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Paradoxes of (Il)liberal democracy: the role of Christian Democracy

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Studies on the democratic backsliding in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) often focus on local dysfunctions and idiosyncrasies, and they tend to overlook how those authoritarian tendencies are deeply influenced by European integration. I argue that the wave of authoritarianism in CEE is exacerbated by a shared political culture based on Christian Democracy (CD), and instead of divergence between Western and CEE, a form of convergence is happening. I point to CD's role in responding to the 'polanyian' tensions between democracy and liberalism. CD played an important role in shaping the present constitutional and ideational order of the European Union. The 'illiberal' policies enacted by several member countries—especially in the domains of Christian identity politics, traditional gender roles, and Bismarckian welfare—come out of the Christian-Democratic political toolbox and exemplify a paradoxical regime of authoritarian liberalism (or politics without policies) that does not threaten the (neo)liberal foundations of the EU.

Keywords: European Union; European integration; authoritarian liberalism; Christian Democracy; populism; illiberal democracy

In the span of 20 years, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) went from the resonant success of Western liberal democracy and living proof of the end of history, to the failure and warning sign of the autocratic tendencies of 'the East.' Scholars, Western and 'autochthonous' alike, explain the current rise of illiberalism in CEE in several structural or cultural ways, mostly focusing on local idiosyncrasies. Those explanations often presuppose a form of 'civilizational incompetence' (Sztompka 1993), from the structural weakness of civil society, to the corruption of elites and their inability to grasp the principles of markets and competitive electoral procedures, to social and cultural legacies from the communist period that favor authoritarian leadership (Bogaards 2009; Bogaards 2018; Bochsler and Juon 2020; Buzogány 2017; Geva 2021; Enyedi 2020; Hanley and Vachudova 2018; Sata and Karolewski 2020; Sedelmeier 2017; Vachudova 2020; Ágh 2016). Another strand of explanations relates to the rise of right-wing populism that, while generally acknowledging a global dimension and avoiding the trap of methodological nationalism (Delanty 2016), is still interpretatively limited to studies of ideologies as discursive styles and rhetorical strategies, or, focused more on the outcomes rather than the causes of democratic backsliding. Using the populist frame as an empty form of 'doing' politics overlooks the fact that the political developments in CEE have a more systematic nature than any 'thin-centered ideology' (Martín-Cubas et al. 2019; Mudde 2004).

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Instead, more structural accounts have stressed that the European Union (EU) itself contributed to democratic backsliding by creating a 'cycle of authoritarianism' in which EU policies introduce and 'constitutionalize' traits of authoritarian rule in the EU's supranational governance. This depoliticizes them, thereby spurring and reinforcing a rise in right-wing populism (Kreuder-Sonnen and Zangl 2015; Kreuder-Sonnen 2018; Kreuder-Sonnen 2016). Others point out that EU funds help financially sustain these regimes and create an 'authoritarian equilibrium' (Kelemen 2020), or that international organizations that promote democracy unintentionally foster authoritarianism by focusing too much on institutions, rigid parameters, and increasing executive power while also limiting domestic policy options (Meyerrose 2020)—again, a form of depoliticization. Indeed, many authors underline how CEE countries can conceal the tension between the nationalistic tendencies with international neoliberalism (Csillag and Szelényi 2015; Johnson and Barnes 2015; Kim 2020; Scheiring and Szombati 2020) as a strategy to combine the needs of international capital with some sense of identity and local solidarity.

Our contribution follows the footsteps of these structural accounts. While many of the previous authors have pointed at the role of the EU in enabling depoliticization and the rising of authoritarian tendencies, little attention has been given to which political tools have been employed to make these arrangements possible. What has helped this separation of the economy from politics at the EU level, and within member states? Against the populist thesis, I argue that Christian Democracy's (CD) political strategies, already tried and used in Western Europe after the Second World War and deeply embedded in the construction of the EU itself, are the main tool used by CEE governments to deal with the need to reconcile the contradiction between enabling international capital reach and maintaining an image of solidarity and social stability.

Many studies underline the significant role of CD in shaping EU integration (Conway 2020; Forlenza 2017; Forlenza and Turner 2019; Hien 2020; Hien and Wolkenstein 2021; Invernizzi-Accetti 2018; Johansson 2002; Kaiser 2007; Kalyvas and Van Kersbergen 2010; Kalyvas 2018; Lamberts 1997; Müller 2013). Recently, Invernizzi-Accetti underlined how CD influenced 'the institutional framework and background political culture,' and further showed how many EU institutional features are explainable by looking at CD political tools and categories. Christian-Democratic concepts such as subsidiarity, consociationalism, and a social market economy are, according to Invernizzi-Accetti, insightful when describing the type of polity, political regime, and economic regime of the EU (Invernizzi-Accetti 2020).

Despite CD being one of the most successful political families in postwar Europe, academic scholarship about it remains limited both in political science and political sociology. Given that CD is mostly endemic to continental European political culture—with some derivatives in South America—Anglo-Saxon scholarship has scantly investigated it. This has created a blind spot in the literature about European integration. The goal of this paper is to bridge the gap between studies on CD and European integration and the literature about the democratic backsliding in Europe and to explore potential crossovers. The main thesis is that many discursive and policy tools employed by CD in Western Europe after the Second World War have been used with success by CEE governments to restrain democracy. To explain this, I will proceed in three steps.

In part one, I bring the discussion to a higher structural level by highlighting the contradictions intrinsic to liberal democratic governance. I underline that instead of following a supposed natural order, the cohabitation of liberalism and democracy is precarious at best. I then sketch how the contradiction between democracy and liberalism pushed a political program of separating economics from society through its

constitutionalization and depoliticization, which created a Polanyian dynamic of disembeddedness.

In the second part, I show how the contradiction between democracy and liberalism has played out in Europe, focusing specifically on the role of CD and ordoliberalism. I briefly retrace the intellectual history of political Christianity in Europe and the origins of CD. I argue that CD was particularly effective at separating economics from the political domain because its origin is rooted in another age-old conflict between Christianity and popular sovereignty that began after the French Revolution. The historical goal of CD was to mediate between those two domains and to create a 'constrained democracy' by limiting the power of the people to maintain this balance and ensure a harmonious community. CD, like Christianity, also promoted a civilizational mission using the concept of *Abendland* as an attempt to reconstruct the postwar (Western) European space. To address this intrinsic identitarian nature, I will also investigate CD's ideological specificities and the ideal polity that CD wanted to create, focusing on subsidiarity, corporatism, supranationalism, and ordoliberalism.

In the third part, I will focus on how all these ideological idiosyncrasies are reflected in the policies. I argue that many conservative parties in CEE use various political tools that come straight from the classical Christian Democratic toolbox. I provide examples of this from Hungary and Poland, as well as comparisons with Western Europe. These are namely identity politics (leveraging the Christian roots), gender politics (embracing traditional gender roles, subsidiarity), and welfare politics based on corporatism and Bismarckian solidarity within and not between classes (consociationalism and corporatism). In the context of an EU-mandated 'authoritarian liberalism,' a supranational union of 'policies without politics' de facto encourages these national strategies of 'politics without policies' (Schmidt 2006). This phenomenon is particularly strong in the post-socialist context, where the influence of neoliberalism and Europeanization is stronger, however, it can also be observed all over Europe.

