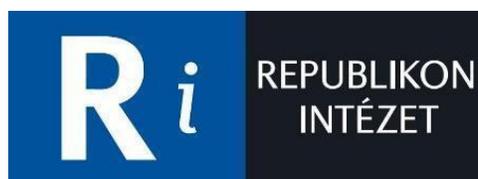


Illiberalism in the Visegrad Four

A REPUBLIKON INTÉZET ELEMZÉSE



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INTRODUCTIONS

Illiberalism is a term which is used more and more frequently. Not without reason. Illiberal tendencies are gaining prominence, and no victories for liberal democracies, such as the fall of the Soviet Union or the EU expansion can put a stop to illiberal tendencies.

Now we see countries with decreasing commitment to liberal values of a constitutionally limited government, strong civic liberties, democratic institutes and checks and balances. The European Union experiences this problem through its member states. One prominent region under regular scrutiny is the Visegrad Four countries: Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

Illiberalism is not limited to these countries though. No one is safe from democratic backsliding, only through constant vigilance, and the constant promotion of the benefits of a liberal democracy could combat illiberal trends. These trends are often not isolated, organic, bottom-up phenomena. External forces and interests play a considerable role in supporting their spread. One such external force is Russia, whose interest lies in a weak, fragmented, constantly disagreeing Europe, North America, and in fact world.

The case of the V4 countries is interesting exactly because of an amalgamation of factors, which might have played a role in illiberal trends in the region. All countries have been part of the Eastern Block, all became part of the EU during the expansion in 2004, and all have a proximity to Ukraine, a further reason it is in the interest of Russia to influence these countries.

Therefore due to the geographical, historical and cultural closeness of these countries their case serves as an interesting study in the development of illiberalism, from which other countries can learn. It is important to understand illiberalism as best as possible to be able to counter it.

In order to understand illiberal tendencies in the V4 countries, Republikon Institute organized a conference¹ in October 2025 with experts from all 4 countries. The following study is partially based on the conclusions of the event, and using already existing data to draw further conclusions.

¹ https://republikon.hu/esemenyek/251014_v4pluskhk-beszamolo.aspx

WHAT IS ILLIBERALISM?

Before going into the specifics of the Visegrad 4 countries, it is important to understand what exactly is illiberalism. The term is exponentially growing in popularity, showing not necessarily a spread in illiberalism, but an increase in interest (Figure 1).

Although the term has been around for a long time denoting several different concepts. In his impactful essay, *The End of History*², Francis Fukuyama claimed that in the 19th century most liberal European societies were illiberal in their belief of imperialism, the right of certain nations to rule over others.

He went on establishing his seminal theory that with the West's triumph in the cold war, liberal democracies established themselves firmly, bringing an end of history. Subsequent events however refuted this sentiment. Illiberal tendencies are reemerging as Russia, headed by Vladimir Putin, and aided by China is yet again posing a growing threat to the liberal world.

