



AUTHORITARIAN POLITICS:

*How to Understand It
and How to Resist It*



**MARIE HEŘMANOVÁ &
KRISTÓF SZOMBATI**
IN COLLABORATION WITH **CITAP**

Introduction

This is a non-exhaustive and rather personal selection of books, papers, essays, and audio materials that focus on the region of Central and Eastern Europe, where the authoritarianism that constitutes a key dimension of contemporary politics made an early breakthrough, offering scholars a unique opportunity to study its birth and flowering *in situ*. Although regional politics and society both exhibit certain particularities—such as the imprint of previous authoritarian experiments and experiences on political culture—the scholarship we find most interesting and insightful has sought to situate regional dynamics within global processes. These scholars have conceived of the region as a laboratory for neoliberal reforms, which were implemented with remarkable zeal by a cohesive and interconnected cohort of progressive reformers—who saw in neoliberalism not only an opportunity to achieve economic convergence with the West but also a tool to mold self-responsible and autonomous citizens and to break the shackles of nationalism and paternalistic collectivism once and for all—from the 1990s onwards.

While these scholars have put forward competing accounts of how, why, and where neoliberalism went wrong, they all highlight the centrality of popular discontent with neoliberalism—whether as a project of governance, a type of rationality, or a set of economic policies—as key to understanding the resurgence of an authoritarian, nationalist, and anti-globalist Right. We believe that these analyses are highly relevant to those outside the region, particularly in the U.S., where popular discontent with neoliberalism has also emerged as a key interpretive framework for analyzing the rise of Donald Trump.

The second common strain in the works we have chosen is the guiding assumption that this new iteration of the Right—despite its sometimes petty nationalism and narrow-minded tribalism—is highly interconnected, to the point where it is not an exaggeration to speak of a “Sovereignist International,” whose representatives seek to learn from each other’s successes and mistakes. Some of the works cited below have been selected with an eye to this ‘pedagogic’ dimension: highlighting tactics and strategies that have been tested in various contexts and are likely to be adopted by leaders coming to power now or in the future. Divergences in constitutional setups and political systems are, of course, highly relevant in this regard, as tactics cannot simply be copy-pasted. Nevertheless, we are convinced that understanding how the Right achieved hegemony in a place like Hungary could be eye-opening, as right-wing leaders in both Western Europe and the U.S. have cited Viktor Orbán as a central influence on their governance projects.

Finally, we decided to foreground gender struggles in both society and politics because we believe the Right has been especially successful in instrumentalizing bruised masculinities in its mobilization and coalition-building strategy. Gender has also played a central role in Rightist governance projects in the region, with an emphasis on family policy and a return to traditional norms. In short, gender struggles have allowed the Right to portray its opponents as hopelessly out of touch with everyday people’s concerns while presenting itself as an exponent and proponent of common sense. As has become clear, there is no more powerful political tool than occupying the high ground of popular culture. Although this phenomenon may be familiar to American audiences, we believe they will benefit from learning how it has unfolded in Central and Eastern Europe.

About the Authors

Finally, a few words about ourselves. Although we set out on different paths (Kristóf coming from the world of ecological activism and politics, Marie from the world of human rights activism and journalism), we both found ourselves entangled in the struggle between the old left-liberal guard and the new right-sovereignist guard in our respective countries (the Czech Republic and Hungary). This particular positionality has made us acutely aware of the blindspots and shortcomings of the liberal tradition we emerged from, the partially autonomous dynamics of popular sentiment “in the ruins of neoliberalism” (to borrow an expression from Wendy Brown) and the new Right’s deep understanding of and accompanying ability to selectively incorporate popular grievances and demands into its political project and thereby attain a level of credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of broad popular constituencies. We have, furthermore, both watched this project as it unrolled in our country, deeply affecting our own projects and lives, and offering a unique vantage point for observant participation and analysis. We have both incorporated this experience into our academic and extra-academic pursuits, with Kristóf in particular making it his mission to produce (through articles, book chapters, a monograph and most recently a podcast) an ethnographically informed account of the popular roots and political-economic micro-foundations of right-wing politics. Marie, in turn, utilizes her background in activism, campaigning, and journalism to research how the authoritarian ideals of gender normativity are mainstreamed into wide cultural consciousness via social media and digital communication platforms.



