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## Introduction: The Mutual Impact of Global Migration and Illiberalism in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe

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## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

## The Mutual Impact of Global Migration and Illiberalism in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe

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### Abstract

Illiberalism is a political view and agenda that impacts state–society relations in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe, and migrant diaspora communities in other regions. This chapter underlines the need to understand how illiberal states manage migration to absorb resistance, and how migration may impact the illiberal political agenda and policymaking. These processes often hap-

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pen over a long period and involve a complex set of legal and administrative decisions. The driving forces of illiberalism are shared by different political systems and often have transnational features, while being anchored on local and national circumstances and rationale. Exploring how illiberalism influences and is influenced by global migration trends in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe offers insights into the complex interplay between political regimes and transnational mobility, and helps to conceptualize illiberalism for the study of politics and government.

**Keywords:** illiberalism, migration, Russia, Eurasia, Eastern Europe, autocratic governance, political regimes

## Introduction

This edited volume is built around two big societal challenges, often existing alongside each other: global migration and illiberal politics. We focus on Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe (REEE), a region in a significant part of which we can still observe the resilience of illiberal state politics and extensive migratory flows. While the management of migration, particularly in Russia, has garnered considerable attention, there exists a gap in the theorization of the mutual impact among illiberal state politics, policymaking, and global migration, particularly within the broader REEE area.<sup>1</sup> Further exploration is warranted to understand how autocratic governance influences and is influenced by global migration trends, offering insights into the complex interplay between political regimes and transnational mobility in this dynamic geopolitical context.

Migration to, from, and within the REEE area has been a part of flows and processes between the Global North and Global South, but also a part of the building of past empires. Global migration is on one hand a story of wars, refugees from persecution, limited opportunities, and economic hardship, and on the other a process of transferring knowledge and talent, economic globalization, the birth of new innovations, and cultural development. Historically, the impact of migration in many fields, such

as economy and culture, has been enormous. In addition to these areas, migration affects national politics, global inequality, urbanization, local communities, the travel of ideas, cultural renewal, institutional development, labour markets, innovation, education, and social policy, as well as foreign and security policy. Migration also requires transnational solutions as a part of national and regional migration policy. New migration flows and processes can be expected due to political upheavals, environmental degradation, and climate change.

Migration is also a policy area which tests the resilience and preparedness of receiving states. An important aspect to consider is the nexus between illiberalism and global migration, which may advance negative recycling of local and regional practices that slow down or hinder the democratization or institutionalization of good governance. Globally, migration may generate strong reactions and ad hoc responses, galvanize populist movements, and bring to the surface questions related to illiberalism. Migration can also be an important economic tool for authoritarian regimes to stabilize the political and social landscape in their societies. And it can be used as political capital or a weapon in foreign relations (Natter 2023, 11). The number of illiberal democracies is rising; globally, eight in ten people lived in a ‘partly free’ or ‘not free’ country in 2021 (Freedom House 2022). Moreover, according to a growing consensus among scholars, illiberalism is on the rise across liberal democracies too (Timbro 2019; Hadj-Abdou 2021).

Empirically, illiberalism puts state–society relations in the focus of attention and asks what causes or contributes to the development of a certain type of relationship. For instance, Glasius (2018) emphasizes a practical perspective that sheds light on the organizational and social context—in other words, what people will do within the structures of the state based on their shared rules. The rights of the population and the accountability of authorities are at the core of this relationship. Investigating illiberalism in state–society relations vis-à-vis global migration should sensitize the researcher to look for certain kinds of elements in governmental policymaking, implementation, and the outcomes of politics.

The perspective of this edited volume is a multidisciplinary one that brings together theoretical and methodological approaches from a variety of fields, such as political science, history, legal studies, sociology, and media studies. Each chapter presents an independent case study, and together they create a multifaceted view on the nexus between migration and illiberal politics. The chapters represent examples of the various effects of illiberalism on policymaking and policy implementation, as well as the interlinkages between illiberal politics in sending countries and emigrant communities abroad.

We underline the need to continue to critically engage and challenge the established conceptions regarding the politics around migration in illiberal states. Exploring the connection between illiberalism and global migration will help to uncover problems and opportunities that global migration presents to societies and to illiberalism as politics. Recently, migration scholars have begun to call into question the validity of assumptions based on migration governance in liberal democracies (Natter 2018b; Pisarevskaya et al. 2019; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Urinboyev 2020). A growing number of international migrants live and work in countries that are not counted as liberal democracies, requiring that an understanding of the ‘regime effect’ in migration governance includes more than an exploration of ‘one side of the coin only’—‘Western liberal democracies’ (Natter 2021). Urinboyev and Eraliev (2022) have pointed out that in contemporary literature on migration regimes, typologies primarily focus on Western-style democracies despite the fact that many migration hubs are non-democratic. They argue that ‘relatively little attention has been devoted to the variations and similarities in immigration policymaking within and across authoritarian regimes’ (Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022, 12). Writing about immigrant populations outside of the territorial boundaries of non-democratic regimes, Glasius (2018) has discussed how the extraterritorial dimension of authoritarian rule is connected to the nature and resilience of contemporary authoritarian rule itself. She points out how authoritarian states tolerate and even sponsor migration and have learned to manage the risks

that it poses to them. Most importantly, authoritarian migration management approaches its populations abroad not as citizens with rights but as objects to be used for various political goals in differing roles. Her conclusion is that the authoritarian rule is not a territorially bounded regime type but a mode of governing through a distinct set of practices.