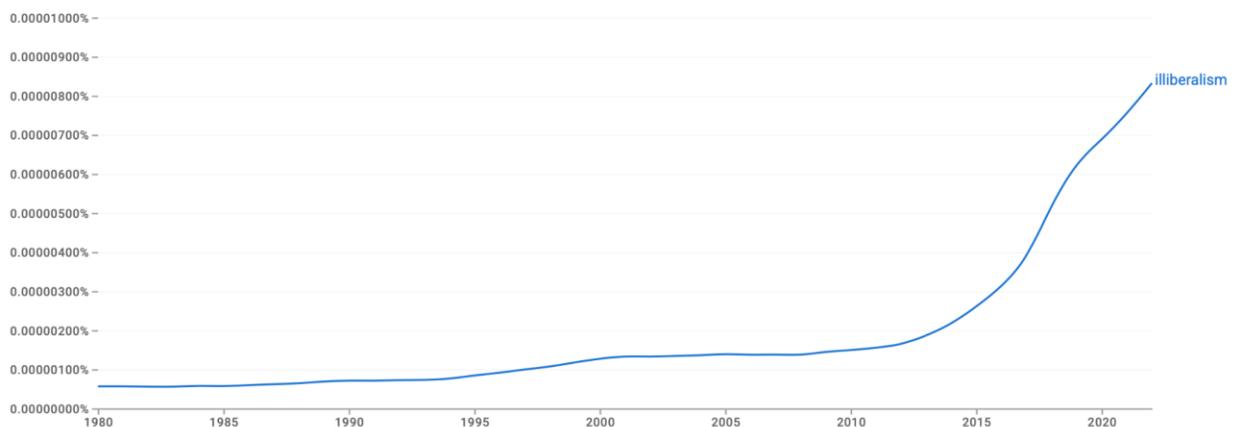


Figure 1: Frequency of the use of "illiberalism" in Google Books Ngram³

² <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184>

³

https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=illiberalism&year_start=1980&year_end=2022&corpus=en&smoothing=3&case_insensitive=false#

Fareed Zakaria has already cautioned about rising illiberalism in his 1997 article in *The Foreign Affairs*, citing Slovakia as an example⁴. He also used Freedom House's classifications to distinguish between different types of regimes.

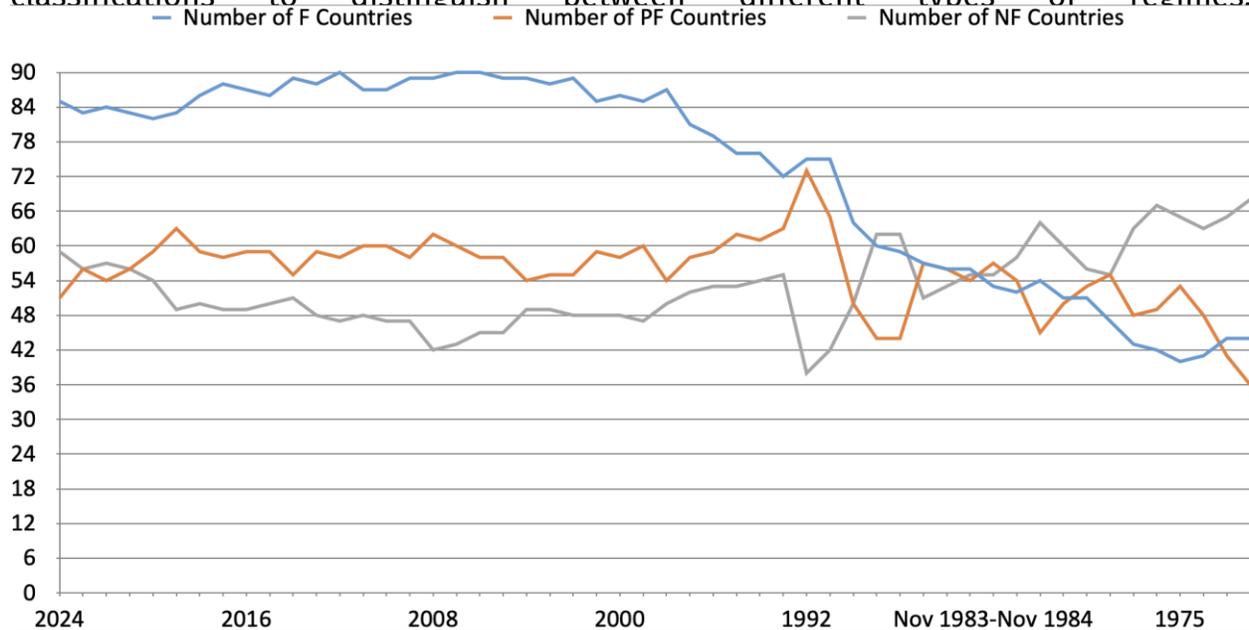


Figure 2: the change in the number of free (F), partially free (PF), and not free (NF) countries over the years according to Freedom House⁵

Freedom House's historical data in Figure 2 is different from the one used by Zakaria (this was used because more datapoints exist in this set), yet for the purposes of trend analysis it is a useful metric. It is apparent that the number of free countries has been on the rise until the late 1990s. The end of cold war and the fall of the Soviet Union helped many not free countries develop into at least partially free places. Yet recently the number of free countries is stagnating and partially free countries are increasingly turning into not free countries.