MARIE HEŘMANOVÁ is a researcher and writer currently based between Prague and London. She holds a PhD in social anthropology from Charles University in Prague. Before starting her academic career, she worked in the NGO sector, engaging in campaigning and advocacy around the issues of migration, refugee rights, and gender equality. She co-founded a volunteer movement aimed to protect human rights of refugees during the so-called “refugee crisis” in Europe in 2015. She conducts research at the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences and teaches at Charles University in Prague.



KKRISTÓF SZOMBATI is a scholar, educator and practitioner based in Berlin. After spending a decade in the Hungarian environmental movement, he co-founded the green LMP party and was an elected member of its Steering Committee. He left LMP in 2011 to pursue a doctoral degree focusing on the rise of right-wing politics in rural Hungary. Since defending his PhD at the Central European University (CEU) in 2016, he has published extensively on right-wing politics, taught courses on de-democratization at universities in the US and Europe, and supported a series of re-democratization initiatives in his native Hungary. His newest project is the podcast *This Authoritarian Life*, which explores everyday human stories to make sense of authoritarian politics around the globe. His current employer is the Humboldt University, and he is Editor for Political Economy at the Review of Democracy.

I. LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Books and essays that reflect on the totalitarian regimes in the Soviet Bloc before 1989 and the aftermath of its fall and shed light on how living under authoritarian rule affects everyday lives, the notion of civic courage, the concepts of private and public, the idea of community, and relationship to the world beyond the state borders.

Havel, Václav: The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe (edited by John Keane). London: Hutchinson, 1985.

The titular essay “The Power of The Powerless” was written by Václav Havel in 1978 and had a profound influence on the dissidents in Central and Eastern Europe at the time. Havel argues that totalitarian regimes (such as the communist regime in the Soviet Bloc) can, by their nature, create “dissidents” out of ordinary citizens and asks what this means for their everyday lives. He proposes various ways in which people can unite and organize in the face of political oppression. The book includes an expanded version of the original essay and nine other essays from Czech and Slovak authors who respond to Havel.

If you want to read the original essay only, it's [available here](#).

Yurchak, Alexei: Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation. Princeton University Press, 2005.

The book offers a detailed, ethnographically rich story of the “Last Soviet Generation” of 1970s - 1980s, for whom, as Yurchak argues, the fall of the Soviet regime was both very unsurprising and absolutely unexpected. Central to his analysis are tensions between public and private, state and the citizens, inner life and public life that co-existed in a paradoxical way mostly incomprehensible from the outside. Yurchak points out (and this particularly could be useful for our understanding of our current situation) that many people genuinely believed in the communist values, but held them as separate from their private lives and on an everyday level transgressed them in a myriad different ways. The gap between what was official politics and what was the lived experience of the citizens became so vast that the regime imploded in the end.

Ghodsee, Kristen. Lost in Transition. Ethnographies of Everyday Life After Communism. Duke University Press, 2011.

Unlike the two previous texts, this book focuses on the era after the democratic transformation of the CEE region. It is based on years of ethnographic fieldwork in Bulgaria done between 1990 and 2009 and seeks to answer the question of why so many people feel nostalgia after the communist regime. Told through personal stories, anecdotes, and vignettes, Ghodsee shows the confusion and feeling of being lost and unmoored in a world where nothing makes sense anymore and the opportunities and openness (promised as the opposite of the totalitarian darkness) don't reach the common citizens.

An essay that connects Ghodsee's work to the current situation in the US, with a focus on the concept of “internal immigration” and why it might be both useful and dangerous for US citizens right now.