I argue that CD has always aimed to build constrained democracy, and this limiting of policy options for redistributive politics at the European level encourages the recrudescence of 'politics without policies' at the national level. While many post-socialist countries are challenging the rhetoric of an 'ever closer union' by waging cultural battles, they are simultaneously not challenging economic integration, austerity-driven European policies, and the entailed process of liberalization. The European Union, trapped in such an equilibrium, severely limits the possibilities of more redistributive social policies. Consequently, national politics in new member states adapt to this situation. In CEE, economic liberalism is accompanied by the resurgence of a reactionary wave, with precursors in Hungary and Poland. While many consider the rise of Hungary's 'Fidesz' or Poland's 'Law and Justice' to be a new populist animal in the European political fauna, I point out the similarities of political strategies already used by their Western counterparts for decades—which often remain blurry under the intensity of the orientalizing discourse focused on the differences and failures of 'the East.'

1. Tensions of the liberal Democratic order

The description of 'illiberal democracy' as an oxymoronic term represents the essentialization of liberal democracy and its conflation with democracy in general (Slobodian 2020; Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018). The relationship between liberalism and democracy, however, is no less paradoxical. Its inherent conflict between democracy and liberalism took different forms in different eras and geographical contexts, but at its core, there is

a Polanyian conflict between the social and economics. For Polanyi, liberalism is a theory of government that works towards the disembedding of the economic sphere from the social and political one (Polanyi 1957).

I understand the tensions between liberalism and democracy as the friction between two different interpretations of what freedom is supposed to be. For Friedrich Hayek, '[l]iberalism and democracy, although compatible, are not the same. The first is concerned with the extent of governmental power, the second with who holds the power' (Hayek 1966). By signifying independence from the state, liberalism is characterized by negative freedom or '*freedom from*', in contrast to democratic theory which, as a reflection on the forms and means of self-governing by a constituency, is mainly concerned with positive freedom or '*freedom to.*' Despite the ties between liberalism and democracy, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the pairing represents a contingency rather than a natural occasion, and its conjunction is relatively recent and fraught.

In US constitutional history, the Lochner vs. New York case showed the inherent tensions between *freedom from* and *freedom to* in public governance. After the state of New York instituted a regulation that capped the working hours for bakery employees to a maximum of ten hours per day in 1895, bakery owner Joseph Lochner was convicted and fined after being found guilty of exceeding those limits. Lochner appealed, arguing that the penalties were unconstitutional because they were against his right to freedom of contract between him and his employees. After several levels of judgment, the Supreme Court ruled in his favor.[1] From this point on until the late 1930s, personal freedoms such as freedom of contract were considered 'foundational laws' that existed in a sort of pre-political space. Freedom was, in other words, seen as a natural rather than a social construct, and any legislative action that jarred with this conception—for example, actions in favor of redistribution or regulation—was 'unprincipled.' As Michael Antinori remarks, 'Lochner-era courts elevated individual rights at the expense of popular sovereignty' (Antinori 1994). During the three decades, the Supreme Court focused on delimiting what Hayek called 'the extent of governmental power,' thereby opening an era of judicial activism where affirmative action policies—such as policies constructed with the intention to redistribute wealth—were ruled as unconstitutional. The Lochner deadlock broke when another ruling by the American Supreme Court established that the protection of negative freedoms guaranteed by the constitution should not infringe on public decisions. In the case of West Coast Hotel v. Parris[2] (1937), a housekeeper sued the hotel she was working for because of the gap between the received pay and the minimum wage set by the public. The hotel tried to defend itself using Lochner, but after deliberation, the Supreme Court ruled again: 'Liberty implies the absence of arbitrary restraint, not immunity from reasonable regulations and prohibitions imposed in the interests of the community.' In other words, while the American constitution allows freedom from the excess of government, it simultaneously guarantees the affirmative power of politics. 'Freedom from' and 'freedom to' have the same legitimacy for the American constitution: one should no longer prevail over the other. In post-Lochner America, politics will decide what to prioritize—nothing exists in a 'pre-political space.'

Cass Sunstein argues that Lochner-like themes are deeply ingrained 'in the very concept of constitutionalism,' and given the restriction of positive governmental measures, the Lochner case imposed 'a constitutional requirement of neutrality that commands preservation of the status quo as reflected in market outcomes.' The function of this imposition was to preserve 'the existing distribution of wealth and entitlements under the baseline of the common law' (Sunstein 1987). The clash between the state's push for

'freedom to' versus the court's acceptance of 'freedom from' in the Lochner era is, in Hayekian terms, a conflict between democracy and liberalism. For Hayek, 'the progressive displacement of the rules of conduct of private and criminal law (i.e. negative freedoms) by a concept derived from public law (positive freedoms) is the process by which existing liberal societies are progressively transformed into totalitarian societies' (Hayek 1966). In other words, free liberal societies should stick to negative freedoms if they wish to stay free because positive freedoms pave the road to serfdom. But to defend freedom, democracy is the main target—Hayek famously confessed to 'preferring non-democratic government under the law to unlimited (and therefore essentially lawless) democratic government' (Hayek 2018). Hayek's distaste for democracy producing potentially arbitrary power is so evident that some contemporary authors do not consider him a liberal (Richard 2020), while others point out that for liberal thinkers this disdain for democracy is more the rule than the exception (Solchany 2016).

Indeed, besides the Hayekian focus on the *rule of law* to constrain democracy, this tension between democracy and liberal governance is also found in other theorizations of liberalism. According to Walter Lippmann, the general public would not be able to achieve a basic knowledge of public affairs, as the world is too complex for any individual to comprehend, thus making democratic deliberation simply impossible or illusory (Regalzi 2012). His solution is threefold: building consent and forging opinions (instead of a social contract), researching common symbols, and, similarly to Hayek, restraining 'the government of the people by a common law'— 'in a liberal democracy the law must seek primarily to regulate human affairs by a system of individual rights and duties rather than by administrative commands from the ruling officialdom' (Lippmann 1937). Again, this constrains political action to protect (negative) freedom (Tourneux 2020). A newer formulation of liberal theory by James M. Buchanan also shares the same tension with democracy. In the *Limits of Liberty* (1975) and *Reasons of Rules* (1985), Buchanan sees danger in democracy, as it might disrupt itself without a constitutional set of rules. In a very 'Lochnerian' fashion, those rules must be found in a pre-political space of unanimity. Those general rules should constitutionalize the primacy of the individual and avoid public waste—the state should act as a regulator instead of trying to be the producer of social welfare, which would inevitably result in a waste of resources. According to Buchanan, both democracy and liberalism are compatible because they take individuality seriously. Buchanan's normative individualism follows the contractarianism tradition, where voluntary contracts are the principal means by which individuals coordinate their activities without public interference (Colin-Jaeger 2020). We saw the limits of this line of thinking in the Lochner enigma: collective action is as much natural and legitimate as individual action. MacLean noticed how Buchanan ideas deeply influenced the Koch brothers' activism, which cemented the base of the American alt-right (MacLean 2017).

