Beyond Liminality? The Kulturkampf of the Early 2000s in East Central Europe

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The late 1990s and early 2000s have been considered a period of social and political stabilization of the "Other Europe," marked by a growing economic and institutional convergence with the Western part of the continent. At the same time, paradoxically, the ideological conflict between different political forces did not lose its intensity. On the contrary, one could talk of the disappearance of the last vestiges of consensus politics that characterized the postdissident political elites of the early 1990s. Already during the emergence of the new democratic system, deep ideological conflicts ravaged the political life of these countries. In countries where the former anticommunist opposition came to power in 1989–90, the process of differentiation was evident at the very moment of the formation of the demo-

cratic governments, when certain ideological trends and networks emerged as mainstream and others appeared as alternative streams contesting the new arrangement and radicalizing the divergences already existing within the opposition subcultures.

Nevertheless, in the early 1990s, the personal and political cleavages notwithstanding, a relatively large segment of the new political elite, Left and Right, postcommunist and anticommunist, still shared a common commitment to the necessity of institutional reforms stipulated by the "transition paradigm." This commitment entailed the consensual aim of "getting closer" to European structures and also adapting European institutional practices, with respect for the democratic procedural rules, as they seemed to command social support and were also legitimized by the manifest historical victory of "Western" liberal democracy over "Eastern" communism.

This democratic and Europeanizing consensus was also linked to a critical stance toward the precommunist authoritarian political traditions and entailed the rejection of the personality cult of leader figures. Yet it did not prevent the emergence of a number of semiauthoritarian leaders, propelled to power by a combination of skillfully instrumentalized antielitism, a feeling of national and social insecurity, and the increasing irritation of the population against institutionalist, and thus rather slow, political arrangements. However, in these cases (such as Slovakia), and also in countries characterized by a prolonged postcommunist transitory phase (Bulgaria, Albania, Romania, Serbia), consensus politics were usually respected if not by all the political elite then by the anticommunist, antiauthoritarian opposition that brought together very different ideological traditions. Simultaneously, most political forces stemming from the communist party were also eager to subscribe to some sort of liberal democratic ideological minimum—at least when the offer of European integration became a tangible incentive for them. This liberal framework seemed to be so dominant that, the actual political ups and downs (and the quick disappearance of explicitly liberal political forces in most countries) notwithstanding, many analysts tended to speak of a liberal hegemony in East Central Europe. For instance, Romanian political scientist Aurelian Crăiuțu wrote in 1998, "Liberalism in this part of the world became an obligatory syntax of political thought."[1] All this, however, became increasingly precarious in the late 1990s, giving way to a search for a new ideological framework from the turn of the millennium onward.

1. Aurelian Crăiuțu, "A fi sau a nu fi liberal?," in *Doctrine politice*, ed. Alina Mungiu-Pippidi (Iaşi: Polirom, 1998), 17.

Beyond the inherent thrust toward political polarization, the erosion of post-1989 consensus politics can be linked to a series of divisive collective experiences in the respective political communities. In contrast to the early stage of the transition characterized by a pervasive pro-Western European stance, combined with very limited interaction with Western institutions, this naïve positive image gradually started to change in the process of negotiation and adaptation to EU structures, and various frustrations with the pace and direction of the transformation came to be linked to perceived or real pressure from "the West." Also, the transition societies carried a number of unresolved historical traumas: the dramatic instability of the respective state borders and consequently the experiences of massive population transfers, displacements, et cetera, after the Second World War; the Holocaust; the destructive effects of the socialist transformation, with its concomitant campaigns of collectivization, "de-kulakization," and forced industrialization; and, finally, the outbursts of mass-scale terror, as well as the complicated dialectics of compromise and resistance characterizing both the interwar authoritarian and the postwar communist regimes. In the heat of the search for future-oriented solutions in the early 1990s, these traumas remained to a large extent suppressed but continued to feed the divergent "private histories," which could coagulate into competing alternative representations of the twentieth century that could eventually be played out against each other.

Naturally, the ideological components of this "politics in a new key" were drawn from different preexisting reservoirs, ranging from the interwar constructions of national authenticity to the ideological debates of the anticommunist opposition circles. Thus, the new ideological vision questioning the legitimacy of the posttransition regime inherited some elements from the anticommunist discourse of the early 1990s, but in many ways it also went beyond it. Most important, it turned against not only the clear heirs of the communist power structures but all the more so against those former dissidents who eventually abandoned the anticommunist platform and chose to enter into either an actual coalition with postcommunist political forces or concluded that the posttransition context posed new challenges, foremost that of ethno-nationalism, and that the fight against the vestiges of the communist regime was not the most important task any longer.