Ypi, Lea. Free. Coming of Age at The End of History. Penguin Books, 2021.

A personal memoir that reads like a novel. Ypi narrates her childhood in Albania ruled by Enver Hoxha, isolated both from the West as well as from the rest of the Eastern bloc. Through the eyes of her childhood self, she writes about the fall of the regime and the promises and disappointments of the transformation of the 90s. If someone asked me about just one book to read to understand what it's like to live through such a transformation (and why so many people are disappointed with it today), this would be the book.

II. AUTHORITARIAN POLITICS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Essays, books, and a podcast series from authors from Central and Eastern Europe reflecting on the transition away from democracy towards authoritarianism across the region, based on personal testimonies, fieldwork as well as political and sociological theory.

Szombati, Kristóf and Erdem Evren. This Authoritarian Life (audio)

A podcast published by two authors reflecting on their research and life under regimes transitioning away from democracy towards authoritarian rule and interviews with guests with the aim to explain the authoritarian policies and their impact on the everyday lives of people.



Scheiring, Gábor. The Retreat of Liberal Democracy. Authoritarian Capitalism and the Accumulative State in Hungary. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

This book is one of the most exhaustive reports on the political developments in Hungary that led to its now infamous “iliberal democracy” transition under the leadership of Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz. Scheiring (a former member of the Hungarian parliament who personally experienced Orbán’s power grab) interviewed almost 200 blue-collar workers and thoroughly mapped the country’s network of wealth (via concrete names of investors, entrepreneurs etc). His analysis focuses on the economic and social aspects of the transition and explains how Orbán successfully managed to build an infrastructure of trust and exploitation based on support of the middle-class workers. In this way, the iliberal transformation is not designed as a fight against liberal democracy, rather it is built from within it, as its logical follow-up (and ensures that the authoritarian leaders are elected leaders).

An essay from the author with lessons to be drawn from Hungary’s case, where he outlines what the U.S. can expect now and how to fight back.

Shapiro, Jeremy and Zsuzsanna Végh. The Orbanisation of America: Hungary’s lessons for Donald Trump. European Council on Foreign Relations, 2024

A long essay providing a detailed overview of various steps Viktor Orbán took to secure his power, how Donald Trump can walk the same path, and what it means for the US and US-EU relations.

Krastev, Ivan and Stephen Holmes. The Light That Failed: Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy. Pegasus Books, 2020.

A political history of CEE in the past 30 years that focuses on how the supposed “end of history”, in the aftermath of the fall of communism, turned out to be the beginning of the “age of autocrats”. The authors analyze the resentment felt across the region against the promise of “Westernization” which is now seen as a failed experiment. They draw direct parallels to Trumpism in the US and point out the similarities in the narratives of failing West and failing globalization as used both by Trump and by Eastern European leaders such as Viktor Orbán.

Kalmar, Ivan. *White But Not Quite: Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt*. Bristol University Press, 2022.

Another deep dive into the resentment of Central Europe against the concept of “catching up with the West” pays attention to how structural inequalities manifest in populist sentiment and further reinforce authoritarian tendencies. Kalmar applies the post-colonial lens to the CEE region and argues that much of the xenophobia rampant in the region comes from the feeling of being “white but not quite”, seemingly part of Europe and the Western world, but also never quite there in terms of equal opportunities.

Scheiring, Gábor and Szombati, Kristóf. *From neoliberal disembedding to authoritarian re-embedding: The making of illiberal hegemony in Hungary*. *International Sociology*, 35(6), 721-738. 2020.

Heavy on theory and perhaps not a recommended reading for people outside of social sciences, but for social scientists looking for a robust theoretical framing explaining how authoritarian regimes emerge and root their power in economic and social structures, this article offers a useful framework.