With this necessarily brief excursus of contemporary liberal doctrines, I want to point out how the relationship between liberalism and democracy is intrinsically unstable. If anything, the main theorization of liberalism nurtures a clear suspicion of democracy and mass politics, ranging from Hayekian distrust to Lippmann and Buchanan pessimism. This intuition is not new. In chapter 12 of Karl Polanyi's *Great Transformation*, the birth of the liberal creed is seen as a political experiment conducted with 'evangelical fervor' to artificially separate the social from economics, to make the utopia of an auto-regulated market a reality (Polanyi 1957). What these formulations I surveyed have in common is the aim to constrain democracy by separating the economic sphere from the rest of society and following the utopia of a self-regulated market. This can be achieved using

the constitution or other procedures and institutions. The goal is to create a space above the political, to depoliticize it and to create a sort of governance without government. Using this Polanyian frame, I will focus on how this tension between liberalism and democracy played out in Europe, and on the political ideology that operated on this fault line more than any other: Christian Democracy.

2.   Liberalism vs. Democracy in Europe: the case of Christian Democracy & ordoliberalism

Quinn Slobodian's claim that the 'confrontation with mass democracy was also at the heart of the century for neoliberals' (Slobodian 2020), however, is also perfectly applicable to CD. For Christian Democrats, people as a community are held together by natural law (a pre-political arrangement) and the idea of the common good (Invernizzi Accetti 2019). Based on this relationship, the Christian Democratic vision of institutional functioning in a democratic regime needs to limit the power of the people to maintain this balance and ensure a harmonious community—one that conceals class differences. Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* defines natural law as 'the rational creature's participation in eternal law.' One of the main thinkers behind CD, Jacques Maritain, in his treatise *The Rights of Man and Natural Law*, added: 'Natural law, or natural right, is nothing more than […] an order or disposition that human reason can discover, and according to which the human will must act in order to attune itself with the necessary ends of the natural order' (Maritain 2012). Given the existence of a 'natural,' pre-political order, the question was, especially after the French Revolution, how to reconcile this with democracy (Müller 2013). With the massification of Christian Democratic partizanship in Europe following the Second World War, the political realization of this democratic vision manifested—in what Jan-Werner Müller terms 'constrained democracy'—as a wave of 'constitutional ethos' that was 'positively hostile to ideas of unlimited popular sovereignty,' as well as publicly backed with a traditionally moral and political language (Müller 2011; Müller 2013). In this sense, political Christianity and liberalism share the need to constrain democracy. The challenge for CD is how to harmonize Christianity and democracy and how to render democracy 'safe' for Christianity by constraining the demos through institutions. The main harbingers of this political innovation were Western European Christian Democratic parties, whose dominance in West Germany, France, Italy, and the Benelux made them highly important protagonists in creating a specific postwar political and economic order.

Here I suggest the existence of morphological similarity between CD and liberalism: if, according to the Polanyian analysis, liberalism is a belief in the utopic auto-regulating power of the invisible hand, then the goal of CD was to isolate this 'natural law' from the intervention of society. I argue that this theoretical and intrinsic hostility toward democracy has made Christianity and liberalism compatible and complementary. Politically, both have worked to temper democracy, to tame it and present a new vision of democracy much more restrained in limits, goals, and possibilities: a new type of governance based on abstract, pre-political, rules.

What do these abstract rules, or 'natural order' entail for CD? Without going into the full details of the extensive work of Invernizzi Accetti regarding the nature and content of Christian Democratic ideology (Invernizzi Accetti 2019), the main points are based on: the sacredness of human life, focusing on personhood (the individual, his responsibility toward the others); the defense of the family as an essential part of human life; traditional gender roles; the protection of private propriety; and the idea of subsidiarity, that the state

should not interfere to manage things that can be adequately dealt with at lower levels of social organization, such as the family or the community. Moreover, Christianity had a civilizational mission (Invernizzi Accetti 2019). For this study, I focus in particular on the two characteristics—identity and subsidiarity—that are the most relevant for studying the specificities of democratic backsliding.

2.1. *Abendland: Europe as an identity*

The role of identity is central to the CD project in Europe. In the context of the postwar period of reconstruction, Cold War power relations are important for understanding the specificities of the development of the new European Christian Democratic agenda and its highly anti-socialist and anti-nationalist thought and language. Rosario Forlenza well depicts the *longue durée* transformation of the German medieval concept of *Abendland*—as a culturally and spiritually homogenous Western European realm—from its counter-revolutionary political reemergence after the French Revolution to a signifier of the postwar Christian Democratic order. After the catastrophe of the Second World War, Christian Democrats used the narrative of *Abendland* to push the idea of a revived, common European space opposed both to pre-war nationalisms and postwar communisms. The language of supranational Europeanism that invigorated the process of European integration, however, was based on a Catholic German-Franco alliance with strong anti-communist tendencies politically set against pre-fascist liberalism, although less clearly against US capitalism (Forlenza 2017).

The concept of *Abendland* as an attempt to reconstruct the postwar (Western) European space, moreover, was a project of both giving new meaning to post-Nazi Germany and vindicating political Catholicism and its support for violent nationalist and authoritarian regimes from the interwar period (Forlenza 2017). The tendency to move away from authoritarianism—questionable since the Vatican still supported postwar fascist regimes in Spain, Portugal, and Latin America—has never altered the Christian Democratic distaste for mass democracy. The answer to the question of bringing together Christianity and democracy remained in the realm of top-to-bottom restraint through elite and expert-led governments and administration, both on the national and supranational level. After 1945, this transformed from theory into practice on a mass scale that defines Europe today.

A handful of scholars addressed the relationship between CD and contemporary so-called 'illiberal democracy' by arguing that, although certain Christian-Democratic intellectual attitudes and policies can be interpreted as illiberal, the main difference lies in the European, supranational character of CD versus the nationalism of CEE-type illiberal democracy (Müller 2020). In contrast, I reveal the hegemonic and exclusionary character of Christian-Democratic supranationalism and the way that various European discourses on Christian civilization try to fit into it as a currency of Europeanness. Moreover, against the rather unsubstantiated defense that 'Christian Democrats in Western and Northern Europe weakened their ethnic and gender biases to a large degree' (Kovács and Trencsényi 2020), the focus on the classic Christian-Democratic repertoire—identity and subsidiarity—displays a new wave of regressive decommodification with Christian-Democratic characteristics which continue to be pivotal throughout the European Union from the postwar period until today.

2.2. *Ordoliberalism, subsidiarity and social market economy*

Another strain of postwar restructuring and refashioning for Christian Democrats happened in the sphere of their economic programs. The intellectual origins of ordoliberalism

are from the Weimar period in Germany (Goldschmidt and Wohlgemuth 2008). It developed under Nazism and was later implemented under the name 'social market economy' (*soziale Marktwirtschaft*) in the postwar era, conceived under Konrad Adenauer's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) in 1949.