In contrast to the anticommunism of the early transition years stemming from the fear of restoration and rooted in a liberal antitotalitarian framework that functionally served as a legitimizing factor for the new democratic regime, the new anticommunism was also markedly antiliberal

and came to serve as an ideological framework questioning the legitimacy of the whole transition process. Significantly, the emerging intellectual formulations of this new anticommunism were not necessarily coming from people who were the most radical anticommunists in the earlier phase.

Another important aspect connected to all this was the seemingly paradoxical development triggered by the advancement of European integration and the dissolution of self-restraint on the part of political elites in the countries of the region. As the formal democratization criteria were met and the integration of these countries into the European Union became irreversible, a majoritarian understanding of democracy and a concomitant zero-sum perception of political struggle became dominant in the political cultures of the region. All this led to the growing conflictuality of political discourse culminating in constructed and sustained radical visions of mutual elimination—mobilizing one's own camp by accusing the ideological opponent of aiming at one's total destruction. The struggle was thus not framed in terms of political competition within a procedural framework of democracy that could allow for the clash of different visions of the future but would also make it possible to change direction over time. Instead, it became represented as the clash of fundamentally incompatible *Weltanschauungen* that aim at changing the outlook, and often the very composition, of the political community once and for all.[2] From this perspective, it became legitimate to prevent the breakthrough of the opponent by any means, including the subversion of the procedural structures mentioned above. The radicalization was also linked to the change in the horizons of expectation of the political community: while in 1989–90, a major factor of moderation was the fear of civil war between communists and anticommunists, the vestiges of this fear disappeared by the 2000s. What remained was a discourse of "secret deals," "embezzled transition," and the "betrayal" of the society by the transition elites.

One can map this polarization and radicalization of political ideologies in terms of the eruption (or revival) of the local Kulturkampf. The notion of Kulturkampf, or "culture war," denotes a more encompassing struggle for the past and the future of a given community, aiming at creating an ideological hegemony by stressing the fundamental incompatibility of visions. The concept originally referred to the conflict of the supporters of the Prot-

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2. For an innovative reading of modern Hungarian intellectual history along these lines, focusing on self- and enemy-images, see Iván Zoltán Dénes, *Szabadság-közösség: Programok és értelmezések* (Budapest: Argumentum Kiadó, 2008).

estant state and the Catholic Church in late nineteenth-century Germany. It also resurfaced as the title and key term of a radical pamphlet against the Americanization of French culture, written in the late 1970s.[3] Eventually, it was relaunched in American public debates by James Davison Hunter's study *Culture Wars*,[4] and in the 1990s, it also gained a currency in the public debates of East Central Europe, adapted to local discursive traditions.

Significantly, the different usages reflect rather different conceptualizations of culture, depending on the actual political context, albeit all of them concern the question of the relationship of the state and the collective identity of certain groups within the state framework. The nineteenth-century German struggle was about the relationship of the normativity of religion and statehood, and *Kultur* in this sense was closely connected to *Kult*. In a way, it was about the question of whether a modern secular state could accept the theocratic power claim of the supranational Catholic church. In contrast, the American debate concerned the relationship of cultural plurality to political community, and eventually the viability of a multicultural political nation. Finally, the East Central European Kulturkampf is also about the clash of different visions of "the political," derived from competing narratives of the national past and especially incompatible renderings of collective traumas. While the notion of Kulturkampf does not necessarily pop up in all European contexts, one could also stretch it to other political cultures, for example, the French struggle between the Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards, which lasted for at least half a century, shared many of the same conflicts described here.[5] Furthermore, when one looks at East Central Europe, it is also obvious that the semantic connotations of the concept and also the actual stakes of the debate were rather different depending on the national context. For instance, in Hungary, the notion of Kulturkampf is usually linked to the reactualization of the interwar conflict of populists and urbanites, which, after 1989, was often reduced to a clash of "ethno-nationalists" and "cosmopolites";[6] in Romania, it came to denote

3. Henri Gobard, *La Guerre culturelle: Logique du désastre* (Paris: Copernic, 1979).
4. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
5. See, for instance, Michel Winock, *Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and Fascism in France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 111–30.
6. The dissident historian Miklós Szabó dealt with the issue of Kulturkampf as a problem of the relationship of state and church in the German and French contexts of the late nineteenth century, but he also drew more general political conclusions from his historical analysis and thus opened up the notion for actualization. See his "A német 'kultúrharc,'" *Beszélő* 1991/22, accessed December 11, 2012, beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/a-nemet

the rise of a neoconservative ideological dominance;[7] while in Slovenia, it was relaunched in the context of a debate between the secular intelligentsia and Catholic circles.[8]

While obviously the central political conflict in these contexts was quite different, they also share a common trait: all of them are about the relationship of the political community to certain prepolitical divisions and the possibility of keeping together a functioning public sphere and institutional system in a situation where different sides have radically different traditions and expectations. The key to the logic of Kulturkampf common to all these interpretations is that achieving cultural hegemony (which is usually identified with appropriating the hegemonic narration of the past) is a preeminent means of domination.

