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**Rural Populations and the Neo-Conservative
Revolution in Eastern and Central Europe –
Review and Commentary on the RECEO
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The *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest (RECEO)* is a quarterly established by CNRS in 1970 for the publication of original research papers on the post-Soviet area of Europe and Eurasia. It has a comparative and multidisciplinary approach and contains articles on economics, sociology, law, political science, geography, etc. The majority of its issues are thematic; several have been devoted to rural questions: no. 38/2/207 – rural development in Germany; no. 39/4/2008 – decollectivisation and local development; no. 43/2/2012 application of the LEADER model; and no. 48/1–2/2017 – the relationship of rural areas to the market.

Rural questions have also appeared in various other thematic issues, and sometimes rural populations are a major correlate of the processes being described. It seems to us that this is the case with no. 47/4/2016, which was devoted to the conservative revolutions occurring in recent years in East-Central Europe. The main part of the publication consists of the introduction and four articles presenting the situation in Poland and Hungary.¹

¹ The issue also contains an article, under “Varia”, about the mass media debate over Russia’s accession to the WTO and a number of book reviews.

This issue was coordinated by Frédéric Zalewski,² who explains in an extensive introduction that it is devoted to the political changes occurring in East-Central Europe. Zalewski considers that the scope and magnitude of Orbán's and the Kaczyński brothers' marches to power, which began around 2000 and are reaching their apogee now in the middle of the 2010s, are difficult to describe with the notions in present use. The two parties that dominate Polish and Hungarian politics are strongly ideological; they are concentrated on the total reconstruction of the state and its economic, social and cultural institutions. The steps undertaken by the governing parties are changing the existing order and the relations that previously prevailed between actors.

In discussing the events unfolding in Poland and Hungary, commentators most often perceive certain types of populism, or they seek to describe conditions in the categories of illiberal regimes or illiberal democracies. Zalewski reconstructs and clarifies these categories of description; he admits their usefulness but proposes that events should rather be seen in terms of a neo-conservative revolution. He refers to various approaches to populism, analysing the historical idea and indicating in which periods the term gained in popularity and how its understanding has changed.

Of particular interest to us is the attention he draws to two historical sources of contemporary populism. One kind of populism has Russian roots and a strong socialist orientation, going back to the turn of the 19th to 20th centuries and is the ideological reference point for contemporary leftist movements. Right-wing populism, on the other hand, derives from the peasant/agrarian movements of the interwar period. Here, radical peasant movements relied on conservative traditions and stressed the role of the nation, tradition, customs, and religion.

The present populism spreading its influence in the countries of East-Central Europe takes its specific characteristics from the archaic nature of these societies, which are still strongly agricultural with a post-feudal structure. Right-wing populism has its roots in these movements, which were increasing in popularity before agrarian reforms and, in some places, collectivisation based on the Soviet model, disrupted the countries' social structures.

² Frédéric Zalewski is a political scientist and a lecturer at the Université Paris Ouest-Nanterre. His interests are political movements and peasant parties in Poland.

Zalewski considers that the populist model appears increasingly insufficient to understand the fluctuations and changes – the strengthening and weakening – of authoritarian tendencies in Poland and in Hungary. The populist model of analysis very frequently concentrates on the most radicalised groups, and although such groups may have visibly anti-systemic reputations, they are rarely of the greatest importance for the real course of change. Then too, some researchers focus on emphasising the difference between Western and Eastern Europe, and in pointing to the civilisational differences between the two worlds. However, this approach does not contribute to understanding the essence of the processes.

Another way of explaining the ongoing transformations is by the above-mentioned concept of an illiberal democracy – a system where the authorities simultaneously follow democratic procedures and violate civil rights. An analysis in these terms is a new way of explaining a situation where the elements of the democratic legitimisation of power are combined with authoritarian practices aimed at limiting and controlling pluralism.