(1) In an article titled 'The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations' (1929), Carl Schmitt argues that Europeans have several times throughout the centuries attempted to neutralize political conflicts by taking them far from the domain of politics and trying to manage political issues through other means. The aspiration of neutralization and depoliticization was to find a shared ground on which to coordinate society while avoiding the costs, conflicts, and dangers of politics. Schmitt refers to the process of reaching a 'neutral domain in which there would be no conflict' as 'normativism,' or politics by normalizing. In other words, this turns politics into a system of norms based on the idea of natural rights (Scheuerman 1996). Schmitt traces the quest for neutral power from the seventeenth century onward. He concludes that 'Europeans always have wandered from a conflictual to a neutral domain, and always the newly won neutral domain has become immediately another arena of struggle' (Schmitt 1993). He points to the hypocrisy of the liberal order by showing that to have rules you already need a political order that enforces them. For this reason, the supposed neutrality of the constitutional order is always fictitious— there cannot be non-conflictual neutrality, and the norm simply conceals power.

Schmitt's intention was neither to improve the democratic process nor to create a state of permanent revolution without any constitutional arrangement. Rather, particularly worried by the perceived lack of political efficacy in the Weimar era and by pluralism as the cause of mass discontent and revolt, Schmitt's proposed alternative was the concept of the 'strong state'. In front of an audience of industrialists in November 1932, he specified that the strong state was not a 'quantitative total state' that tries to order the economy in an authoritarian and partisan way, but a 'qualitative total state' that claims to be just and non-partisan by drawing 'a sharp line of separation vis-à-vis the economy, although ruling, on the other hand, with the strongest military means and the means of mass manipulation (Radio, Cinema)' (Heller 2015). Puzzled by this confusing distinction that Schmitt defended 'with a straight face,' German legal scholar Herman Heller, in a very polemical article from 1933, refers to Schmitt's ideas as 'authoritarian liberalism,' which describe a state that lacks democratic rule and the possibility of social policy, but protects and encourages the economic sphere. In Heller's view, Schmitt's 'authoritarian liberalism' was hollowing democracy from the inside out by creating an unholy alliance between free-market liberalism and political authoritarianism (Heller 2015). In the past decade, Heller's concept has been mobilized multiple times to understand the paradoxical nature of the contemporary state (Poulantzas 2013). Ian Bruff updated the concept by writing about 'authoritarian neoliberalism,' in which dominant social groups maintain their hegemony through constitutionally and legally engineered self-disempowerment of nominally democratic institutions, governments, and parliaments (Bruff 2014). Additionally, various authors pointed out the intellectual closeness of Schmitt's ideas to the Hayekian liberal project (Cristi 1984; Irving 2018; Scheuerman 1997).

(2) The Nazi period: ordoliberalism was born contemporarily at these discussions on the role of the state in the relationship between economics and politics and focused on the same themes. The main proponents were German economic and legal scholars with deep roots in Christianity, gathered around the Freiburg School, and later in connection with the academic journal *ORDO*. These include Walter Eucken, Franz Böhm, Ludwig Erhard, Alfred Müller-Armack, Wilhelm Röpke, and many others. There is a lively debate

among scholars working on the history and politics of ordoliberalism about the continuity between Schmittian and Nazi legal theories and ordoliberalism, as well as between pre-war and postwar dynamics of ordoliberalist thought and practice. Werner Bonefeld retraces to Schmitt the influence on ordoliberal thinkers (Bonefeld 2017), saying that both argued for 'a healthy economy in a strong state' (Schmitt 1932). Ralf Ptak shows how there is 'a considerable overlap of ordoliberal and Nazi critiques of parliamentarian democracy, trade unions, and the Communist Party in particular' (119). He points out that many proponents of ordoliberalism worked in close connection with the Nazi regime during their academic careers, as 'papers published in Freiburg between the mid-1930s and the beginning of the 1940s unquestionably reveal that ordoliberal concepts were designed to be implemented under the auspices of the Nazi government' (117) (Ptak 2009).

(3) In the post-war period, ordoliberal ideas found their way into Christian Democratic programs. After the war, the CDU's idea of *social market economy* assumed that a state-introduced framework needs to exist to ensure the functioning of a competitive market economy and to bring while providing some social protection to those disadvantaged by it. In this sense, the creation of an economic framework at the constitutional level was also perceived as a solution to social injustice, which essentially played out as a sort of Bismarckian, conservative welfare state, and was more than strategically necessary in the postwar context of strengthened organized labor and socialism (Goldschmidt and Wohlgemuth 2008; Matković 2020; Slobodian 2020). Subsidiarity is the core idea behind the Christian Democratic welfare state, where theological justification of subsidiarity has 'often sought to protect private and religious issues, or the 'natural' groups of family, church and guild' (Follesdal 1998), and ''subsidiarity' is understood as the responsibility of all individuals to take care of themselves' (EPP 2009). It is important to clarify what is 'social' about the social market economy, and Erhard, ordoliberal and Minister of Economic Affairs under Adenauer from 1949 to 1963, in conversation with Hayek clarifies: 'I hope you don't misunderstand me when I speak of a social market economy (Soziale Marktwirtschaft). I mean by that that the market economy as such is social, not that it needs to be made social' (Ptak 2009). Social market economy is often presented, especially by its proponents, as a third way between socialism and liberalism, in fact, it was extremely close to other neoliberal theories, just with more emphasis on the conservative protections of families and waged labor.

The CDU was not alone in its economic endeavors, and other Christian Democratic parties' debates from the late 1940s between more progressive and conservative economic visions were resolved similarly in favor of the latter—the French MRP replaced *dirigisme* with 'mixed economy,' and the Italian CD decided on market regulation (Invernizzi Accetti 2019) that maintained a familistic welfare structure inherited by fascism and never quite reformed (Quine 2002). In this period, European Christian Democratic parties transformed into mass national parties and, as Wolfram Kaiser argues, formed a strong transnational party network that became hegemonic in Western Europe. This dictated the formation of pre-EU institutions such as ECSC and EEC (Kaiser 2007). After becoming a member of the negotiating committee following the Spaak Report, Müller-Armack, an ordoliberal sociologist who worked as an advisor for Erhard in the German Ministry for Economic Affairs, helped draft and sign the founding document of the EEC, the Treaty of Rome (Slobodian 2020). Müller-Armack's interest in state and economic order went back to the interwar period and his work for the Nazi regime, during his time as a member of NSDAP, which lasted up until 1945. In the same years that Schmitt wrote about the strong state, Müller-Armack published his *The Idea of the State and*

Economic Order in the Third Reich (1933), and while teaching at the University of Münster, he became acquainted with ordoliberal thinkers who circled around the University of Freiburg. After the war, Müller-Armack and Erhard joined the CDU as well as the Mont Pèlerin Society (Matković 2020). There, the idea that a compromise between neoliberals and Christian Democrats took place at the birth of the European Union, as argued by Slobodian, is not completely accurate (Slobodian 2020): in terms of people, institutions, and ideas, both sides were already intertwined during the interwar period and, after 1945, emerged as the most influential determinants of European political culture to this day.

