

CHAPTER 10

Conclusions

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As we conclude this edited volume, we reflect on the mutual impact of global migration and illiberalism in the broader context of the REEE (Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe) area. The legacy of the socialist system looms large, leaving an indelible mark on the socio-political landscape. Authoritarian states with weakening democracy in the REEE, while influenced by this historical backdrop, exhibit a complex relationship with globalization. Political decisions are made in structures which are not only shaped by domestic considerations but are also deeply entwined with the globalized markets and the shadow economy that transcend national borders economically and culturally. Understanding

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illiberal politics in the REEE demands a nuanced grasp of such effects of globalization.

The drastic economic transition policies of the 1990s, coupled with a foreign policy backlash against perceived grievances, gave rise to illiberal tendencies. Economic growth, driven by globalized economic and institutional competition, paradoxically led to elitist economic policies, oligarchic power concentration, and the intertwining of neoliberal markets with selective nationalistic agendas. The REEE area presents an intriguing case study through which to interrogate the nexus between illiberal politics under different regime types and their migration policies. It comprises totalitarian states, nominally democratic autocracies, and declining and established democracies. Though the transition to democracy and market economies meant challenging the authoritarian and illiberal features of the former socialist regimes, political institutions, public administrations, and judiciaries are to varying degrees influenced by the legal and administrative cultures of the socialist period.

The question of whether illiberalism is the root cause or an outcome of these structural and cultural features remains a complex one. We have argued that illiberalism emerges as both a catalyst and a consequence of various challenges, such as inequality, political division, informality in government, and erosion of societal rules. As a political stance influencing state–society relations by diverging from democratic liberal values, illiberalism finds its way into political goals and policy processes, often uniting seemingly unrelated groups under its banner. Democratic backsliding is seldom a drastic rupture like, for example, an authoritarian revolution; it is more often a slow and gradual process. Typically, democratic institutions and regimes formally remain un-attacked, but they are crippled or co-opted by the ruling elite. In some cases illiberal backsliding can be a temporary phase, connected to the rule of some political party or leader, but it can also be a more long-term development if democratic institutions and checks and balances are severely eroded (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 453). For

this reason, the study of illiberalism as a political viewpoint and agenda is an extremely timely endeavour.

We underline the importance of practices and ways of thinking linked to policymaking and implementation in the examination of the illiberalism–migration nexus. Migration is a ‘signature issue’ (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 433) of illiberal politics and its criticism of liberalism. Portrayals of liberalism as characterized by open borders policy, coupled with demands to prioritize national security and economy over the ‘luxury’ of human, minority, and migrant rights, also have a populist appeal in many countries and are therefore an efficient means of gathering support for the illiberal political agenda. Illiberal political actors thus implicitly tap into the liberal paradox (Hollifield 1992). Illiberalism accuses liberalism of hypocrisy, and in migration policy this charge often seems quite justified. As Virkkunen, Silvan, and Piipponen also argue in this volume ([Chapter 7](#)), it is possible to notice illiberal features in the very structure of European migration policies, not to mention in such practices as the pushing back of asylum seekers from the borders of the EU. Thus, it can be suggested that migration is one of the policy areas where the erosion of such liberal-democratic principles as respect for international laws and agreements may begin.

In the course of European history, the way in which the concepts of liberalism and illiberalism have been understood and used has undergone many changes. Thus, all theoretical models of them also inevitably reflect their own time and context. Occasionally, contemporary conceptualizations of illiberalism seem to have been drafted to describe specific cases such as, for example, Orbán’s Hungary. However, there are notable differences in contemporary illiberal politics. For example, welfare nationalism and criticism of liberal individualism is quite common in the illiberal politics of many European parties but, unsurprisingly, anti-individualism or redistributive social policies do not configure in Trumpian illiberal political rhetoric (Smilova 2021, 194). More comparative studies would further discussions about both variance in and core features of illiberal politics.

Our examination of the nexus of illiberalism and global migration within the REEE area has focused on two distinct ambitions. First, we have analysed how migratory flows present both opportunities for and challenges to illiberal governance practices. Migration contributes to political polarization, restrictive immigration policies, xenophobia, and discrimination, prompting a typical illiberal response of securitization in policymaking. Second, we have explored how illiberalism, in turn, shapes, influences, and capitalizes on migration to advance political goals. This complex relationship is a two-way street, as migration processes can simultaneously challenge illiberal political objectives by fostering diversity, networking, democracy promotion, and political empowerment. Examples of these contradictions are presented in, for instance, Dmitry Kurnosov in [Chapter 5](#), which demonstrates how developments in the administrative and legal sphere in Russia have been intertwined in the emergence of illiberal politics in migration policy. Another example is in Ajar Chekirova's chapter, where the analysis shows that virtual spaces where diaspora communities gather are a venue of persistent contention between liberal and illiberal ideas, and that these venues are furthermore utilized by both state and non-state actors to mobilize for action ([Chapter 6](#)). By adopting our dual perspective on the illiberalism–migration nexus, the contributors in this edited volume, through their cases, provide an understanding of how migration becomes a pivotal factor in shaping political discourse, policies, and governance practices within the context of illiberal states.

Through our interdisciplinary approach that draws on political science, sociology, law, and international relations, among other fields, the volume achieves a comprehensive examination of the complex interplay between migration and illiberalism. This interdisciplinary lens contributes to a holistic understanding of the challenges and opportunities involved in navigating migration dynamics within illiberal contexts. We invite further academic exploration, encouraging a deepened understanding of the complex relationships uncovered. Potential avenues for research emerge, calling for continued inquiry into the evolving nature of

illiberal politics (its ways of thinking and practices), the resilience of democratic processes in the face of migration challenges, and the role of diaspora communities in shaping the political landscape. This becomes especially important as one of the largest military conflicts in the region since the Second World War is ongoing, with superpowers aiming to change political boundaries.

Migration will continue to be an important societal and political force in the future. Climate change and degradation of the environment in many parts of Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe will challenge governments, communities, and individuals to find coping strategies. The examination of illiberalism in this context offers a framework for future investigations into how global geopolitical shifts, economic and labour market changes, and technological advancements might influence governance structures, policies, and practices. Understanding the adaptive strategies of illiberal regimes in response to such external forces and their impact on migration dynamics could provide valuable insights for scholars and policymakers alike. Investigating how illiberal regimes recalibrate their policies and narrative frameworks over time, especially in the aftermath of crises, stands as a promising avenue for research. This temporal dimension could uncover patterns of resilience or vulnerability within illiberal structures and inform predictions regarding their future trajectories.

In essence, this edited volume, while a significant contribution, stands as a starting point for an ongoing academic conversation that promises to shed light on the mutual impact of migration and illiberalism in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe. The complex nature of these interactions invites continued exploration, encouraging scholars to dig deeper into the evolving dynamics, uncovering new facets of the relationship between migration and illiberal governance in this region. As the geopolitical landscape continues to evolve, this academic discourse remains crucial for comprehending the diverse challenges and opportunities that define the intersection of migration and illiberalism in this region.

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