While recognising the usefulness of the above categories, Zalewski suggests that the changes occurring in East-Central Europe should be described in terms of a neo-conservative revolution. In spite of the fundamental differences between the present situation and the conditions associated with neo-conservatism – that is, the events in Great Britain and the United States at the beginning of the 1980s – he considers that it is a more apt concept for analysing the phenomena that are currently taking place in East-Central Europe, because:

- using the conceptual categories connected with neo-conservatism opens a new sphere for understanding current events beyond the popular commentaries of the moment;
- this idea explains the ability of the present ruling parties to reuse, redefine and reorganise conservative and anti-communist themes to polarise the right and to construct a political platform that is capable of bringing together various groups of the electorate;
- the idea facilitates thinking about the polarisation of the political scene and right-wing domination as a stage in passing from the communist model of a state to a post-communist model and, in this sense, to think about the victories of PiS and Fidesz as an extension of the transformation that started in the early 1990s. The emergence of political and intellectual groups that are national, anti-

communist, and conservative in nature – and naturally opposed to the values promoted by the neoliberal milieu that introduced democracy to Poland and Hungary – thus appears to be a natural stage in the transformations in question.

The questions that Zalewski raises in the introduction are then addressed in the succeeding articles.

In the text “*La révolution des somnambules*” (“Sleepwalking through a Revolution”) Andrzej Leder continues to elaborate the ideas contained in his book *Prześlona rewolucja* (2013). In order to explain the processes that have caused Polish society to shift its sympathies to the right side of the political scene, Leder refers to Poland having slept through a revolution, leaving the events unprocessed in the psychological sense which, in his opinion, has shaped Poland’s current social structure.

Leder theorizes that the revolution of 1989 was in essence a second revolution. The first, which took place in the years 1939–1956, was ignored (or slept through, as he expresses it), but brought such essential changes to the country’s social fabric that analysing the current processes is impossible without understanding it. In describing the events of the revolution, he points to two key moments: the extermination of the Jews during the war, and the elimination of the remaining elite during the Stalinist period. In the structure of Polish society these events created gaps which were filled by members of other groups, who thus occupied places emptied by violence. Even if the violence was not of these groups’ doing, they were its beneficiaries.

An unwillingness to think about the sources of such a social advance, to analyse one’s place in the social structure and define one’s new identity, is understandable. However, omitting to analyse the processes that occurred over a long historical period meant that members of the newly created elite did not ask themselves questions about their identity and did not build a sense of citizenship, of political subjectivity. For over thirty years the communist authorities who came to power after 1956 maintained the existing order and, in this time, a generation grew up for whom the confusion and chaos of the system in which they lived was the normal state of affairs.

Those who benefited most from the revolution of 1989 – which was initiated by the workers – were members of the elite who had been educated in the previous system: the intelligentsia, members of the bureaucracy and

of the power structures. The groups that did not receive the fruits of the revolution were the workers in large factories, farmers, whose material status significantly decreased after 1989, and the owners of small firms who had survived in the previous system but could not compete in the free market. Their needs and voices – which went unheard for a long time and reflect frustration and anger at the elites who succeeded – are now fueling support for a party that has managed to name these resentments and point to the people to blame for a situation that a large part of society does not accept.

In the text “*L’émergence d’une démocratie antilibérale en Pologne*” (“The Emergence of an Anti-Liberal Democracy in Poland”), Frédéric Zalewski makes an in-depth analysis of those post-1989 changes on the right wing of the political scene leading to the present position of the Law and Justice Party (PiS). Zalewski describes the kind of political activities with which right-wing leaders in Poland have successfully countered the liberal milieu’s hegemony (which had seemed certain and natural after 1989). He uses PiS’s dual victory in 2015 as a departure point for analysing how the party functions on the Polish political scene. He describes not only how the PiS has changed its activities but primarily how it has changed its narrative, meaning the issues the party raises in communicating with voters have shifted. The description of the political transformations in Polish politics after 1989, with the groups and factions that have appeared, the coalitions formed and the betrayals committed, makes it possible to view the processes from a distance. Analysed in this fashion, the pattern in current events in Poland becomes visible.

To widen its circle of support to encompass ever more sections of society – which previously might have been indifferent or supported other political groups – the PiS has ceased to focus primarily on the struggle against the post-communist system and concentrated instead on constructing a new national myth. This myth has negated the political order introduced on the basis of the Round Table agreements, undermining the achievements of the Solidarity heroes, retelling the events of the late 1970s and early 1980s, and including new elements such as the conspiracy theory of the Smolensk catastrophe.