From the 1960s onward, the political success and economic programs of Christian Democratic parties went through certain transformations, not just on national levels but also within their main—and generally the largest—EU parliamentary group: the European People's Party. In the dialectical process of Europeanization, the EPP expanded its Christian Democratic core to include other conservative center-right parties (Hanley 2002). Nevertheless, as Invernizzi Accetti insightfully argues, the deterioration of Christian Democratic partizanship was in fact paralleled by a process in which its core ideas and principles became constitutive elements of the 'political infrastructure and cultural mainstream' of Europe (Invernizzi Accetti 2019). In other words, the institutional framework of the European Union served as a means of transfer, and even universalization, of Christian Democratic political and intellectual tendencies that affected even those political parties and policies that are not explicitly labeled as Christian-Democratic. The question now is: how have identity and subsidiarity been used in the wider frame of the EU constitutional order?

3.   The Christian Democratic policy toolbox

In a famous and prescient text called 'The Economic Conditions of Interstate Federalism' (Hayek 1939), Hayek argues that the best way to implement a system of negative freedoms is federalism. A federation of states limits the possibility for single countries to establish arbitrary policies while simultaneously limiting the state's role as a pure enforcer of the rule of law. Hayek points out, for example, that a common currency at the federal level necessarily limits the leeway of national central banks. The same goes for policies and market regulations, which 'cease to be at the disposal of state governments.' For Hayek, federalism becomes an opportunity to create governance—but without any possibility of government. This lack of a constitutional body with a shared identity hinders the development of any central institution that could overcome the federal limitation of state powers. Hayek remarks that, without national solidarity, '[I]t is difficult to visualize how, in a federation, agreement could be reached on the use of tariffs for the protection of particular industries.' Consequently, this makes the construction of affirmative policies all but impossible.

According to Fritz Scharp, the European project created a 'constitutional asymmetry' between policies that promote markets and policies that promote social protection and the correction of market failures (Scharpf 2002). While the former is enacted by 'non-political' institutions like the European Central Bank or European Court of Justice, for the latter, there is no superior body to account for and manage those institutions. The European Union is an example of governance without a government—a case of Hayek's legacy. Wolfgang Streeck argues that the EU's member states are in a supranational institution, which is 'insulated from electoral pressure' and built to avoid any form and possibility of discretionary politics. Streeck's most important example comes from monetary

policy, in which 'the removal of devaluation ensures that investors, in particular financial investors, need no longer fear that struggling governments will use sudden exchange-rate adjustments as a weapon of self-defense.' The European Union, therefore, closely embodies the Hayekian idea of a liberal federation of states (Streeck 2014) lacking a constituent body that could come in the way of limiting individual state powers, with an intergovernmental scheme that disables the legitimation from national assemblies. National politics is relegated to 'politics without policies,' which preserves the liberal status quo. Both features are in favor of supranational operations at the federal level, which strongly prioritize single-market policies and potentiate the implementation of a Hayekian system of negative freedoms. 'Politics without policies' should be understood, in a Polanyian sense, as a regressive reaction to the straitjacket of 'authoritarian liberalism' created by the European constitutional order of 'policies without politics.'

Instead of representing a new political trend, the so-called illiberal backlash of CEE countries shares many similarities with CD strategies used by many Christian Democratic Parties across postwar Europe. The 2009 declaration from the Bonn Congress of the EPP, the European group of all CD parties, said that 'the state must not be omnipresent but should act as a rule-maker and referee, establishing and enforcing the 'universal rules of just conduct', as the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, the Scottish philosopher David Hume and—in our days—the Austrian economist and Nobel laureate Friedrich A. von Hayek and the French economist Claude-Frédéric Bastiat put it' (EPP 2009). While Hungary and Poland rhetorically try to break with neoliberalism, they are in fact dependent on it (Bohle and Greskovits 2019)—when it comes to following EU's economic parameters oriented toward austerity, lowering the deficit, and a very parsimonious social spending, they could be considered best in class. I go further, suggesting that the same framework can be used to understand policies used both in Western and CEE. Post-socialist Europe is as Christian-Democratic as the West, even more so. I will focus on the three areas where CD ideas had the most impact. The first one is identity: Christianity today, like before, is used to create a sense of belonging in a society fractured by different instances. The appeals to Christianity should be seen as heritage and identitarian statements, not as a reversing of secular trends. The second point relates instead to subsidiarity and is about gender: family and traditional gender roles have always been used, in Christian Democratic regimes, as a cheaper alternative to welfare—these dynamics are now current in CEE. Finally, the broad welfare system and labor politics show a neo-Bismarckian direction with a tendency to socialize risk within and not between classes—an application of corporatism and subsidiarity.

3.1.   *Identity & race politics*

European integration was driven by Christian Democratic parties and their belief in Europeanism as a form of supranationalism and even universalism. This was backed by the concept of *Abendland,* and the religious culture shared by most of its 'founding fathers' who, like Konrad Adenauer, Alcide de Gasperi, and Robert Schuman, were devout Catholics and received support from the Vatican (Loughlin 2015). Nevertheless, there has been little research on the contemporary relationship between Christianity and the EU (Chaplin and Wilton 2015). Instead, the question of Christian identity emerges only in critical junctures, such as in debates on the reference to the Christian roots of Europe in the EU's Constitution (2002-3), or on the accession of Turkey to the European Union (Menendez 2005; Minkenberg 2012). Weiler argues that Christianity is a pillar of European identity that cannot be eradicated, just like crosses and churches cannot be eradicated from our

cities since they are what make the European civilization 'European' (Weiler 2003). During the debate on the European constitution, he argued that constitutions of many EU countries indeed refer to God and that Christian values are more broadly at the origin of liberalism and pluralism (Cvijic and Zucca 2004).

Although the heated debate around the position of Christianity in the European constitution brought the project to an end, a rewritten version, which later became the Lisbon Treaty (2007), still recognizes the importance of religion as a part of the European heritage (Milton 2015). This blanket reference to religion, however, is drowned out by the dominant pleas specific to Christian identity, which have always been employed by European politicians in the search for legitimacy through both consensus and exclusion. The case of the German CDU's debate on the idea of *Leitkultur*—a counter-model to multiculturalism that should protect the jeopardized 'German cultural identity' from immigration (Pautz 2005)—exemplifies the tendency to culturalize politics and relate it to a broader and ill-defined set of ideas based on 'identity.' The *Leitkultur* debate symbolically reached its peak when the German chancellor Angela Merkel announced the death of multiculturalism (Manz 2004). By commenting that guest workers brought in the early 1960s stayed in Germany even though everyone else hoped they would 'disappear again,' Merkel announced that the multicultural approach to 'live side by side and (…) happy with each other' has 'utterly failed' (BBC News, 2010). Portrayed as a cultural issue, Merkel's racist statement glosses over the importance of guest workers for Germany in its bilateral agreements with Turkey, and that, if anything, the case of the *Gastarbeiter* is not a failure of multiculturalism but instead of policies designed to import cheap labor from abroad to fill in the growing shortage of able-bodied male workers, which creates a de-facto ghettoized minority at the bottom of the income scale. The language used by Merkel and CDU in 2010, therefore, masked the systemic economic and social problem of Germany's migrant labor exploitation by presenting it as a problem of culture.