Urinboyev and Eraliev (2022) state that in established democracies, the abuse of power and curtailing of migrant rights are constrained by regard for international human rights obligations, active civil society, and appeals to independent courts, while non-democratic regimes do not offer such guarantees of legal certainty. In addition, large shadow economies with adjunct corruptive informal structures and practices worsen the situation considerably. Citing Breunig, Cao, and Luedtke (2012), they note that non-democratic regimes can both restrict the human rights of their populations and ignore the populations' anti-migration sentiments, which then enables them to make top-down policy decisions more freely regarding migration. In addition, as Schenk (2021) points out, the failings or weaknesses of governance, such as corruption and informality, can be deliberately employed by authorities in illiberal regimes to pursue both their own and the state's interests in a particular policy sector.

Building on the 'liberal paradox' concept, scholars have suggested a concept of 'illiberal paradox'. Like liberal democracies, illiberal and authoritarian governments are bound by global economic liberalism, and as a result, they have the same incentives to encourage immigration openness. However, unlike liberal democracies, they are less dependent on those utilizing the democratic processes that are seen to be the driving forces behind restrictive immigration policies (such as election cycles and public opinion), or on the national courts' interpretations of migration rules. Ultimately, authoritarian leaders can implement pro-immigration policies more quickly than their democratic counterparts, even though they must also balance the conflicting interests of institutional and economic actors (Natter 2018a). The illiberal paradox 'does not imply that autocracies do enact more liberal policies

than democracies, but it suggests that autocracies can liberalize their immigration rules more easily than democracies if they wish so, that is, if it fits the broader economic goals, foreign policy agenda, or domestic political priorities of the regime in place' (Natter 2021, 118).

Although there is a growing amount of research on global migration in REEE, and a vast body of literature on the societal, political, and economic transformations in the region over the past 30 years, the specificities of links between illiberalism and migration in this region have typically not been explicitly or thoroughly explored. Our premise is that looking at this connection will not only create new empirical research on global migration in the REEE area but also help to make the conceptualization of illiberalism more relevant for the study of political and administrative practices and ways of thinking in this region. In addition, we see that examining illiberalism vis-à-vis migration in this region well illustrates the global socio-political tendencies in many other parts of the world. In this examination, we attempt to cover a multitude of human and ideational processes and flows which impact global migration because of illiberal tendencies, as well as the impact which migration has on illiberalism as a political force.

## Illiberalism

The academic use of the concept of illiberalism has gained popularity in the wake of shifts in world politics, as well as social and political polarization in the Western world, including in former socialist Eastern Europe. Almost since the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholars have used different descriptions of unfavourable outcomes of transitions, oligarchic leaderships, and non-democratic governmental policies to capture what is not a fully functioning liberal democracy. Illiberalism is typically defined by a rejection of liberal-democratic values such as the rule of law, individual rights, and civil liberties, and an embrace of authoritarianism and nationalism. The term has been used to refer to both political ideologies and regimes (Rosenblatt 2021). It is often

used interchangeably with terms such as ‘democratic backsliding’, ‘populism’, ‘hybrid regime’, ‘illiberal democracy’, or ‘(electoral) authoritarianism’. Overall, the scholarly community’s targets of criticism can be seen as following the agenda set by authoritarian and illiberal leaders and interest groups that publicly label the liberal-democratic model not only unsuitable for their countries but even a collapsing system.

For instance, democratic backsliding has been defined by Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley (2018) as a range of negative phenomena that impact the democratic regime with the threat of authoritarian reversal. They emphasize, among other things, growing partisan control over state agencies, media, and civil society; the dismantling of checks and balances; and the creation of an anti-liberal ideology. Galston (2018, 11) has defined the threat to democracy posed by populism as one in which there is a sceptical view of formal institutions and procedures that impede majorities ‘working their will’, and which views individual and minority rights critically.

The ‘hybrid regime’ has received attention as a form of a government in between authoritarianism and full democracy (Ekman 2009; Morlino 2011; Mufti 2018), often a balancing act which includes strong legacies of the illiberal past. Considering election regime, political and civil rights, horizontal accountability, and effective power to govern, Merkel (2004) shows that over half of all the new electoral democracies at the time of his study represented specific variants of diminished sub-types of democracy, which he called *defective democracies*. Levitsky and Way (2002, 52) have criticized the general term ‘hybrid regime’, because ‘different mixes of authoritarian and democratic features have distinct historical roots, and they may have different implications for economic performance, human rights, and the prospects for democracy’. Instead, they choose to distinguish between electoral authoritarianism (prevalent in the post-Soviet area), full authoritarianism, and unstable, ineffective delegative democracies. The concept of a hybrid regime could be limited to the description of political development rather than being seen as a



definitive government type. In this way, it includes the structural elements of a full democracy, namely laws and institutions, while emphasizing the political goals and governance practices of non-democratic systems.

In recent years, this conceptual heterogeneity has led scholars to engage in discussions about the clarity and empirical usefulness of popular terms. This development has coincided with scholars critically assessing the diffusion of the liberal-democratic model as contributing to the return of authoritarianism (e.g., Deneen 2018; Kravtsev and Holmes 2020). This line of scholarly attention has been directed at the critical review of neoliberalism and its consequences in different political environments, which has given birth to the concept of neoliberal authoritarianism. It focuses on various governing practices of capitalist systems which marginalize, discipline, and control populations, such as prioritizing constitutional and legal mechanisms and the centralization of state powers by the executive branch over more inclusive governance (Bruff and Tansel 2019, 234).