III. THE WAR ON GENDER IN AUTHORITARIAN POLITICS IN CEE

The following books and essays focus on one particular aspect of the illiberal transformation - the fight against “gender ideology”. They explain how the notion of gender was weaponized and used to create an imaginary enemy to traditional values, families, and, consequently, “the common people”.

Graff, Agnieszka and Elżbieta Korolczuk. Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment. Taylor & Francis, 2022.

Drawing on examples from Central Europe and particularly Poland, the authors show how gender became a key component in conservative policy-making on a global scale and how it also serves as an element connecting various anti-democratic conservative forces across national borders. Employing the concept of “opportunistic synergy” between conservatism and anti-gender movement, the book is an essential read for anyone interested in how the “anti-gender” movement came into being and why it seems to work so effectively in pushing forward policies aimed at curbing reproductive rights.

Kováts, Eszter and Maari Põim. Gender as a Symbolic Glue. The Position and Role of Far-Right and Conservative Parties in the Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015

A collection of case studies from Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, France and Germany that offers a detailed look at how the war on gender was constructed in conservative policy making across Europe - before it became one of the most visible and exploited issues in political campaigns elsewhere, including the US.

Mejstřík, Martin and Vladimír Handl, Current Populism in Europe - Gender-Backlash and Counter-strategies, Heinrich Boell Stiftung Prague, 2021.

Collection of essays from various authors, providing examples of how gender was exploited and weaponized in right-wing policies across Europe, that reads well as a follow-up on the previous collection, six years later.

Ghodsee, Kristen. "Escape the Trump Era with Internal Emigration." *The New Republic*, November 23, 2020.
<https://newrepublic.com/article/188550/escape-trump-era-internal-emigration>

Ghodsee, Kristen. *Lost in Transition: Ethnographies of Everyday Life After Communism*. Duke University Press, 2011.
<https://www.dukeupress.edu/lost-in-transition>

Graff, Agnieszka, and Elżbieta Korolczuk. *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment*. Taylor & Francis, 2022.
<https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/50542>

Havel, Václav. *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*. Edited by John Keane. London: Hutchinson, 1985.
http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=clanky&val=72_aj_clanky.html&typ=HTML

Kalmar, Ivan. *White But Not Quite: Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt*. Bristol University Press, 2022.
<https://bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/white-but-not-quite>

Kováts, Eszter, and Maari Põim. *Gender as a Symbolic Glue: The Position and Role of Far-Right and Conservative Parties in the Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/budapest/11382.pdf>

Krastev, Ivan, and Stephen Holmes. *The Light That Failed: Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. Pegasus Books, 2020.
<http://www.pegasusbooks.com/books/the-light-that-failed-9781643133690-hardcover>

Mejstřík, Martin, and Vladimír Handl. *Current Populism in Europe: Gender-Backlash and Counter-Strategies*. Heinrich Boell Stiftung Prague, 2021.
<https://cz.boell.org/en/populism>

Scheiring, Gábor. *The Retreat of Liberal Democracy: Authoritarian Capitalism and the Accumulative State in Hungary*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
<https://www.amazon.com/Retreat-Liberal-Democracy-Authoritarian-Accumulative/dp/3030487512>

Scheiring, Gábor, and Kristóf Szombati. "From Neoliberal Disembedding to Authoritarian Re-embedding: The Making of Illiberal Hegemony in Hungary." *International Sociology* 35, no. 6 (2020): 721–738.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580920930591>

Shapiro, Jeremy, and Zsuzsanna Végh. "The Orbanisation of America: Hungary's Lessons for Donald Trump." *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2024.
<https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-orbanisation-of-america-hungarys-lessons-for-donald-trump/>

Szombati, Kristóf, and Erdem Evren. *This Authoritarian Life*.
<https://thisauthoritarianlife.buzzsprout.com>

Ypi, Lea. *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History*. Penguin Books, 2021.
<https://www.penguinbookshop.com/book/9781324050292>

Yurchak, Alexei. *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton University Press, 2005.
<https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691121178/everything-was-forever-until-it-was-no-more>