There is an ongoing debate⁶ over what exactly illiberalism means⁷, for the purposes of this paper it will be understood as still democratic systems that go against liberal principles, such as strong constitutional limitations on government control, strong democratic institutions, effective checks and balances, and guaranteed civic liberties. Yet from the trends it is apparent that countries who lost their "free" designation by

⁴ https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/rise-illiberal-democracy?check_logged_in=1

⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/>

⁶ <https://www.illiberalism.org/illiberalism-a-conceptual-introduction/>

⁷ <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/edit/10.4324/9780367260569/routledge-handbook-illiberalism-andr%C3%A1s-saj%C3%B3-stephen-holmes-ren%C3%A1ta-uitz>

Freedom house tend to slide further towards not free. As such the democratic component of illiberal countries could be just a temporary phrase.

Indeed, according to V-Dem Institute's Democracy Report 2025⁸, an increasing number of countries (45) are autocratizing. Out of these 45 countries 27 started as democracies, but by now only 9 remains.

It is important to note that populism, a term often used frequently in conjecture with illiberal democracies, is not the same as illiberalism. It is a tool modern illiberal politicians often apply, exploiting the fears of people to gain popular support. However, as the Populism, Nationalism and Illiberalism: A Challenge for Democracy and Civil Society paper of the Heinrich Böll Foundation outlines: "While illiberalism in all of its forms poses a challenge for democracy, populism as such does not."⁹

As for an EU context illiberalism is a growing threat, even after a period of optimism with the former eastern block countries joining the EU. Former Italian prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi is often discussed¹⁰ as a leader flirting with illiberal ideas, and maintaining a close friendship with Vladimir Putin, however it was not until Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orbán's 2014 speech¹¹, outlining Hungarian illiberalism that the term became widely discussed in the EU.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

When democratic changes began around the early 90s, in Central Eastern Europe, the citizens of the Visegrad Four countries looked at democracy, and the market economy with great optimism (Figure 3). In the Czech Republic 87% supported a change to a multiparty system, and 80% supported a change to market economy. In Hungary the support was 80%, and 74% respectively, in Poland 61%, and 54%, while in Slovakia 70%, and 69%.

Although support over the region varied, all countries saw an over 50% support for both a multiparty system and market economy. This attitude however did not last. By 2009, at the time of the financial crisis people realize freedom doesn't mean instant riches, and many countries experienced a downward trend in support of a multiparty

⁸ https://v-dem.net/documents/54/v-dem_dr_2025_lowres_v1.pdf

⁹ https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2020-03/E-Paper_Populism_Nationalism_and_Illiberalism.pdf

¹⁰ <https://revdem.ceu.edu/2023/06/27/black-knight-and-pied-piper-silvio-berlusconi/>

¹¹ <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>

system (Figure 3). This has rebounded by 2019, but the period of pessimism was enough for extremist, illiberal and populist parties to emerge, or for existing parties to change their view and tactics to these.

In some countries, support for the transition to a multiparty system and a free-market economy has rebounded, although support in Russia has declined