‘Illiberalism’ has become a general term which it is hoped will capture various outcomes of problematic democratization and globalization. It differs from the globalization studies economic perspective by emphasizing the identity politics and cultural processes resulting from globalization. Kauth and King (2020) describe illiberalism as an overarching perspective which sheds light on practices and ways of thought which can be found in both non-democratic and democratic societies alike. Because of this, they propose that a definition should be based on either an opposition to procedural democratic norms (disruptive illiberalism) or an ideological struggle (ideological illiberalism). Laruelle (2022) defines illiberalism as a new ideological universe, dissociated from regime types, democratic erosion, and authoritarianism. She points to its permanent oppositional relation to liberalism and sees it as a concept which can offer insights not covered by such notions as conservatism, the far right, or populism. Illiberalism, then, proposes solutions that are majoritarian; that underline nationhood or sovereignty, traditional hierarchies, and cultural

homogeneity; and that shift attention from politics to culture (Laruelle 2022, 304).

Laruelle builds her definition of illiberalism on five major building blocks (metanarratives) of liberalism, which illiberalism both refutes and mixes arbitrarily at the same time. The first is classic political liberalism of individual freedoms protected from state interference and democracy, which includes checks and balances, limiting majoritarianism. The second is economic liberalism based on curbing the role of the state in the markets through deregulation, privatization, and free trade agreements, which in its neoliberal form is pushed forward by states and supranational institutions. The third is cultural liberalism, which stresses not only individual rights but especially identity rights. The fourth is so-called geopolitical liberalism or the global attractiveness of American soft power, followed by the fifth metanarrative of liberal colonialism, in which liberal democracy is linked closely with modernization (Laruelle 2022, 312–313).

As Laruelle points out, illiberalism often attempts to decouple liberalism from democracy. It accepts elections and majoritarianism but at least partly denies democratic institutions. Illiberal views are often based on the idea—shared also by, for instance, leftist critiques—that liberal democracy is severely compromised by liberal economic policies which exclude large segments of the society. Even as many illiberal parties and regimes may implement neoliberal policies, and build questionable close relations with the business world, their politics critique globalized neoliberal economic policies. Furthermore, illiberalism strongly opposes cultural liberalism, and in Central and Eastern Europe, neoliberalism and cultural liberalism are often seen to be negative outcomes of post-socialist transitions. As regards the dominance of the US-led liberal world order, illiberalism has national variations (Laruelle 2022, 314–315).

Drawing on the discussions briefly presented here, we define and concentrate on illiberalism as a political view and agenda that impacts state–society relations globally, and both the REEE area and migrant diaspora communities outside of it. Illiberalism

in this context is neither a substitute for non-democratic political regimes, such as authoritarian or hybrid regimes, nor a fully established ideology, such as Marxism or liberalism. It is rather a collection of beliefs and values, and of practices and ways of thinking linked to policymaking and implementation. All of these factors impact the perception of migration, the creation and implementation of migration policies, and the outcomes for individual migrants. Illiberalism exists in various types of political systems, including mature democracies, and has both globally shared and regionally and nationally specific causes, and outcomes.

One of the issues within illiberal politics is the relationship between the law and the individual. Since the Second World War, international organizations and international law have played an important role in states' policymaking, including migration policy. However, this notion has been contested by a good number of states emphasizing their sovereignty in matters pertaining to internal affairs. Two opposing views exist. One supports a universalistic understanding and scope of international law, while the other promotes a selective view on international treaties and institutions. Discussion about sovereignty is often coupled with questions of national security. The latter has been actively used by authoritarian regimes as a tool in policy changes, but its importance has been underlined also in old democracies in recent times. (Heusala 2021) International obligations in migration policy, for instance, can be re-evaluated in situations which require heightened attention to perceived security challenges. National security can emerge on the political agenda in times when decision-making is particularly challenging because of external shocks. In such situations, information flows but it does not create a balanced reflection for the development of law or institutions. Internal political competition may increase over policy lines, and the importance of political consensus may be underlined (Beck 1992). Overall, a illiberal political agenda can tend to enhance the securitization of the policymaking and policy implementation process, which increases the powers of authorities and decreases the rights of citizens.

In illiberal politics, not only may laws themselves be illiberal by nature (i.e., limiting civil or universal human rights), but the implementation of laws may regularly infringe upon basic rights and freedoms of selected individuals and groups. In this way, illiberal governance practices refute the principle of equality before the law and can even exhibit a casual attitude towards the deterioration of institutional trust, as has been witnessed even in the case of the United States in more recent times. In particular, the principle of equality before the law can be overlooked in questions related to national security, when one of the key principles of the rule of law—that the government is subject to the law (Kahn 2006)—can be compromised.

Illiberalism may be promoted by separate phenomena and qualities, such as racism, elitism, or fanaticism, which find their way into political goals and policy processes, and sometimes join outwardly unrelated groups of people together in politics and government. Such driving forces of illiberalism are shared by different political systems and often have transnational features, while being anchored on local and national circumstances based on localized or national rationales. In the context of migration, illiberalism often leads to the adoption of restrictive immigration policies, the criminalization of irregular migration, and a disregard for the rights and wellbeing of migrants. This can result in the creation of hostile environments for migrants, where they are subjected to discrimination, abuse, and exploitation.

Migration policy and regulations have been a fiercely contested area in Western democracies, where emphasis on national security has resulted in the overall securitization of this policy area. Hadj-Abdou sees the inherent tension within liberal democracy as the main reason for the rise of illiberalism in an era of global mobility:

while liberalism protects individual and minority rights to prevent a ‘tyranny of the majority’, democracy is essentially about the rule of the majority. Populist political entrepreneurs across Europe and beyond utilize this tension by putting an emphasis

on majoritarianism claiming that liberalism, including migrant rights go against ‘the will of majority’. (Hadj-Abdou 2021, 299)

For these reasons, the assumption that liberal regimes also implement liberal migration policies and are committed to respecting the rights of migrants has been questioned in recent research literature (Natter 2023). For example, in the REEE area, it has been suggested that Russian policies that violate the rights of migrants or exert ‘legal violence’ towards them may not always differ much from those of liberal democracies such as the United States or EU states (Schenk 2021, 304; Kubal 2013). Katherine Natter (2023) suggests that the focus on regime effect, which draws such binaries as authoritarianism–democracy or Global South–Global North, has failed to notice the generic and issue-specific process that can be found in different kinds of political systems. Therefore, illiberal politics are not exclusive to authoritarian regimes, as it is evident that illiberal tendencies can be identified across different political systems.

