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current government that depends on UP support are not rosy either[26], Borisov has demonstrated time and again that there cannot be a viable alternative to his primacy.[27]

While Borisov wins international praise for his staunch EU support amidst fears of increasing Russophilia across the region, he can hardly pass for a liberal in political and social terms. Though aspiring to uphold the "Bulgarian ethnic model" as one of presumably peaceful co-existence, Borisov's take on integration often conveys his disdain for minorities. His 2009 speech to the Bulgarian émigré community in Chicago gave birth to the infamous catchphrase of Bulgaria's "bad human material" in relation to "1 million Gypsies, 700–800 thousand Turks and 2.5 million retirees".[28] At home, the macho persona he tailored for his leadership contributed to a political climate where a politician's appeal is measured by masculinity rather than competence. Borisov is also instrumental in solidifying the patriotic consensus, not least by giving the far-right policy-making initiative in areas that are crucial for their agenda – i.e. national security, demographic policy and minority integration.

As the centre of Bulgaria's politics shifts decisively to conservatism and nationalism, the post-1989 'left' and 'right' follow suit. While within mainstream parties there is certainly no love lost with regard to native minorities, the influx of refugees to Europe reinforced their intolerance towards others. The 'democratic right' rediscovered the Christian roots of Bulgarian identity by calling for a Fortress Europe to push back the "hordes of barbarians". Simultaneously, the 'socialist left' rehashed the mono-ethnic concept of the nation and started scaremongering that under the pressure of the EU refugee policies the Bulgarian government is plotting an "ethnic change" in the country.[29] There is no doubt that the refugee crisis gave further impetus to the patriotic unity but it certainly did not give birth to it.

## Bulgaria's Memory Wars as Surrogates for Structural Change

The potential legitimacy deficits of the centrist parties on the left and on the right to deliver on their declared agendas have been regularly obscured by way of reactivating memory wars along the '89 left-right divide. For the 'socialist left', it is easy to rely on the nostalgic thrust of their core electorate of elderly, whom the economic transition pushed into poverty without any chance to benefit from free-market opportunities. At the same time, the parties of the 'democratic right' are all too eager to capitalize on the counter-nostalgia of their own electorate that elsewhere I have called "demostalgie" – an invocation of the dawn of democracy after 1989 as experienced by the younger generation of the time, what are today middle age voters. Counting on such nostalgic memories, any new centre-right project claims pedigree from the democratic opposition of the early 1990s, while the socialists maintain the image of a "100 year-old Party".

Throughout the 1990s, recurrent battles over history, collective memory, public space and monuments sustained this left-right polarization – or two-camp equilibrium. By reminding the main segments of the electorate what the grand stakes were in the political process, 'left' and 'right' parties consistently obscured their neglect for pressing issues of public interest or their compliance in corruption. Thus, memory wars became legitimation surrogates and policy ersatz. As the mobilization potential of the left-right divide wears out, however, an opposition of Russophobes and Russophiles is gradually replacing it, fulfilling much the same function of diverting attention from structural problems and obfuscating similarities in agendas across the newly constructed demarcation.

After all, Euroskepticism in the poorest EU nation is unlikely to lead the country out of its EU membership and into the Eurasian Union; even the UP is not unanimous on the issue. Volen Siderov, the only leader of

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a constituent party without a cabinet position, now and then acts out a charade like his latest call, during a TV interview this June, to revise Bulgaria's NATO membership and redirect the country into the Russian geopolitical sphere. Beyond such sensationalist distractions, however, the nationalist parties feel quite comfortable in the European Parliament. MEPs like Dzhambazki defend Bulgaria's membership in a European Union that they wish was more economically integrated (as opposed to a "Europe of two speeds") and less federalist in cultural terms (as opposed to a "multicultural liberasty"). The rhetorical opposition between Russophilia and Russophobia nevertheless acquires public relevance by fuelling new clashes over history, that in some ways extenuate those of the post-1989 years, but also shift their focus.

The latest example of this is the recent demolition of a communist-era monument, 1300 Years of Bulgaria (in Sofia), which conveniently obfuscated a series of political scandals revolving around corruption, oligarchic entanglement between business monopolies and public officials, and the compromised separation of powers. While earlier debates on this monument vacillated along the old left-right pendulum, in the polemical cycle this summer those positions were side-lined by patriotic arguments. Because the municipal decision for the dismantling came hand in hand with a promise to rebuild a memorial from 1934 to soldiers who died in the Balkan Wars and World War I, the stance against the communist monument found stable patriotic footing. Some opponents of the demolition, in turn, highlighted the patriotic interpretation of the later monument (celebrating a millennium-long Bulgarian state) as opposed to its presumed communist symbolism, and even proposed an ensemble of both monuments. Ultimately, a series of op-ed publications in online media with rather 'liberal' outlooks promoted the notion that history's prime function is to be a source of national self-esteem and the function of monuments is to glorify national heroes, thus cementing precisely a patriotic consensus at the centre of political debates.

## Conclusion

Returning to the topic of Victor Orbán's 'Lex CEU' and its relevance in Bulgaria, there are apparent similarities as well as significant differences. The embrace of illiberalism and the fierce attack against civic organizations and individuals who stand in defence of liberal values – minority rights, social equality, transborder solidarity – is certainly a common line, as is the conspiracy notion that NGOs serve alien interests and thus undermine the traditional national culture. Yet, while the notion of majority rule does capture the Bulgarian political imagination when defining national traditions and defending them against undesired 'others' from within and without – ethnic minorities, LGBT people, refugees – the political system remains pluralistic in the sense that it lacks the authoritarian centre evident in Hungary. This pluralism of parties and actors, however, conceals a striking unison when it comes to identity politics as well as various economic and social policies. Not least, this superficial pluralism co-exists well with cronyism and oligarchic monopolization of various public sectors.

Finally, the disdain for liberal values that cuts across political cleavages is neither new, i.e. breaking with previous traditions, nor is it stirred from the political fringe, that is by the far-right, who no doubt gives it a radical articulation. For the first decade of the post-1989 transition, a left-right divide preserved, through memory wars on the legacy of communism, the pretence of political divergences, while the two poles of the spectrum converged in their support of economic neoliberalism and social illiberalism. As the mobilization potential of the left-right dichotomy faded, new divides such as Russophobes-versus-Russophiles came up to refuel symbolic battles and obscure structural problems of corruption, poverty and growing inequalities. At the same time, the long-absent centre of the political spectrum has been


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taken over by populism that reinforces a patriotic consensus against liberal values.


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