Therefore, it is not surprising that around the turn of the millennium the main battlefield of the East Central European Kulturkampf turned out to be a new politics of memory. All this coincided with an increasing feeling of anomie and loss of orientation in the generations maturing after the 1989 turnover. The necessity of creating more encompassing communitarian frameworks of identification was formulated from different ideological positions, and the need for a narrative of the national past sustaining these frameworks became increasingly articulated in the public debates. The conscious promotion of some specific historical memories underpinning civic education and the search for a new, positively formulated notion of patriotism has come to the fore in East Central European societies during the first years of the 2000s.

The most eloquent example of this development in the region is

-%E2%80%9Ekulturharc%E2%80%9D; and "A két francia 'kultúrharc,'" *Beszélő* 1991/23, accessed December 11, 2012, beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/a-ket-francia-%E2%80%9Ekulturharc %E2%80%9D. The notion gained currency in the 1990s; see, for example, Gábor F. Havas and Ottilia Solt, "Kulturkampf?," *Beszélő* 1995/7, accessed December 11, 2012, beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/kulturkampf. A more recent example is the article "Kulturkampf," by one of the most virulent radical rightist publicists in Hungary and vocal supporter of the Orbán government, Zsolt Bayer, in *Magyar Hírlap*, December 18, 2012, www.magyarhirlap .hu/kulturkampf.

7. For an overview, see Sorin Antohi's introduction to *Razboaie culturale: idei, intelectuali, spirit public* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2007); and Gabriel Andreescu, "20 de ani de războaie culturale: Victoria junk-conservatorismului," in *Idolii forului: De ce o clasă de mjloc a spiritului e de preferat "elitei" intelectualilor publici?*, ed. Sorin Adam Matei and Mona Momescu (Bucharest: Corint, 2010), 67–80.

8. See Brane Senegačnik, ed., *Kulturni boj na Slovenskem: včeraj, danes, jutri* (Ljubljana: Družina, 2006).

no doubt furnished by Poland, where the harsh criticism of the transition of the 1990s was mounted well before 2000. Already in the late 1990s, this critical stream was linked to a search for a new ideological framework that would make it possible to go beyond liberal transition ideology. Arguably the most coherent Polish formulation of this agenda was provided by Marek Cichocki, a political philosopher who, in the first decade of the century, became a key figure in the neoconservative political and intellectual circles in Poland. Having written his dissertation on conservative political ideologies, Cichocki, in his programmatic book *Continuity and Change: Could Conservatism Be Not Revolutionary?* (1999), sought to link his ideological position to a broader intellectual tradition encompassing Edmund Burke, Jacob Burckhardt, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Carl Schmitt.[9] His central agenda was to reformulate conservatism not as a backward-looking traditionalism but as an activist force of social transformation. In his view, the postcommunist societies, characterized by profound discontinuities, could hardly sustain a conservative political project based on defending the existing state of affairs. What was needed was a radical turn, a sort of "conservative revolution," in his words, which could actively contribute to the reshaping of the society. In this respect, Cichocki offered a specific reading of the history of conservatism. On the one hand, he distanced himself from the purely reactive trend characteristic of the post–French Revolution context; on the other hand, he also pointed to the dangers of the voluntarism of revolutionary conservatism relying on nonconservative means, such as mass politics and mass mobilization, to achieve its aims.

While in his book Cichocki was still rather critical of memory politics, half a decade later, in the context of the emergence of a radical neoconservative political project around the Kaczyński brothers (Jarosław and Lech), he became much more focused on the relationship of memory politics to the cohesion of political community and political legitimacy. His point of departure in his other seminal book, *Power and Memory*, was the claim that politics was not only about administration and redistribution but the identity and memory of the community as well.[10] Consequently, memory became a key factor in political debates, and he declared forthrightly that "if you rule the memory, you dominate the change." Like other thinkers of similar leanings, he linked the dysfunctions of the postsocialist political sys-