Analysing policies and critical decisions that seem to contradict liberal values reveals the multitude of ways that illiberalism penetrates national politics and influences policy choices. Faist (2018) notes that in migrant-receiving wealthy countries, migration control assumes a high priority, characterized by externalization through remote control and securitization in areas of origin and transit. The construction of physical barriers like ‘Fortress Europe’, where stringent border controls are implemented, has been scrutinized for its potential humanitarian impact, raising concerns about human rights and the treatment of migrants. Uygun (2023) has pointed out that the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, founded in 2004, has aimed at securing the EU’s external borders through collaboration with mostly non-democratic third countries, which creates concerns over conformity with the EU’s principles and norms. In Finland, a member country of the EU, the government closed the borders with Russia in autumn 2023 (Valtioneuvosto 2023) in response to Moscow’s allegedly intentional policy of bringing in refugees

and pushing them to the Finnish border. This underscores the complexity of migration management in liberal democracies. While some view this as a legitimate measure to protect national security and shield against Russia's potential weaponization of migration, others perceive it as a non-democratic, illiberal move that dehumanizes migrants and potentially denies asylum seekers their rights. This scenario highlights the delicate balance that liberal democracies must navigate between security concerns and upholding humanitarian values.

To describe the situation in which liberal democracies must follow contradictory immigration policies of 'open markets' and 'closed political communities', Hollifield (1992) introduced the term 'liberal paradox'. He argued that, on the one hand, the demand for labour in capitalist economies pushes states to pursue open and inclusive immigration policies. But on the other hand, states must adopt restrictive immigration policies because of nationalist demands from citizens and politicians' dependence on re-election. In other words, the beneficiaries of immigration are likely to favour the liberalization of immigration policies, while the wider electorate, or those who 'bear the costs of immigration', tend to argue for immigration restrictions. Thus, Freeman (1995) argued, politicians in turn are likely to cater to the interests of those who can lobby effectively. Put differently, while the expenses of immigration are dispersed, its benefits, such as the availability of cheap labour, are concentrated. Due to the dispersion of costs and the concentration of benefits, he argued, it is likely that employers (businesses that benefit from immigration), who can be quickly mobilized, will prevail over the rest of the population, who find it difficult to mobilize, as the carrier of diffused costs (Freeman 1995). Christian Joppke (1999) further contributed to these discussions by underlining the vital role that the national courts in Western countries have played in protecting the rights of immigrants. Compelled by their own legal and moral principles, liberal democracies, Joppke argued, coerce themselves through 'self-limited sovereignty' and remain immigrant-friendly against the wishes of their restriction-minded governments. Scholars

have also pointed to the limits of liberal states when politicians explicitly rely on liberal values while pursuing an anti-immigrant agenda, a concept defined as ‘illiberal liberalism’ (Adamson, Triadafilopoulos, and Zolberg 2011).

To differentiate between illiberal tendencies in authoritarian contexts and in liberal democracies, the policy process and implementation should be given attention. In consolidated democracies, the independent legal oversight of governmental decisions creates boundaries for decision-making practices and guides the outcome. Decisions can also be revisited because of changed public opinion and active interest representation, which influences political competition. In illiberal political systems, both the work of the judiciary and organized interest representation are heavily affected by the authoritarian legal and political culture, and the society does not have effective means to control the authorities’ actions.

Exploring illiberalism in authoritarian regimes, such as the Russian Federation, and formally democratic regimes such as Hungary, requires paying nuanced attention to temporal and spatial circumstances and manifestations of illiberalism. When evaluating illiberal politics and their outcomes in the REEE area, the resilience of Soviet legacies should be given adequate attention as one explanation for the rise of illiberal politics. This is especially significant in an understanding of why globalization, and its radical neoliberal form in the 1990s Russian Federation, have been met with illiberal political responses that resonate well in the minds of the public born and raised during the socialist period. The survival of illiberal politics and practices may resemble ‘authoritarian resilience’ (Nathan 2003; Hess 2013; Whitehead 2016), a term used to analyse the persistence of authoritarian regimes against the internal or external pressures for change. There are major national variations in the way that the former socialist countries in the REEE region have evolved in terms of eradication of the past regime. However, we see that post-socialist countries in REEE share, to varying degrees, a common historical legacy regarding the main features of this governance style, which

is reflected in the strengthening of illiberalism in the region. This is not the same as seeing the socialist legacy as dominating; rather, it is something that may contribute to the re-emergence or intensification of illiberalism in this region.

The administrative and political legacy of the socialist regime resembles the concept of ‘natural state’, defined by North, Wallis, and Weingast (2006), where the central government uses limited access order to hold the elite together and secure societal order. In the REEE, the socialist past included limitations on free organization and access to commerce and trade, as well as the controlling of violence or oppositional movements through elite privileges. The personal understanding and experience which people have from the socialist era, as well as the structural developments after the collapse of the Soviet Union, impact the actual national illiberal agendas in different countries of the REEE. For instance, Gel'man has introduced the term ‘bad governance’ to describe an agency-driven—or elite-centred—political culture in the current Russian Federation, where the power vertical consists of elite privileges, corruptive power brokering, and policies which fluctuate between technocratic and more inclusive effectiveness criteria (Gel'man 2022).