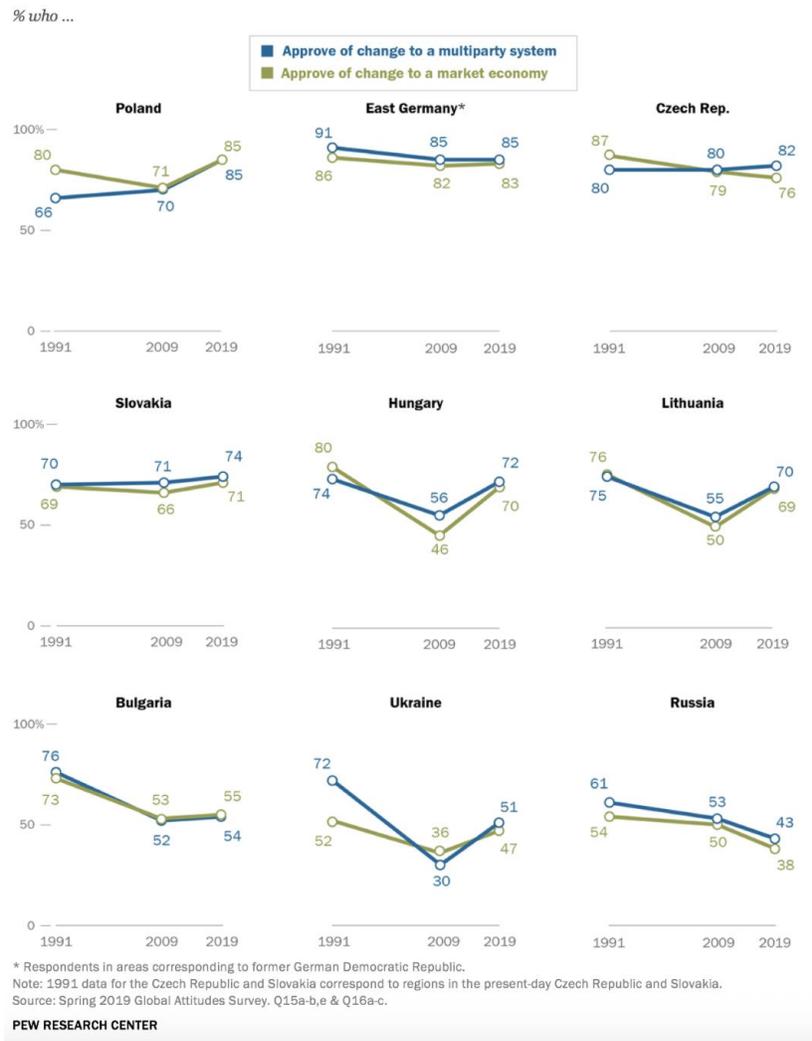


Figure 3: support for a multiparty system, and market economy in the former eastern block¹²

The support of the EU was lower in 2009 than in 2019, especially in the case of Hungary where there is a 56 percentage point change between the 2 measures (Figure 4).

¹² <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/14/political-and-economic-changes-since-the-fall-of-communism/>

Despite the increasingly favourable view on the impact of the EU illiberal populist parties in the V4 region are often overly critical of the EU¹³.

Since 2009, more say European integration has helped individual economies

% who say their country's overall economy has been strengthened by the economic integration of Europe

	1991	2009	2010	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2019	'09-'19 Change
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Hungary	-	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	65	+56
Lithuania	-	28	-	-	-	-	-	-	62	+34
UK	44	29	32	30	26	41	49	-	54	+25
Czech Rep.	-	31	-	31	29	-	-	-	51	+20
Germany	-	50	48	59	54	63	59	-	69	+19
Poland	-	53	68	48	41	53	53	-	71	+18
Slovakia	-	41	-	-	-	-	-	-	58	+17
Bulgaria	-	14	-	-	-	-	-	-	25	+9
Spain	53	53	51	46	37	38	43	-	59	+6
France	31	43	37	36	22	26	31	-	42	-1
Italy	43	31	-	22	11	9	11	-	22	-9
Netherlands	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	60	-
Sweden	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	51	-
Greece	-	-	-	18	11	17	-	8	35	-

Note: Statistically significant differences in **bold**.
Source: Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey, Q14.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 4: Perception on whether EU integration helped the economy¹⁴

Whereas the V4 region looked at democratic changes with great expectations, this waned over the time, when the financial crisis hit, giving a fertile ground for illiberal parties to emerge. Although sentiments improved the illiberal parties are here to stay.

ILLIBERALISM IN THE V4 COUNTRIES

In this section the illiberal tendencies in each of the four Visegrad countries will be explained, with a list of various scores on related indices.

The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland saw a sharp increase in liberal democracy after the democratic changes, and Slovakia was quick to catch up a decade later (Figure 5). However after the 2008 financial crisis this brief period of liberal democracy ended,

¹³ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0263395720975970>

¹⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/14/the-european-union/>

first with the illiberal turn of Hungary in the early 2010s, followed by the illiberal tendencies in Poland, and lately Slovakia. Now the liberal future of the Czech Republic is in danger. Although Poland managed to undo some of the illiberal damages, no country in the region is immune from the threat of illiberalism.