Several other examples show that this identitarian position has been a typical rhetorical and political tool used by Christian Democrat parties in Europe in the last 20 years (van den Hemel 2020). During the electoral campaign in 2007, the Christian Democrat Swiss People's Party created posters of a flock of white sheep kicking out a lone, black one with a Swiss flag as its background. Other posters were asking, 'where do we live, in Baden or Baghdad?'. These posters built momentum that, in 2009, led to a populist referendum for banning the building of minarets on Swiss soil, which is now incorporated into the Swiss constitution. In 2011, under President Sarkozy, the French EPP member parties Union for a Popular Movement introduced a law banning headscarves, which today is still enforced in public schools. Similar laws banning full facial coverings were introduced in Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Denmark. Italy's EPP member House of Freedoms, led by Berlusconi, introduced one of the most draconian immigration laws in 2002, creating detention centers for illegal and irregular immigrants. Susanna Mancini argues that these policies are made specially to define friends and enemies in a Schmittian sense, as identity and representation are the two pillars of the political form (Mancini 2014). Schmitt is inspired by the history of the Catholic Church, where the identitarian idea is so strong and unitary, and its capacity of representation so powerful, that it can survive any internal transformation: what ultimately counts is the identity and not the content.

For Rogers Brubaker, the rise of the Christian identitarian discourse corresponds to the perceived threat of Islam present among European populist parties in the last 15 years (Brubaker 2017). Christianity, however, is not seen in religious terms but as a supposedly

common marker of a civilizational identity. This is placed in opposition to others, mainly the generations of Muslim migrants in Western Europe, or, in the case of CEE, the possibility of their arrival following the 2015 migrant crisis. Despite being a common European feature, 'civilizationalism'—as Brubaker terms it—is equally Islamophobic in Western and CEE, but while it has 'internalized liberalism' by showing care about 'gender equality, gay rights, and free speech' in Western Europe, in CEE it appears as more national and critical of liberal democracy (Brubaker 2017).

Despite the insightful understanding of the exclusionary character of the Christian identitarian discourse, Brubaker's distinction of 'civilizationalism' as a new form and alternative to nationalism cannot hold ground if we consider the previously described examples of discourse and policies in Western European Christian Democratic parties, where references to Christian identity did not make them any less nationalist, Islamophobic, or xenophobic. Moreover, Brubaker's dichotomy between the supposed Western European liberal and CEE-an national and anti-liberal 'civilizationalism' proves false, even by Brubaker himself, who writes that the Western European 'liberalism is deeply illiberal.' Instead, this dichotomy rather echoes the common orientalizing discourse, according to which 'the East' is always more nationalist, racist, xenophobic, and 'illiberal' than Western Europe, even though Western Europe shows identical tendencies, not only in parties labeled as populist but in center-right Christian Democratic parties.

In contrast, Ivan Kalmar recognizes that xenophobia in Western and Eastern Europe has the same characteristics and is demographically related to the same population—the precariously employed white and lower-middle-class workers and rural residents—even in places where the Muslim population is in fact rather low (Pickel 2020; Yendell 2019). For Kalmar, the difference in xenophobia is in the degree of it, which is structurally explained by the fact that the aggressive, capitalist transition generated deeper social woes, poverty, and resentment in CEE than in western Europe, and this radicalized the population further (Kalmar 2020).

Hungary and Poland's leadership capitalize on the population's discontent and fears, by utilizing Christian 'identitarian' and nationalist discourse to signify internal and external 'threats' and legitimize the introduction of a variety of discriminating and restrictive measures. In Hungary, a reference to Christianity was introduced during the change of the constitution and was subsequently followed by a series of legal changes that undermined freedom of the media, limited judicial independence, and weakened the power of the Constitutional Court. EPP's member Fidesz also criminalized homelessness and discriminated against the unmarried, same-sex families, and transsexual individuals. These are all measures that Adam Fabry aptly terms 'authoritarian-ethnicist' (Fabry 2019). Simultaneously, these measures are a case of pure identity politics that do not challenge the economic model, which remains the neoliberal subsidization of foreign direct investment in manufacturing appreciated and encouraged by core countries (Bohle and Greskovits 2019). While civil rights are slashed with no real economic cost, the economic model remains in the status quo. Similar tactics have been used in Poland.

'European identity,' based on the evocative power of tradition, is a political myth, and 'ultimately an illiberal project, that carries the risk of undermining the very foundations of post-World War II Europe' (Mancini 2014). As an opportunity to reaffirm identity and the illusion of solidarity against an external threat, the Christian Democratic identity discourse pushes politics to the border in an almost literal sense since border protections were the focus of the rhetoric and action in several European countries. Politics has no power to act on the frustration of the electorate in a redistributive way: it can only offer more identity.

3.2. *Gender politics*

Another important component of CD is its focus on gender politics, which serves as another bridge between 'the West' and 'the East' in political cultures and policy strategies with very similar goals. Recent studies reveal the transnational dimension of the so-called anti-gender movements in Europe (Kováts 2017), which stem from the debates in the Vatican following the UN Beijing Conference on women in the mid-1990s. An intense focus on gender among conservative and right-wing parties and religious civil society movements emerged in the late 2000s, both as an issue and, as Gabriele Dietze and Julia Roth argue, a 'meta-language for negotiation of different conditions of inequality and power' under neoliberalism (Dietze and Roth 2020; Paternotte and Kuhar 2017). Complex and contradictory, the opposition to the so-called 'gender ideology' brings together discourses and policies centered around conservative identity politics, which emphasize the heteronormative nuclear family as a social model and attacks reproductive rights, sexual education, LGBTQ rights, gender mainstreaming, gender studies, and other forms of deconstruction of gender and sexuality as biological categories (Kováts and Põim 2015).

Like Christian identity, the discourse on gender operates as a 'symbolic glue,' creating an antagonism to politics and a culture of gender emancipation that has been constructed as foreign and hostile to traditional values (Grzebalska and Pető 2018). Gender is instrumentalized in the struggle against 'external and internal enemies,' centered around the idea of protecting women and families against Muslim migrants or LGBTQ individuals. This is obvious in the debates regarding the sexual attacks during New Year's Eve celebrations in Germany, or demonstrations and referendums against same-sex marriages that took place from France and Germany to Croatia, Slovakia, and Poland (Dietze 2016; Sremac and Ganzevoort 2015). In this antagonist identity discourse, another layer is played by the idea of foreign imposition and financialization, highlighted through an anti-colonial narrative of protecting national sovereignty and conservative values against liberal elites in the EU (Paternotte and Kuhar 2017). The discourse on gender as 'Ebola from Brussels,' which invigorated Europe-wide attacks on the Istanbul Convention, is part and parcel of similar nationalist attacks on any kind of supranational decision-making on the EU level (Korolczuk and Graff 2018).

Again, the gender aspect of identity politics discourses equally represents a case of politicization of the cultural and de-politicization of socioeconomics. This includes an erosion of the welfare state and a parallel individualization and commodification of household and care responsibilities that shifts to women and families. Although the criticism of gender ideology is sometimes targeted against liberal elites, the gender order it proposes works in harmony with the conservative, neoliberal emphasis on the family as the cell of society. In Hungary, this is emphasized by the fact that 'gender policy was reformulated by the government as family policy, and family policy was reformulated as demographic policy' (Kováts 2020). This is in fact not specific to CEE, but a crucial part of the Christian Democratic package of social policies based on Bismarckian welfare.