In the socialist REEE, the law was an instrument for the elite, rather than a causeway (Kahn 2006) to wider legal protection and institutional trust. This strong legacy facilitates some of the key elements of illiberal politics in the REEE, which typically put emphasis on sovereignty, cultural cohesion, and uniqueness in connection with a selective or confrontational view of international norms and the functioning of political institutions and policymaking, all of which may accelerate the securitization of the policymaking cycle (i.e., the prioritization of national security as an overarching policy framework). Illiberalism in the REEE questions or denies liberal democracy's superiority as a model that can be imported to new societies without major national variations. For instance, Russian leaders have stated that Russia's version of government is ‘sovereign democracy’, including such elements as a strong power vertical.



The law as such is an important tool in the illiberal political agenda. But in the post-socialist context, the effects pushed forward by legal changes are still compounded by challenges linked to the third principle of the rule of law, namely a society's ability to enforce the supremacy of the law (Kahn 2006). In the REEE, these qualities are aggravated by long-standing practices, such as networks and informality, as well as administrative legacies of the REEE, which in many countries of the region contribute to the recycling of corruption and weak institutions and a lack of strong channels of interest representation. The outcome of successful illiberal politics and policymaking, in such a context, can result in an effective limitation or erosion of political and civil rights, electoral procedures, checks and balances (i.e., accountability), and overall constitutional stability in state–society relations. This impacts the image which people have of the state and its role in their lives, as well as their willingness to actively resist changes. Such a political culture may also involve the illiberal paradox in which situational analysis and negotiations inside the political-economic elite effectively guide migration policies while public and organized interest representation is challenging or impossible. In addition, even 'modern' legislation that seeks to consider different societal virtues in a more comprehensive manner suffers from the society's inability to enforce the accountability of the government in the implementation of legislation.

In addition to the legacy of the socialist system, we consider that illiberal states in the REEE depend on globalized markets and the shadow economy, which form the structures within which political decisions are made. Thus, an assessment of illiberal politics should consider the effects of globalization, which has diluted the significance of national borders both economically and culturally and brought about the drastic economic transition policies of the 1990s and a foreign policy backlash against Western influence. In the REEE, globalized economic and institutional competition has led not only to economic growth but also to elitist economic policies, including oligarchic power concentration and neoliberal markets, combined with a selective nationalistic agenda

and a heightened sense of outside risks, requiring securitization. Whether illiberalism is the root cause or rather the outcome of these structural features most likely depends on the situation and question at hand. Illiberalism can be both a reason behind and an outcome of various challenges related to inequality, political division, informality in government, or erosion of societal rules.

### **Migration in the REEE Area**

Although global migration in Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe is a geographically versatile and historically long process, in this edited volume we direct our attention to the recent interplay among the countries of this region which was shaped by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The REEE region has experienced significant economic and political crises in the past few decades, which have resulted in a complex set of factors that shape migration patterns. In addition to the dramatic change from one political and economic system to another in the 1990s, the REEE countries have experienced similar vulnerabilities linked to the consequences of globalization that other parts of the world have seen.

As Müller (2018, 735–736) notes, the Global East contains much diversity in terms of economic situation, but in general it is too poor to belong to the global North and too rich to be considered a part of the Global South. Consequently, the Global East, whether we are talking about such areas as Eastern Europe or even such poorer areas as Central Asia, is usually not included in discussions about the need for emancipation in the Global South (Müller 2018, 738–739). Rising socioeconomic inequality, rapid cultural changes, and transnational security threats (whether real or perceived risks) have met with diverse and inconsistent reactions in REEE. The ex-socialist EU member countries are in many ways privileged in the global context, but in Europe they can still be considered less developed. The former socialist REEE does not neatly fit into the dichotomies of colonizers and colonies, aggressors and victims, as some countries in the region can be considered both. Racism against migrants is rampant in many Eastern

European countries, while discriminatory stereotypes of Eastern Europeans persist in many Western European countries (Krivonos 2023; Kalmar 2023). Thus, it is important to pay attention to flexible and relational hierarchies and exclusions (Krivonos 2023, 2–3).

Scholarly research emphasizes the importance of considering several key elements concurrently. Gerschewski (2013) has introduced the concept of ‘authoritarian pillars of stabilization’, shedding light on how autocratic states maintain stability amid global changes. This notion underscores the strategies of legitimation, repression, and co-optation employed by autocratic regimes to navigate the challenges posed by globalization. In tandem, Collyer and King (2015) highlight the significance of ‘state controls of transnational space’, emphasizing the role of governments in regulating the transnational flow of people and ideas. Diaspora politics has emerged as a notable channel for political voice. Scholars such as Burgess (2012), Caramani and Grotz (2015), and Gamlen (2008) underscore the political agency wielded by diaspora communities. These communities serve as influential actors in shaping and expressing political perspectives, contributing to the landscape of regional politics.

The year 1991 set in motion a vast-scale migration process within and from the REEE. The post-socialist space went from eight to twenty-eight countries, and an estimated 46 million people resided outside their country of birth (Heleniak 2017). Since then, a regional migration system has been formed within the former Soviet republics in which the main centres are Russia and Kazakhstan (Denisenko, Myrtchyan, and Chudinovskikh 2020). The main flow has been to Russia, to which 8.4 million people immigrated between 1991 and 2000 (Abashin 2017; Karachurina 2012). Within two decades, almost 12 million immigrants, mostly from the former Soviet republics, moved to Russia to live there permanently, and almost the same number, approximately 11 million, of foreign nationals have been found to reside in Russia every year, most of whom are circular migrants (Abashin 2017). Denisenko, Myrtchyan, and Chudinovskikh contend that in the

Transcaucasia, Moldova, and Tajikistan, the peak of the population outflow in the 1990s was caused by armed conflicts, while in Central Asia it was caused by economic problems and discriminatory laws. Between 1992 and 2017, 2.2 million people emigrated from Kazakhstan, 1.6 million from Uzbekistan, and approximately 800,000 from Kyrgyzstan (Denisenko, Myrtchyan, and Chudinovskikh 2020).