9. Marek A. Cichocki, *Ciągłość i zmiana: Czy konserwatyzm może nie być rewolucyjny?* (Warsaw: Więzi, 1999).

10. Marek A. Cichocki, *Władza i pamięć* (Cracow: Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej, 2006).

tem to the failure to come to terms with the communist past in Poland. This involved mostly the "traditional" lustration topoi of unmasking former secret agents, their networks, and continuities, and excluding the collaborators of the communist regime from political life (he described the German process after reunification as exemplary in this respect). In his understanding, Polish society witnessed the "oligarchization of memory," which served the postcommunist elites seeking to cement their socioeconomic domination. All this boiled down to a counterposition to the original aims of the transition, as they were professed originally by the democratic, anticommunist opposition, and the actual outcome, which brought mainly corruption and dissolution of the anticommunist camp by the "deviation" of liberals, who made peace with the postcommunist political forces.

The rejection of "transition liberalism" on the basis of cultural, political, and socioeconomic arguments and the search for a new ideological framework putting the whole transition period into brackets became a central theme of public discourse in Hungary, as well. This development can be followed in the shifting political discourse of intellectuals linked to FIDESZ, a party that in 1989–93 combined radical anticommunism with a liberal democratic vision of politics. By 1998, when Viktor Orbán became the prime minister of a right-wing coalition government, the liberal democratic element was minimized, and the ideologues close to the leadership started to experiment with a right-wing republican discourse. They used the notion of "citizen" as the central normative concept, which was meant to denote a communitarian attitude aiming for the common good but, at the same time, being entrepreneurial, and not relying on the welfare system of the state but seeking to realize him- or herself within the new framework based on private property. While "citizen" obviously functioned as a counterconcept to the "subject" of the communist regime and thus entailed a rejection of the recent past, it had limited historical referentiality (there was not much discourse about where in the past such citizens could be found in Hungary, and thus it was all rather future oriented). As this framework turned out to be unable to provide mass support for the government, Orbán and the intellectual circle around him opted for a more history-centered strategy of legitimization. This was indicated by the pompous celebrations in 2000 commemorating the millennium of Hungarian statehood. It also meant a powerful turn back to archaic symbols, preeminently the Holy Crown, which, from a venerated but antiquated object, was upgraded to serve as the official symbol of national unity and state continuity.

This discourse was radicalized even further after 2002, when FIDESZ

unexpectedly lost the elections. Challenging the legitimacy of the socialist-liberal coalition government with an ethno-nationalist rhetoric (claiming that "the nation cannot be in opposition," which implied that the actual left-liberal government was a historical anomaly), the right-wing political and cultural elite sought to regain power by a wide-ranging social mobilization. Concepts such as the national conservative parallel polis, based on local voluntary associations, the so-called civic circles—*polgári körök*—appeared, which entailed among other things the creation of a parallel cultural infrastructure (ranging from ideologically committed media to an alternative art academy) to reconquer the public sphere. The underpinning political discourse was a combination of fervent anticommunism, antiliberalism, cultural tradition-alism, statism, and an increasing ethno-nationalism targeting Hungari-ans living outside of Hungary, especially in Transylvania, as constitutive members of the Hungarian political community. In some ways, they were described as more authentically Hungarian—as they have been on guard protecting their identity from the dangers of assimilation for decades—than the "unconscious" Hungarians in the mother country.

The most complex ideological underpinning of this discourse came from the political philosopher András Lánczi, an admirer of Leo Strauss and a key figure of the think tanks around FIDESZ in the early 2000s, who sought to link the Hungarian neoconservative turn to global debates. Lánczi's "conservative manifesto" had many features in common with Polish neoconservative ideas.[11] He stressed the lack of normative social and ideological continuity upon which conservatism could be grafted and argued that this required the radicalization of conservatism, in contrast to the structurally antiradical postcommunists. He also pointed out that, in the given context, the most important common element of the conservatives in Hungary was anticommunism, but he considered that this was not enough as an ideological basis. He suggested that the key to regeneration was the restoration of political authority, stressing that in contrast to the depoliticiz-ing drive of the liberals the conservatives were actually aware of the fact that human community can be held together only by political authority.

The basis of authority in Lánczi's vision, inspired by Strauss and

11. András Lánczi, "Konzervatív kiáltvány," *Élet és Irodalom* 46 (November 15, 2002): 9–10. It has to be mentioned that Lánczi's formulation was much more sophisticated than the mainstream political propaganda around FIDESZ during the 2000s, which fused ethno-nationalism with a strong leader cult rather than any Straussian speculation about natural law. It is also not by chance that the "Manifesto" was actually published on the pages of the leading liberal cultural journal.