Analysis of the 2015 election results shows that the group of rural inhabitants has clearly transferred their sympathy. They were thus more willing than in previous elections to support PiS: 45.4% voted for this party

(17.5% for PO – Civic Platform; only 9.4% for the traditional peasant party PSL – the Polish Peasant Party; 9.2% for the anti-systemic group Kukiz '15; 5.3% for ZL – the United Left, which was viewed as an urban party; 4.9% for .N – the Independent Party; 4.4% for the radical anti-systemic party KORWiN; and 2.9% for Razem – Together). Even stronger support for PiS was visible among farmers: PiS received 52.3% of the votes in this group; PSL – 18.6%; PO – 10.9%; Kukiz '15 – 6.4%; ZL – 4.6%; KORWiN – 2.6%; Razem – 2%; and the liberal .N – 1.7%.

The above results confirm earlier propositions referring to peasant partialities towards the right-wing narrative, which refers to national traditions, traditional values, strong ties between church and state, and the expectation of state welfare in social questions. In its electoral campaign, the PiS has managed to strike enough chords that many rural inhabitants have decided to abandon their habitual allegiance; that is, to reject the Peasant (PSL) Party's traditional platform, reflecting the desires of rural inhabitants and to transfer their votes to PiS. The extreme and radical groups enjoy less support in the countryside but PiS's narrative was broad enough to please people with varying views and convictions and has thus managed to obtain the support of a wide group of voters.

The indirect influence of the peasant and rural genealogy of today's urban inhabitants should also be mentioned as well. Jacek Wasilewski's analyses (2011, 2012) might be recalled here, which show the post-peasant nature of Polish society and see in it the source of Polish consumerism. It is worth remembering that the PiS narrative also suits adherents of the competing gentry/Sarmatian genealogy.

The next text, "Mainstreaming the Far Right: Cultural Politics in Hungary" by András Bozóki, is a consideration of the changes – defined as a "second revolution" – that have occurred in the sphere of culture in Viktor Orbán's Hungary. In the context of how the Hungarian political system functions, Bozóki shows how radical right-wing groups influence the government's symbolic policy under the ruling party Fidesz. His starting date is 2010, when parliamentary elections resulted in a historical turning point for Hungary.

The basic consequence of the 2010 elections was the assumption of power by a coalition of Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) and then a revolution in the principles by which the state operates. The Fidesz-KDNP Coalition introduced a new constitution for Hungary

and changed the state, including its domestic and foreign policies, and relations in society, the economy and government. These changes were accompanied by convictions about the superiority of national self-sufficiency over democratic principles of the rule of law. 2010 was the moment when authoritarianism and the propagation of nationalist values came to define the ideological axis of public life. It was a time of rejecting all diversity and of the self-legitimisation of domination through the introduction of “right-wingers” to the main current of social life, particularly in politics and culture.

The new Hungarian politics have removed independence and political neutrality from every sector of public life, including the cultural sphere. All sectors remain under the influence of Orbán’s symbolic policy, which involves the propagation of national and rightist values. According to scholars, the foundations of the symbolic policy introduced after 2010 are analogous to those propagated in 1998–2002, when Hungary was also governed by Orbán. This means that cultural policy is subordinated to the political cycle.

The aim of the Hungarian government is to colonise culture, although it is unable to achieve monopolistic control on account of the diversity of this sphere and its resistance. The propaganda campaigns directed at society identify culture as an area serving the nation, which means that culture is perceived as an instrument for shaping the consciousness of the lower social classes. In the right-wing discourse, cosmopolitan contemporary art refers to non-rightist values and thus has no value; its international prestige is similarly without importance.

All this involves an attempt to rebuild the symbolic field. The ruling party, making use of right-wing and nationalist rhetoric, wants to push the cosmopolitan, European elements of Hungarian culture to the margins. General social consciousness is then supposed to be dominated by “Hungarian Hungary,” that is, by cultural products that strengthen national pride and patriotism, and where a major place must be found for products of the “people,” or rather those approved by the “people.”³ This is not a new phenomenon and, in the interwar period, it appeared throughout the whole of Central Europe, although it was particularly strong in its southern part.