Scholars have for years analysed from various disciplinary perspectives the development of migration policies, the main administrative hurdles, legal uncertainty, the often abusive treatment of migrants, and their tactics for navigating the Russian administrative landscape (e.g. Abashin 2017; Urinboyev 2017, 2020; Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022; Schenk 2018; Reeves 2019). Researchers have also discussed the effect of the Russian hybrid regime (Urinboyev 2020) and Soviet legacies (Heusala 2018; Light 2010) on the implementation of migration policies. The interdependence created by post-socialist migration has been most prominent between Russia and Central Asian countries. This region has a semi-official transnational labour market, which has been essential for several Russian industrial and commercial sectors while relying largely on globalized shadow economy (e.g., Heusala and Aitamurto 2017). The shadow economy connects questions of globalized economic competitiveness involving huge interests inside the Russian market with the internal security and foreign policy goals of a regional security complex (Buzan 1991) in Central Asia (Heusala 2017).

Today, the REEE region remains an important hub for migration (e.g. Ioffe 2020), with significant implications for both the societies in the region and migrants themselves. Russia continues to be among the top countries in the world for both immigration and emigration, with over ten million foreign workers coming to the country and millions of Russians departing on either a temporary or a permanent basis. In 2010 the outflow of remittances from Russia reached \$21.4 billion, and in 2022 it was still \$16.9 billion. In Kazakhstan, there were over 3.7 million migrants in 2022, almost 20 per cent of the population, and in Ukraine the number

of migrants in 2021 reached 5 million, nearly 11.5 per cent of the population (IOM 2022). Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 disrupted regular patterns of mobilities in the region, with millions of Ukrainians fleeing their home and hundreds of thousands of other migrant workers reconsidering their choice of destination.

Apart from Russia, the increase in resident population due to migration was observed in Belarus for almost the entire period of 1992–2017, when immigration exceeded 300,000 people. In Russia and Belarus, the countries with a comparatively better economic situation and low fertility among the former Eurasian Soviet republics, the population of working age declined but the demand for labour increased. In Kazakhstan, the growth in jobs outpaced demographic growth. The demand for labour in these countries was met partially by permanent and temporary migrants (Denisenko, Mkrtchyan, and Chudinovskikh 2020), creating a pattern of circular migration between Russia and Central Asia.

Djankov's (2016) analysis shows that in Eastern Europe, the working-age population shrank by around 10 million people between 1990 and 2015 due to low birth rates and increased emigration. Labour migration within Eastern Europe has followed the economic growth in the region and also increased significantly after the EU enlargement to the east in 2004 and 2007. In 2004, about two million citizens from Eastern Europe resided in the EU. During the migration peak in 2007, 1 per cent of East European citizens moved to Western and Southern Europe. The lifting of labour restrictions in 2014 for Bulgarians and Romanians in nine European Union countries, including Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, prompted a new emigration wave. In 2016, GDP per capita in the migration-receiving countries Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia was 80 per cent of the EU average, and labour migration inflows came mostly from Ukraine and parts of the former Yugoslavia. At the same time, Bulgaria and Romania continued to be sending countries. By 2016, 6.3 million East Europeans resided in other EU states (Djankov 2016). Poland–Germany migration was boosted by the German–Polish bilateral agreement at the beginning of the 1990s which allowed

Polish citizens to engage in legal seasonal employment for three months in specific sectors of the German economy (Dietz and Kaczmarczyk 2008). From 2004 to 2007, after Poland's EU accession, a similar increase in population movements from Poland to the UK could be observed (Van Mol and de Volk 2016, 44).

In Ukraine, the initial influx of new residents in the early 1990s was replaced by an outflow beginning from 1994, as the demand for labour declined faster than the working-age population (Densenko, Mkrtchyan, and Chudinovskikh 2020). Since Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine began in 2022, the question of the integration of large numbers of Ukrainian refugees into their new places of temporary or even permanent residence has continued to shift the socio-political landscape of many European societies. Forced migration drastically challenges the resilience of receiving communities and societies and may increase the international political leverage of the illiberal aggressor state. These developments demonstrate in the most extreme way the interplay of illiberal politics and migration.

## Our Cases

As we investigate the link between illiberalism and global migration in the REEE area, our ambition is two-fold. Our starting point here is that migration can have a significant impact on illiberal practices by contributing to political polarization, the adoption of restrictive immigration policies, the spread of xenophobia and discrimination, and economic competition. The illiberal answer to these challenges is typically the securitization of the policymaking and policy implementation process. Migration may also be used to strengthen elite consolidation through liberal labour market policies or to sustain societal stability through the export of surplus labour. At the same time, migration processes can challenge authoritarianism and illiberal political goals by fostering diversity, networking, democracy promotion, and political empowerment.

The focus of this edited volume, then, is less on migration as such and more on the impact that global migration in its various

forms, as analysed by our authors, has on the practices and political goals linked to illiberalism in the REEE. It is our view that both the scholarly community which studies the REEE and policymakers within and outside of this region should understand these complex relationships in order to examine and advance the rights and wellbeing of migrants in the face of rising illiberalism and anti-immigrant sentiments.