Russell Kirk, was natural law—and in this context, he criticized the legal order of the transition, which, in his opinion, was based only on the principles of legal positivism, disregarding higher-level norms. Importantly, he stressed that the compromise-based nature of the transition fostered moral relativism. All this could be overcome only by a new constitution that restored absolute norms and thus created space for true political authority. While Lánczi's reflections, to a certain extent, deviated from the mainstream political mobilization on the right, as he did not argue in favor of the fusion of anticommunism with ethno-nationalist identity politics, the motifs of the restoration of authority and the appeal to higher-level normative principles that ultimately move politics resonated with the mobilizing ideology promoted by Orbán and his entourage. Talking about higher principles of politics, Lánczi conspicuously avoided references to political theology, which became increasingly present in Orbán's rhetoric. One might surmise behind the difference a Straussian stance—the difference between the philosophical mode of speech and the mobilization of the masses that is unavoidably saturated by references to religion.

After almost a decade of political mobilization and increasingly violent mass politics following 2006, the 2010 elections brought an absolute majority to Orbán's FIDESZ. In the legitimizing discourse of the Right, it became described as the "polling booth revolution," supposedly ending two decades of corruption and disorientation, and opening up the possibility of building a completely new political-social order, which received the somewhat Orwellian name of "System of National Cooperation."

The Hungarian context is particularly interesting, as it also entailed the internationalization of the local conflict. As the controversial measures of the Orbán government, such as the media law or the introduction of a new basic law with a heavily ideological preamble, were widely criticized by European political actors and institutions, its propagandists, such as George Schöpflin, the former professor at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London and currently a member of the European Parliament for FIDESZ, sought to "explain" to the Western public the underlying agenda of the government. They put the emphasis on Orbán's anticommunism, linked to his carefully cultivated image of a radical revolutionary of 1989, and described his measures in terms of emancipating the country from the political and economic dominance of (post)communists.

The "cultural turn" of the ideological legitimization of the regime abroad coincided with the appearance of Orbán in the European Parliament facing the disapproval of socialist and Green members, with the most

fiery criticism being formulated by Daniel Cohn-Bendit. In response, Orbán started to talk about a fundamental cleavage between him and his critics, claiming to represent the "forgotten Europe" of Christianity, family, and national pride, which was undermined by the Western 68ers as much as by Eastern communists.[12] This discourse was evidently linked to the arguments developed in the pamphlet by one of the chief ideologues of the regime and director of the House of Terror, Mária Schmidt, characteristically entitled "Despoiled and Betrayed—Germany in the Clutch of the Sixty-Eighters."[13] Schmidt mounted a historical argumentation to support the thesis that although the German Left was nationally destructive both in the phase of the *Ostpolitik* of Brandt, which in her understanding only meant tacit support for the communist regimes, and also at the time of the reunification, when they were calling for a more gradual incorporation of the former GDR, the cultural hegemony they achieved in 1968 made the articulation of a more self-confident rightist ideological position impossible.

On the "home front," the binary opposition of a "cosmopolitan" Left composed of former dissidents and postcommunists, allegedly representing the past, and a "national" and future-oriented Right, has become a central element of the official ideology of the "System of National Cooperation." It also has provided a discursive self-legitimization for the extreme Right, concentrated in the parliamentary party Jobbik, which received almost 17 percent of the vote in 2010. This has made it possible for Jobbik to assume a complex political position—criticizing the government not for its program but for not pursuing "consequently enough" the implications of its ideological commitments, and thus providing a possible hinterland for ideological mobilization in certain conflict situations. Contrary to the international self-legitimization of the Orbán government, which claims that the victory of FIDESZ saved the country from the rule of the extreme Right, in reality there is a strong ideological entanglement between the two political forces, even though Jobbik is evidently provocative exactly in the spheres (such as

12. Orbán's discourse resonated with some of the conservative intellectual circles in Germany, as it is clear from the obvious support lent to him by his interlocutors in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. See Thomas Gutschker, Friederike Haupt, Georg Paul Hefty, and Volker Zastrow, "'Es gibt ein verborgenes Europa,' Viktor Orbán im Gespräch," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 4, 2012, www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/europaeische-union /viktor-orban-im-gespraech-es-gibt-ein-verborgenes-europa-11671291.html.

13. Mária Schmidt, "Kifosztva és elárulva—Németország a hatvannyolcasok szorításában," *Komment.hu*, accessed October 8, 2013, www.komment.hu/tartalom/20120207 -velemeny-schmidt-maria-nemetorszag-a-hatvannyolcasok-szoritasaban.html.

anti-Semitism) where the government is under the most obvious external pressure to comply with "European norms," at least rhetorically.