³ A typical example here is the Polish leader of the peasant party, who promoted disco polo as an original Polish contribution to European culture.

Catherine Durandin (2008) describes this struggle between “autochthonous nationalists” and “cosmopolitans” in detail in regard to its reactivation in Romania at the beginning of the 1990s.

Bozóki points out that culture is an element in the struggle between two right-wing parties: Fidesz, and the even more radical group, Jobbik. The latter obtained 20.39% of the votes in 2014 according to Robert Laszlo of the think tank Political Capital, entailing that “after Jobbik’s success, Orbán’s party will be even more radical and anti-Western” (Newsweek, no. 42/2014).

The succeeding essay in the RECEO issue analyses the behavior of extreme right-wingers in Poland, depending on whether they are represented in parliament or not. In the article “Civil Society and Extreme-Right Collective Action in Poland 1990–2013”, Daniel Płatek and Piotr Płucieniczak discuss the scale of collective violence in the functioning of far-right organisations in Poland in the years 1990–2013. The authors define the far right by three specific traits: its ideology, its repertoire of activities and its historical organisational and symbolic continuity. They point out that the far-right movement is characterised by an attachment to traditional male and female social roles and open resistance to all minorities (including national, ethnic or sexual minorities).

The common denominator of right-wing groups is an attachment to violence as a tool of political communication. The authors’ conclusions can be summarised by stating that the formalised far right does not entirely relinquish violence but tempers it and then treats it as one of the most desirable forms of collective action against political opponents. An example here is the activity of the Polish far-right movement in the 1990s, when its members made use of a repertoire of behaviors that qualify as brutal violence. The movement itself was then uncoordinated, unformalised and structurally weak. The formalisation of groups representing right-wing values occurred in 2001, when the League of Polish Families (along with the All-Polish Youth) achieved parliamentary success. Nevertheless, there was no renunciation of violence toward political opponents. The tools used by this right-wing organisation were adapted to the “civilised world of politics,” and above all were the result of the need to present the organisation in “a good or at least neutral light” on the political scene.

After 2008, the movement was not represented at the parliamentary level and from that moment a partial fragmentation into smaller groupings

has been observed. The departure from the national political scene brought about the movement's return to a repertoire of activities similar to those of the 1990s. In 2012, the National Movement was organised and two years later it was transformed into a political party, which has not been successful in parliamentary elections so far. Płatek and Płucienniczak's reflections end here.

Nevertheless, the view in 2017 in Poland was that right-wing values are socially beneficial. For this reason, the ruling camp may have been making use of the potential resource that the National Movement constitutes, as would be in accord with the above-mentioned strategy of co-opting ever more groups of the electorate.

To what degree that violent activity will find fertile ground among the rural population is a question that has to be asked. A fair amount can be supposed. Violence, presented as a manifestation of popular justice, was the foundation for Andrzej Lepper's "Self-Defense", but it was also present in the farmers' protests in the Third Republic (Foryś 2008: 121–124). An indirect but strong sign of a population's willingness to employ violence is its level of authoritarianism, which is higher in the countryside than in the cities and higher among farmers than among other categories of rural inhabitants (Szafraniec 2005; Halamska 2013).

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Rural Central Europe is a unique area concerning the former agrarian question and later the agricultural reforms conducted after the Second World War. Later yet, except for in Poland and part of Hungary, it concerned a special kind of deagrarianisation through collectivisation (Eberhard 1991). In post-1918 Central Europe nation-states arose by a unique path from the "people" to a "nation"; a pattern that applies equally to Poland and Hungary, in spite of the complexity of their processes (Szacka 2003). This part of Europe is very rural and the rural part is dominated by a more poorly educated class with a peasant genealogy (Halamska 2015). The juxtaposition of such information with the concept of a neo-conservative revolution must lead to the conclusion that without the participation of the rural inhabitants, the revolution would probably not achieve such success.

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