Our starting point is that illiberalism should be seen as a collection of beliefs and values, and of practices and ways of thinking linked to policymaking and implementation. In the REEE area, the most visible features in this regard have to do with a selective and confrontational view of international norms and the functioning of political institutions and securitization of policymaking. These processes often happen over a longer period and involve a complex set of legal and administrative decisions.

Migration can create a crossroad moment that opens new possibilities to strengthen illiberal regimes, as examined by Katalin Miklóssy. Her chapter ([Chapter 2](#)) explores why migration offered flawed democracies the means to strengthen their own path of illiberal development and focuses on the dramatic changes in the politics and rhetoric between 2015 and 2022, due to Russia's war in Ukraine. In her analysis, the political and narrative consequences of the European migration crisis in 2015, the Polish–Lithuanian border crisis in 2021, and the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022 are discussed by way of spatial and temporal comparison. Her core argument is that while illiberal regimes feed on crises that justify extraordinary measures, not every crisis allows political elites to seize the moment and gain geopolitical elbow room. Her analysis shows that the crisis talk addressing migration that emerged in the European political discourse in 2015 made a big difference for European illiberal politics. It created the opportunity and the rhetorical means to invent a metanarrative that contributed to legitimizing the illiberal argument. Taking advantage of 'crises' helped to redefine the illiberal narrative and its advocates' international leverage and increase their impact. Miklóssy

calls the international circulation and spread of illiberal ideas in the European context the ‘liberal paradox’.

Song Ha Joo ([Chapter 3](#)) examines why some autocratic regimes adopt more anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies than others. She notes that most existing literature on the politics of immigration focuses on liberal democracies, despite large-scale immigration to illiberal societies. Joo’s research compares the immigration policies of Russia and Kazakhstan and shows how different regime dynamics of illiberalism can shape immigration policies differently. Russia has actively adopted anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, whereas Kazakhstan has been more lenient towards undocumented immigrants. Joo argues that such differences arise from varying pressures from the electorate. In Russia, Putin and his United Russia party have faced significant pressure from anti-immigrant citizens and political opponents, leading to their adoption of selective anti-immigrant policies. On the other hand, Kazakhstan’s regime has emphasized inter-ethnic harmony and is closer to a non-competitive form of authoritarianism, leading to its more relaxed approach to undocumented immigrants.

Song Ha Joo’s conclusions show the complexities of authoritarian political goals in migration policy, leading to important further questions regarding the overriding interests of political elites in different types of authoritarian regime. The case of Russia shows that while the government has used measures considered to be restrictive, it has also tried to systematize its migration policy to create more regulatory and administrative predictability and to foster growth in the Russian economy. As we stated earlier, globalized economic and institutional competition has led not only to economic growth but also to elitist economic policies, including neoliberal markets combined with selective nationalistic agendas pushed forward in legislation. Thus, it can be argued, migration from Central Asia has been an arena for liberalized labour policy in such post-Soviet structures. The question remains of whether illiberalism is the root cause or rather the outcome of such structural factors. Illiberal political goals may be promoted by separate qualities such as racism and elitism, which find their way into



policy processes and join unrelated interest groups together in government.

Julia Glathe's chapter ([Chapter 4](#)) is connected to Joo's arguments, as it challenges the dominant illiberalism framework used to analyse Russian migration policy, which mostly sees it as a resource in the elite's informal patronage networks, and instead explores the underlying factors driving illiberalism in Russia. While most migration scholarship characterizes Russia's response to immigration as contradictory and reflective of an authoritarian, patrimonial, and populist state, Glathe argues that Russian migration policy is linked to broader problems and conflicts of post-socialist change. By analysing the Russian expert discourse on labour migration, Glathe demonstrates how context-specific constructions of migration are embedded in global power regimes and contends that the competing political projects of labour migration reflect a society renegotiating its post-socialist coordinates in economic, cultural, and global terms.

One of the crucial fields for maintaining illiberal regimes is managing elections with different tools and policy approaches. In [Chapter 5](#), Dmitry Kurnosov analyses the legal regulation of elections in Russia from the perspective of migration. He notes that the regime uses several methods to misuse the system, discriminating against some and favouring others. In consequence, some groups—immigrants and internal migrants in particular—are 'othered' and seen as easy prey in manipulating elections. This can be done by preventing voting by making it extremely difficult, pressuring others to vote according to the wishes of the regime, or making the voting process easy for forgers to subvert. Kurnosov argues that this 'othering' shapes popular perceptions of election integrity and limits even the existing legal channels of democratic empowerment for migrants in the Russian Federation. As was mentioned earlier, authoritarian governments are less dependent on public opinion and elections than strong democracies. However, it is also quite typical that they aim to conceal their opposition to democratic procedures and maintain at least an illusion of democratic decision-making. For example, Russia has earlier

offered migrants the opportunity to vote. At the same time, the intensification of authoritarianism can be seen in increasing restrictions on, for example, dual citizens.

Even though the members of political opposition can form a significant portion of diaspora communities, it is important to remember that there are also emigrants who support illiberal politics in their home country. This becomes especially evident if we look at diaspora politics in a wider framework. Transnational political activism has been made easier by new information technology. At the same time, there are debates over whether online political technology can be seen as an efficient or even a legitimate form of political activity. In [Chapter 6](#), Ajar Chekirova investigates the online activity of the Kyrgyz diaspora and its impact on Kyrgyz politics and society. Her analysis distinguishes between horizontal and vertical forms of communication on different platforms that serve the varying needs and interests of the migrants. The societal and political activism within the Kyrgyz diaspora intensified particularly during the October 2020 revolution, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Kyrgyz–Tajik border conflict in 2021–2022. These cases exemplify the potential of emigrant social media political participation to challenge an illiberal regime in times of crisis and to develop emigrant citizenship. However, Chekirova reminds us that the vulnerability of social media to manipulation and distortion by those in power underscores the challenges faced by online political participation as a tool for resistance against illiberalism.