The Romanian Kulturkampf erupting in the second half of the 2000s displayed a number of features in common with the Hungarian and Polish cases, but both the ideological configuration and the political implications were different to an extent. The year 1996, when the anticommunist camp came to power, also marked the beginning of the disintegration of a "liberal consensus" that brought together various political subcultures, ranging from anticommunist conservatives, agrarians, royalists, Christian democrats, technocratic liberals, representatives of ethnic minorities, and even leftist anticommunists. While the coalition of these forces quickly disintegrated, giving the postcommunists a chance to return to power, a new anticommunist neoconservative position emerged around the presidential power center of Traian Băsescu, elected in 2004. Băsescu originally represented the center-left Democratic Party, and his political offer was based on a pragmatic anticorruption discourse, targeting mainly the postcommunist elites as the principal hub of corruption but also criticizing the abstract ideological politics of the first wave of anticommunist "liberals." However, the political dynamics of the country—with the postcommunists as the main opposition force—prompted him to opt for a more emphatically anticommunist and right-wing ideological position. At this crossroads, the politics of Băsescu met a number of important public intellectuals—themselves key figures of 1990s intellectual life—who felt equally disappointed by the first decade after the revolution, which was marked by the continuing socioeconomic power of postcommunist networks and the ideological weakness and incoherence of their opponents.

Most of these intellectuals started as radical liberals, such as Horia-Roman Patapievici, who claimed to be a follower of Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises in the early 1990s. However, the craving for a new authority that would finally implement the changes which the democratic mechanism, distorted by the postcommunist networks, could not carry out became more and more appealing to them and prompted a neoconservative turn. Neoconservatism fit well with the cultural elitism of these intellectuals, who were extremely critical of the breakthrough of mass popular culture after 1989. Often they would subscribe to some version of the thesis of "two Romanias": where one was built on a cultural-political capital going back to the interwar period, while the other was completely disoriented and uprooted by the failed communist modernization.

In addition, the emerging neoconservative position also drew on inter-

national ideological developments adopting a position counter to the post-modern politics and especially the multiculturalism that seemed to dominate Western European and American liberal and left-wing political visions and practices. While in Romania this had limited impact on the political culture, it still had a certain intellectual prestige in intellectual circles that sought to offer an alternative both to the postcommunist Left and the anti-communist Right. Significantly, the launching of the journal *Observator cultural* in 2000, with its programmatic adherence to political correctness as a way to create a new political culture in Romania, was widely debated and is often considered as the starting point of a new Kulturkampf in Romania. It is not by chance that Patapievici's main attack was exactly against political correctness, which he considered a debilitating conformism, making it impossible to address certain issues. In turn, the authors linked to *Observator cultural* launched an attack against Patapievici's 2001 book *Omul recent*,[14] which was meant to serve as a philosophical underpinning for his skepticism toward not only postmodern politics but political modernity as such. Going beyond the philosophical sphere, the ensuing cultural-political battles of the 2000s were fought around the role of intellectuals supporting the president and seeking to shape his policies by creating a new right-wing ideological offer. The interwar ideological references played a crucial role here. The growing emphasis on ethnicity, orthodoxy, and patriotism notwithstanding, this ideological camp did not opt for a radical nationalist and anti-Western position comparable to the Hungarian and Polish cases. Partly it was due to the fact that these ideological references were, to a great extent, a part of the postcommunist ideological pole, inheriting the "national communist" legacy of the 1970s–80s. Similarly their criticism of the transition was much less radical than that of their Hungarian or Polish counterparts, as they and, after all, the president himself were part of the new political class converting certain pre-1989 social and cultural positions into new political capital.

　　The critical voices were thus less concerned with the radical nationalism of the neoconservative elite than their conflation of the cultural and political spheres to retain their dominant position and their obfuscation of their links to the communist past with the help of an intransigent anti-communism. The main debate revolved around the legacy of the "Păltiniş school" of Constantin Noica, which was constructed by its adherents, such

14. Horia-Roman Patapievici, *Omul recent—o critică a modernității din perspectiva întrebării "Ce se pierde cînd ceva se cîştigă?"* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2001).

as Gabriel Liiceanu and Andrei Pleşu, as a liberating experience, making it possible to return to the European classical tradition and thus break the spell of communist cultural hegemony. In contrast, the critiques of this group described them as elitist and profoundly antidemocratic, as heirs to the ambiguities of their master, whose support of right-wing antimodernism in the interwar period and of the national-communist antimodernism of the Ceauşescu regime had a common denominator, namely anti-Westernism.[15] In this context, Sorin Adam Matei, one of their most important critics, introduced the notion of "paramodernity" as an interpretative frame to explain the elitist and exclusivist behavior of "prestige groups" seeking to preserve their power by supporting a quasi-aristocratic cultural system.