Unlike its northern peers, this Bismarckian Christian-Democratic social policy has always put the family at the center of its welfare efforts. The idea of subsidiarity has been embraced by CD as well, de facto encouraging a status quo between a male breadwinner and a female caregiver within a heteronormative family. This has had important effects on the nature of the labor market and the welfare system—in the postwar period, the decades of economic growth show full male employment paired with low female employment. When it comes to the welfare system, the fundamental unit to

protect was the heteronormative family and not the individual; many care tasks, for children or elders, were considered the private duty of women. In contrast, CEE under socialism showed a much better record of gender equality in terms of access to the labor market and parity of wages. In the case of motherhood, families could benefit from an extensive network of social services that were scarce in Western Europe (Pascall and Manning 2000).

Germany is an interesting case study: after the reunification and during the swift privatization of industry, its eastern part saw a significant setback when it comes to female employment and social rights. The high female participation that still existed at the beginning of the 1990s was seen as a potential problem. A statement from 1994, by then Minister for Women and Youth Angela Merkel, says 'the willingness of the eastern German women to seek employment will be reduced, relieving the labor market.' In West Germany, family policy reached what is called a 'climax of familization,' the conceptualization of the family in a typical Bismarckian way as a space of refuge, an 'anti-structure to society' (Rosenbaum 1978). Historians point out that this special emphasis on families was a direct reaction to the family and gender policies from the socialist bloc (Kolbe 1999). As late as 1978, Christian-Democratic MPs and social scientists warned that 'the needs and demands of (small) children set limits to [women's] emancipation,' and that 'young adolescent women' should be protected 'against a misdirected idea of emancipation.'

The focus of Christian-Democratic care policies on motherhood and family perpetuates the patriarchization of society. Studies show that even care policy reforms within the corporatist Bismarckian welfare systems in Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands from the late 1990s have done little to change its conservative, patriarchal character. Instead, these have simply increased the flexibilization and cheapening of labor, as well as reinforced existing social stratifications (Morel 2007). Heteronormative familialism and the increase of low-paid, low-skilled female labor, therefore, go hand in hand within the EU's agenda to reconcile work and family time. Post-socialist countries have similarly shifted from a system of universal protection to traditional familism, with the emphasis put mainly on motherhood and fertility policies (Duman and Horvath 2013). Hungary and Poland adopted political strategies and legislations to support this traditional gender order by adopting the classical Christian-Democratic script, which has recently been re-baptized as 'family mainstreaming' (Grzebalska and Pető 2018).

'Family mainstreaming' was used with this meaning for the first time in 2010 by the sociologist Pierpaolo Donati, a member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences (Donati 2010; Donati 2013), and later endorsed by a network of Catholic family associations all over Europe. In 2011, the Hungarian EU presidency adopted the term, in opposition to 'gender mainstreaming.' Family mainstreaming sees families as one of the fundamental units of society, a point that is found in many Christian Democratic and conservative parties in various countries that define marriage as 'the foundation (CDU)/basic (AfD)/smallest (NPD) unit of the community or society' (Blum 2015). In opposition to universalist welfare, the family mainstreaming approach underlines the importance of the family over the importance and the rights of individuals. Despite the supposed novelty of the term, this idea once again brings us back not only to Bismarckian familialism but also to one of its crucial components: the Christian-Democratic principle of subsidiarity, according to which care over the individual should take place mainly at the level of the family without state interference. Whatever terminological innovations and identity debates there may be, the transnational struggles against 'gender ideology' as an umbrella term for perceived threats to heteronormative motherhood and family reinforces neo-

liberalized care policies. For decades, these policies have been dominant in many Western European countries and eventually spread into post-socialist states within the EU.

3.3.   *Welfare politics*

Changes in care and family policies are only part of a broader transformation of welfare and public spending spurred by the process of Europeanization, during which a vast range of neoliberal policies were embraced by the heart of the Bismarckian system (Vidra 2018). A large number of EU countries, from Germany, Austria, and France, to Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, 'followed the Bismarckian route to welfare development' after their transition. This took a different course in terms of (un)employment, health insurance, and pension policies during the 2000s (Palier 2010). The flexibilization of labor and workfare programs in the EU represents significant changes in the Bismarckian system without moving away from it, and once again brings countries together across the supposed West–East divide. In addition, against a vast literature in social policy that favors the narrative of 'the modernization of social protection' or 'catch-up convergence,' a few scholars point out that the European Union has in fact contributed to austerity and the rise of authoritarianism much more than working to reduce it (Stubbs 2019; Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton 2020). This is hardly surprising since current research shows that austerity pushes the electorate to radicalize, not only in the East but especially in the West, thereby increasing the vote for non-mainstream parties (Hübscher, Sattler, and Wagner 2020). The main differences are temporal: CEE was subjected to austerity earlier, from the 1990s and 2000s, while, in many parts of Western Europe, austerity tendencies occurred only much later. In both cases, the dynamics in actions and policy responses are very similar.

During state socialism, welfare was extensive, providing social rights and increasing wealth to a large share of the population (Szikra and Tomka 2009) to such an extent that János Kornai defined Hungary as a 'premature welfare state' (Kornai 1997). After 1989, socialist welfare legacies were still present. Kornai himself lamented the dominant state ownership of welfare services, as Poland and Hungary still had relatively generous welfare systems after the transition. By joining the European Union, the nature of post-socialist welfare changed significantly, marking a radical departure from the previous universalism of the socialist period.

Post-socialist welfare found itself in an uncomfortable position, having to deal with two simultaneous problems. On the one hand, the switch to a market economy created a wave of unemployment across all post-socialist spaces. For example, in Hungary, 1.2 million jobs disappeared because of the transition, and in Poland, the consequences of the 1990s shock therapy last to this day (Myck and Oczkowska 2018; Vidra 2018). On the other hand, under the framework of a liberal European Union, access to the common market demanded adherence to strict criteria on spending and state deficits. Reforms in the post-socialist space were almost universally impacted by the EU-imposed austerity, and welfare had to be significantly resized. Hungary, Slovenia, and Croatia, among others, had to address issues around public spending, public revenues, and rising public debt to meet the debt reduction requirements of the EU (Bohle and Greskovits 2012).

Following the models of continental Western Europe, many post-socialist countries started a process of 'Bismarckization' welfare that puts families and work at its center. This emphasized using subsidiarity acts to bring private actors into public provisions—roles that were often taken by churches or confessional NGOs, especially in education and healthcare. This overemphasis on heteronormative family values and the role of

women as caregivers is, therefore, not an Eastern aberration. Western European countries where Christian Democracy is the most rooted, such as Germany and Italy, are historical laggards when it comes to childcare provisions. In these places, raising a child has always been seen as a private family problem involving little or no public responsibility. However, as Nathalie Morel argues, the 'freedom of choice' in the pluralization of benefit options is in fact only available to women of middle and higher income (Morel 2007).