The question with both the Russian and Kyrgyz diasporas is their potential to serve as a reserve for future nation-building. The answers most likely differ because of the different reasons behind migration. For economic migrants, temporary or circular migration may foster limited activism on singular concrete issues, while for war refugees fleeing authoritarianism and conscription the outcome may be a longer and even permanent exile outside of their homeland. Such migrant communities, if successfully integrated into their adopted societies, may over time exert considerable political pressure from outside through foreign policy initiatives and financing of opposition movements.

The confrontation between illiberalism and liberal democracy in the international relations field is examined by Joni Virkkunen, Kristina Silvan, and Minna Piipponen ([Chapter 7](#)), who analyse the instrumentalization of global migration by Russia and Belarus as a tool in international politics. The authors analyse the Arctic Route from Russia in 2015–2016 and the asylum seekers stranded at the Belarus–Poland border in 2021 to illustrate how illiberal authoritarian states use their borders and patterns of global migration in contemporary Europe. The authors argue that the 2015–2016 Arctic Route migration from Russia to Finland and the migration episode at the Belarus–Poland border are similar examples of coercive engineered migration (CEM) which make explicit the significance of instrumentalized migration, the nexus of migration with liberalism and illiberalism, and the potential that migration may have for autocratic and illiberal states to achieve foreign-political goals.

With or without voting rights, it is possible that diaspora communities may pose political challenges to illiberal regimes. Whether Russian emigrants are interested in impacting the political development of their home country, and able to do so, is asked by Margarita Zavadskaya, Emil Kamalov, and Ivetta Sergeeva in their chapter, based on extensive survey data ([Chapter 8](#)). Until Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russian diasporas were usually relatively unpolitical and a significant part held some loyalties towards the Kremlin. However, as the chapter shows, new migrants have political attitudes, skills, level of trust, and economic resources which are significantly different to those of previous migrants and the Russian population. They are also more politically engaged, and willing to self-organize to create inclusive social spaces. Yet, as Zavadskaya, Kamalov, and Sergeeva note, the capacity of Russian migrants to influence politics in Russia depends on the political dynamics in their countries of destination, international sanctions, the internal features of anti-war communities, their professional ties to the Russian labour market, and possible transnational repression by the Russian state.

Anna-Liisa Heusala and Sherzod Eraliev's chapter examines the mutual impact of migration flows and illiberalism in Russia and Central Asia ([Chapter 9](#)). The focal claim of this chapter is that the war in Ukraine constitutes the ultimate manifestation of illiberalism which has developed in Russian domestic politics during the post-Soviet era. This internal development, regarding the way that laws, state organizations, and political decision-making have evolved, has radicalized foreign policy, and is also linked to broader globalized challenges of the post-socialist change. Labour migration from Central Asia to Russia has enabled an unofficial social contract between the Russian political elite and Russian companies. Affordable labour under the conditions of a shadow economy together with a low level of unionization have created a neoliberal economic area between Russia and Central Asia. Migrant-sending countries in Central Asia continue to rely on the social and political stability that circular migration has provided since the 1990s.

The migration crisis which was created first by the COVID-19 pandemic and then by Russia's war in Ukraine created new challenges for authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, as the return of several hundred thousand migrants from Russia put pressure on their vulnerable, remittance-dependent economies. The resulting social dissent, driven by declining living standards and unemployment, was expected to exacerbate existing tensions and create new challenges for these regimes. Given these new challenges, it is unclear how governments in the region will respond. Labour migration and the evolution of current labour markets continue to be central to internal and foreign policy goals in the regional security of the REEE.

Our overall goal in this edited volume has been to understand how illiberal states manage migration to absorb resistance and how migration may impact the illiberal political agenda in these societies. The chapters also include investigations of how illiberalism shapes, influences, and enables states to take advantage of migration to secure and advance political goals, and how

migratory flows provide opportunities for and/or exert challenges to illiberal governance practices.

Heightened attention to external shocks and crises creates a momentum for securitization in different types of regime and intensifies existing illiberal attitudes in, for instance, migration policy. As we have argued, one of the main differences between authoritarian and democratic governments that design and implement illiberal policies and decisions is that authoritarian governments are less dependent on public opinion and elections than are democracies. The chapters presented here show how governance practices include the possibility of creating faster policy shifts and legislative changes. The policymaking process in illiberal contexts can be tailored to the case at hand more quickly than democratic processes involving multiparty representation and often several rounds of deliberations. In the REEE area, public support is also relevant for illiberal politics, but in many countries of this region, neither organized interest representation nor the independent legal oversight of decision-making and implementation influence politics effectively. On one hand, decision-making can be highly centralized; on the other, the accountability of bureaucrats can be weak. This sustains a situation where the legal protection of individual rights is case-dependent. The often-prevalent informal practices and corruption, partly linked to the socialist legacy, in the REEE enable, for instance, the instrumentalization of migration, as there is limited public control over the activities of authorities. In the REEE area, migration policy and management may recycle socialist-era institutional dysfunctions, as well as serving to uphold and strengthen globalized neoliberal authoritarianism.

## Notes

- 1 In this book, the use of 'REEE' encompasses the broad spectrum of former socialist countries within Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. When discussing specific parts of this broad area, such as the post-Soviet space or Central and Eastern Europe, we explicitly mention these distinctions. Otherwise, our references to REEE should be understood to include the entire region of Russia, Eurasia, and Eastern Europe.

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