In contrast to the cases mentioned above, in most of the other countries in the region the Kulturkampf did not become a central factor in the legitimization of the regimes, but its key elements, such as the new politics of memory, the concern with the completion of the "unfinished revolutions" (James Mark), the revived stress on national sovereignty and the critical stance toward the transition elites, culminating in the political rhetoric of a new type of authority, were common to most of the postcommunist societies. We can see elements of this in the political discourse around the Bulgarian prime minister, Boyko Borisov, and the Slovenian prime minister, Janez Janša, who both came (or came back, in the case of the latter) to power with an anticommunist rhetoric, promising to fight the economic-political corruption networks rooted in late communist elites. Nevertheless, in these cases, the political discourse did not escalate into a new national authoritarianism, and the cultural conflicts of the intelligentsia do not completely overlap with the political dividing lines. This might also explain the sudden and unexpected fall of both governments in the early months of 2013.

Another telling case is that of the entourage of the former Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko, the key figure of the "Orange Revolution." In the last phase of his presidential term, facing increasing disaffection with his policies, he started an ideological campaign to legitimize his position through a conflictual historical politics. Going beyond general anticommunist references, he opted for the full rehabilitation of wartime Ukrainian nationalists, many of whom collaborated at some point with the occupying Germans. While this move was ardently supported in some segments of

15. Sorin Adam Matei, *Boierii minţii—Intelectualii români între grupurile de prestigiu şi piaţa liberă a ideilor* (Bucharest: Compania, 2004); see also Matei and Momescu, eds., *Idolii forului*.

the Western Ukrainian intelligentsia, it was radically rejected by the Center and the East of the country, where anti-Nazi resistance and antifascism have been important constitutive elements of collective identity.

A similar process also took place in post-Milošević Serbia, where the political forces claiming an anticommunist pedigree opted for the rehabilitation of the Chetniks as patriotic fighters both against the German occupier and the communists. All this came at a time when the anti-Milošević camp lost its common enemy and started to lose confidence in a problem-free path to European integration. However, as in the Ukrainian case, this discourse did not manage to overwrite completely the earlier historical narratives and thus failed to serve as a fully fledged legitimizing framework for the new regime. While the Serbian political elite, including the more moderate wing of the ethno-populist Radicals that emerged as the biggest party in 2012, remains committed to the idea of European integration, and this obviously imposes an element of ideological self-control, it remains to be seen whether the new political configuration will give birth to an identity discourse fusing the new reading of the Second World War with an autochthonist cultural narrative and the rejection of the entire democratic transition process as the conspiracy of the elites.

In all these cases, the ideology of the Kulturkampf, as formulated by the right-wing challengers, targets the alleged hegemony of the Left, although the actual conflicts had a markedly different logic. In some cases, such as Romania and Bulgaria, we can speak of the parallel existence of institutions, which have competed for symbolic and actual power; in others, the adherents of the Kulturkampf ideology on the right have targeted not so much the institutions of left-wing political parties as the institutions of the state themselves, accusing them of being the subservient tools of postcommunist dominance. As a matter of fact, it is Romania where one can find the most obvious case of the Left striking back, that is, the identification with the logic of Kulturkampf by a postcommunist political force: as the economic crisis after 2008 gradually eroded the popularity of Băsescu, it created the possibility of the return to power of his opposition, led by a new cohort of politicians who emerged during the last decade from within the postcommunist political milieu. Returning to power after a confidence vote against the right-wing government in the spring of 2012, this old-new political elite started retaliating against the supporters of the anticommunist ideological position in the cultural sphere, sacking Patapievici from the leadership of the Romanian Cultural Institute, as well as dismissing Vladimir Tismăneanu from the leadership of the Institute for the Investigation of

Communist Crimes in Romania, and disbanding the research team that produced the presidential report condemning communism in 2006.

The intensity of the clashes has also varied considerably from country to country. In the Polish and Hungarian cases, it is clear that the postcommunist cultural-ideological position was not at all shared by the majority of those whom the emerging rightist project considered as enemies. As a matter of fact, appealing to postcommunist "infection" was exactly the right way to delegitimize positions supporting secularism and the tolerance for the plurality of worldviews, individualism, and the social integration of marginal groups (such as ethnic and sexual minorities), which were linked to the value framework of the European Union rather than to any kind of communist heritage. The reactions were similarly variegated—for instance, in the Polish case, the Cracow-based conservative Center of Political Thought (Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej, founded back in 1992), and the partly overlapping neoconservative subculture around the yearbook *Teologia Polityczna* (published from 2003), inspired by Eric Voegelin, as well as the interwar Polish Catholic political and philosophical traditions, are mirrored by a similarly active network of the "new left" around the periodical *Krytyka Polityczna* (founded in 2002). Both the conservative and the leftist networks run clubs in different towns of the country, organize public events, issue publications and book series, seeking to redefine and cultivate their respective ideological canon, and in general they serve as important frameworks of socialization for young intellectuals.