Indeed, a second characteristic of 'Bismarckization' is the deepening of insider-outsider patterns in employment, which is typical of conservative welfare regimes that redistribute within and not between classes. Dorottya Szikra describes Hungarian welfare policies as 'Welfare for the Wealthy,' meaning that instead of spending money on the precarious population, the new welfare redirects money—especially in the forms of generous family allowances—to the 'hard-working' people, meaning those with a stable labor market position (Szikra 2018).

The European Union and the OECD talked for years about the importance of 'employment flexibilization,' as an umbrella term for various policies that promote non-permanent employment, though the connection between job market flexibilization and employment or economic growth is in fact weak or non-existent (Barbieri 2009). The negative economic and social consequences are more obvious, and CEE was hit hardest by flexibilization (Grekousis and Gialis 2019). The same process has also occurred in Western European countries, for example, with the German Hartz reforms, pushing for workfare, means-testing and targeted benefits, and deeply deregulating the labor market through the introduction of mini-jobs (Treuke 2018). The flexibilization of the labor market has also followed similar patterns in Italy, France, and other countries (Syrovatka 2020), and was then followed by welfare practices that increasingly stigmatized welfare recipients. These practices were then rebranded as social investments or workfare. The 2009 declaration from the Bonn Congress of the EPP clearly stated that 'the redistribution policies in many EU member states do not provide enough incentives for unemployed people to get back to work,' and that 'more attention should therefore be given to policies which aim at stimulating the individual's responsibility' (EPP 2009). In post-socialist Europe, flexibilization was implemented faster as well because of the low trade union density.

The austerity-driven EU reinforced these tendencies. In the postwar period, many worker conquests in Western Europe were directly related to the strength of the socialist and communist parties, along with the real threat of regime change or social unrest (Rasmussen and Knutsen 2019). Liberal governments were eager to appease worker demands, giving concessions both in terms of work protection and improvements to welfare. After 1989, without this political threat, governments in the West were free to pursue more liberal-oriented policies.

The Hungarian and Polish attacks against the EU, and their cries to protect the national population from Brussels, are mainly rhetorical, while neoliberal labor policies and the Bismarckian welfare system remain unchallenged. Even beyond that, the adaptations of Bismarckian welfare, which itself is inseparable from Christian identity politics, are common within the space of the European Union. These are historically infused with CD and essentially differ only in periodization and degree.

4. Summary and conclusion

In recent years, a deluge of popular and academic publications set out to describe, define, historicize, and warn about the perceived 'democratic backsliding' and 'illiberalism' that

are working to erode liberal democracy in the European Union. Three decades after the transitions of 1989, the frantic question of what has possibly gone wrong with liberal democracy, in the meantime, stays largely confined within a liberal vision. The interpretations that subsequently emerged focus much less on Western 'pillars of democracy,' and much more on CEE-an 'newcomers,' such as Hungary and Poland. Such interpretations are largely based on the idea that there has been a deviation from the liberal-democratic, European mainstream caused by the specificities of the post-socialist experience.

Reiterating that democracy is dysfunctional in CEE also has the side effect of overestimating its health in Western Europe. While both liberal and world systems theory explanations capture important pieces of the puzzle, and to some extent contribute to the understanding of 'democratic backsliding' in Europe, they do so by perpetuating a kind of Cold War intellectual posture. This, in turn, perceives CEE as being historically and culturally inclined to authoritarianism. The result is a tendency to (self)orientalize and understand contemporary events simply as local idiosyncrasies and products of an incompletely achieved 'transition' to market economy and liberal democracy, which has been hegemonically constructed as universal standards of 'normalcy' and 'development.' This attitude homogenizes CEE countries and makes common comparisons to political situations in Russia and Turkey, but with much fewer comparisons to the recent political developments in France, Austria, Italy, or Germany.

In this article, instead of stressing the differences, I stressed the commonalities between East-Central and Western Europe in the past several decades. By moving forward from critical literature that recognizes the downfalls of liberal democracy and the negative effects of the EU framework, I first shed light on the internal discord of liberal democracy that causes the depoliticization of the economic sphere, as well as the way it was constitutionalized in the European Union. Second, I showed that the process of political neutralization of economics corresponds to the intellectual and political tenets of CD, which were also definitional for the political culture of the EU, from its foundational moments to contemporary times.

From its entanglement with ordoliberalism in the 1930s to the postwar social market economy and, finally, the foundation and the constitutional nature of the European Union, I proved that these authoritarian tendencies were always a historically and geographically widespread phenomenon. By comparing examples of debates and policies related to identity, gender, and welfare in the EU, I demonstrated that the political tendencies of democratic backsliding that are commonly characterized as 'illiberal' are in fact part and parcel of a long tradition of Christian-Democratic conservative and anti-liberal thought and praxis. According to the historian of Christian Democracy, Emiel Lamberts, 'the power of the Christian Democrats was dependent on their ability to keep the political [conservative] right permanently tied to them' (Lamberts 1997). This was true with the transition from Nazi-Fascism to the post-World War II order—from keeping intact core structural and sociological features of the previous regimes, to repacking these old ideas into new environments, such as the 'social market economy.' This has been a strategy also successfully attempted by the EPP in the case of Fidesz and other 'stabilocracies' in the region (Bieber and Kmezić 2017). Authoritarian-liberal parties in CEE, even if not traditionally connected with CD, adopt a similar strategy: CD provides the language and the political tools to maintain a form of nationalist solidarity while keeping the structural nature of the system unchanged and unchallenged.

While the West was traditionally seen as the example to 'transition' to, scholars did not give enough weight to the influence of the East and the socialist experience on the West. As Philippe Schmitter highlights, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the absence of any

plausible threat of a revolution, or an alternative type of regime, has de facto weakened democracy and social rights in the 'Real-Existing Democracies' of Western Europe (Schmitter 2019). The neo-liberalization of economic and welfare policies in the EU from the 2000s has not, in fact, led to a radical departure from the conservative Bismarckian, Christian-Democratic welfare. Rather, these transformations have hollowed out the few remains of the social dimension of Christian-Democratic tendencies and given space to rising precariousness, labor exploitation, and economic inequality throughout the EU.

The scavenging for resources under the neoliberal sun, particularly in places grasping with the radicalness of the post-1989 transitions, intensified national and identity discourses. This occurred through the culturalization of discussions of essentially economic problems, and the employment of antagonistic demagogic rhetoric opposed to visions of internal and external enemies that included even Brussels. The strengthening nationalism, Christian identity politics, and an anti-Brussels narrative, however, are not a sign of a desire of these conservative regimes to challenge neo-liberalization; rather, they are merely to create an illusion of solidarity, direction, and shared destiny while simultaneously increasing the hardship for their marginalized populations.

European scholars should be more aware of the global hollowing of democracy and its historical roots, rather than exclusively focusing on the failures—not without a touch of orientalism—of a single region. The lack of an inter-European political 'freedom to' has created a legitimacy vacuum and an identity void. The rise of right-wing and identity politics is now filling this void everywhere in Europe.

Notes

1. Lochner v. New York, 198 U.S. 45 (1905), https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/198/45/
2. West Coast Hotel Co. v. Parrish, 300 U.S. 379 (1937), https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/300/379/

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