To some extent, one can compare to the neoconservative Polish think tanks the Serbian circle around the journal and editing house *Nova srpska politička misao* (founded in 1997), led by Slobodan Antonić and Đorđe Vukadinović, which sought to create a new ideological vision going beyond the conflict of the pro-Milošević and anti-Milošević positions and fusing some elements of neoconservativism, liberalism, and nationalism. In contrast, the Romanian, Hungarian, and Bulgarian cases seem to be more diffuse, with less intellectually defined political positions, albeit in all these countries, one can find similar neoconservative networks supporting the political elite and also certain subcultures of the "new left" seeking to "turn the tide." Again, an important common feature of the early 2000s is to be found in the powerful similarities of the posttransition neoconservatives and the "new left," who both question the legitimacy of the transition elites, depict neoliberalism as their principal enemy, and seek to offer an alternative to what they perceive as a pervasive moral and socioeconomic crisis caused by the transformation.

The return to religion as a key political element is also common to most of these contexts. While the sociological data about the level of religiosity in the region is highly divergent (Poland, Romania, and Croatia counting among the most religious societies in Europe, with the Czech Republic among the least), it is clear that in all these contexts, there is a common sentiment of the legitimizing and organizing power of religion, and, in some ways, the erupting Kulturkampf is also about the repositioning of the church in society. All this comes from two directions: on the one hand, the more emphatic use of religious references and the more visible state support of church institutions (for instance, returning elementary schools to the church even in localities where there is only one school, thus making it impossible for parents to opt for a secular education); and, on the other hand, the more self-confident political involvement of the church hierarchy, openly agitating for certain political parties, taking central part in state rituals, entering the debates on social questions, such as abortion and gay marriage, and in general seeking to shape the entire public sphere.

Another common factor is the strong mobilization of civil society. As a matter of fact, these developments provide clear proof of the profound ambiguity of the notion of civil society, which, in the context of the East European transitions, has been perceived as a key agent of democratization. To the contrary, what the last decade has shown is the immense power of a profoundly antiliberal civic mobilization that has created an antidemocratic and often ethno-nationalist "parallel polis" based on voluntary participation (a case in point is the phenomenon of "civic circles" in Hungary), parallel channels of communication, rituals, and particular patterns of sociability and solidarity, which keeps their membership in a permanent state of mobilization and ready to be converted into power bases of the government when their charismatic leaders, such as Orbán and the Kaczyński brothers, eventually came (back) to power.

On the whole, the structural and strategic differences notwithstanding, one can identify a number of common traits of the rise of a neoconservative political discourse questioning the entire transition process and seeking to offer a more stable framework of authority and identity. While the central figures of this discourse are skillful practical politicians seeking to fabricate a charismatic type of legitimacy, they are also projections of certain intellectual subcultures that linked their wish to retain or reconquer cultural-institutional hegemony by opting for a symbolic-political discourse of fundamental renewal, providing a new hierarchy and existential security that put an end to the period of liminality characterizing the transition. In

this sense, there is an obvious parallelism between the neoconservative agenda of the Kulturkampf and the ideology and mentality of "conservative revolutionaries" of interwar Europe, who also rejected continuity with the recent past in the name of restoring a more profound but forgotten tradition of premodern social and cultural harmony. Furthermore, as in the case of the interwar conservative revolutionaries in East Central Europe, the neoconservatism of the early 2000s also reflected the loss of orientation toward a Western European model—the atmosphere of the "decline of the West" in the 1920s, as well as the current crisis of European institutions and values, makes the search for autochthonist solutions more plausible and pressing.

As this phenomenon is evidently fed by social-economic crises, particularly the one that hit the European Union in 2008, the outcome of the Eastern European cultural wars breaking out in the early 2000s is an open question. They might prove to be a transitory episode in the best case, or a prelude to the rise of new (semi)authoritarian regimes in the region in the worst. In any case, the structural similarities and genealogical links with the antidemocratic turn of the early 1930s that can be detected in many of these countries are powerful warning signs, a rather uncomfortable "writing on the wall" for the friends of democracy in East Central Europe.