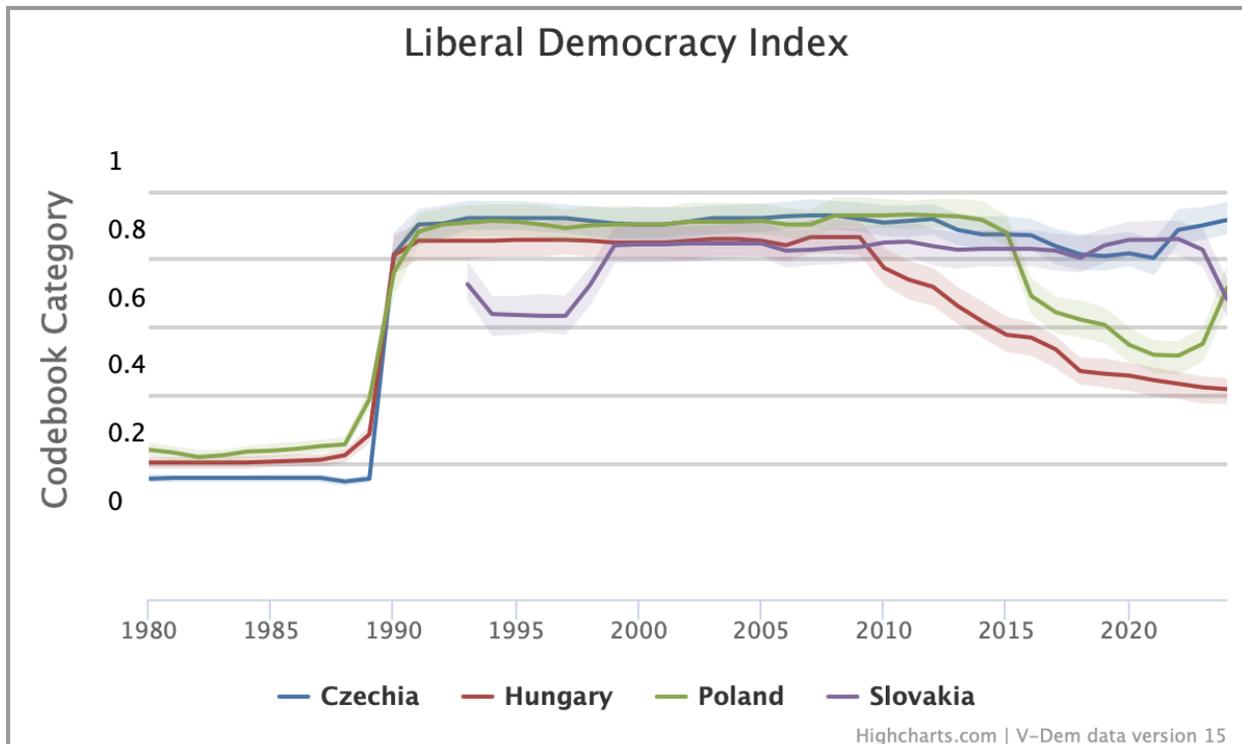


Figure 5: V-Dem Institute's Liberal Democracy Index scores of the V4 countries since 1980¹⁵

Czech Republic

Freedom House¹⁶

Global Freedom: 95/100 (Free)

Nations in Transit: 76/100 (Consolidated Democracy)

Bertelsmann Stiftung¹⁷

Political Transformation:

score: 9.20/10 (democracy in consolidation)

rank: 6/137

Economic Transformation:

score: 9.10/10 (highly advanced)

rank: 3/137

Governance Index:

score: 6.87/10 (good)

rank: 9/137

V-Dem Institute¹⁸

Liberal Democracy Index rank: 7/179

Regimes of the World Designation: Liberal Democracy

The Czech Republic is the most liberal democracy among the Visegrad Four countries. Strong institutions, a consolidated democracy, and an economy which managed to

transform from well from the communist era make it a globally high ranking country among liberal democracies.

However, recent elections which saw Andrej Babiš' return after he was ousted in 2021 raise concerns. Although strong institutions, such as the Presidency, the Senate, the Constitutional Court, or the media could provide guards against the far-right populist forces. Babiš is expected to be a pragmatist, but experts predict a democratic backslide, with a growing populism and illiberalism, maybe even mirroring topics such as culture wars from other V4 countries¹⁹.

As elections happened recently, there is no clear indication as to what will happen, the data on illiberalism in the country reflect only a pre-election state. The election results however hint at a growing trend of illiberalism.

¹⁵ https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/

¹⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/czechia>

¹⁷ <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/CZE>

¹⁸ https://v-dem.net/documents/54/v-dem_dr_2025_lowres_v1.pdf

¹⁹ <https://www.populismstudies.org/prof-bustikova-babiss-victory-in-czechia-is-a-big-win-for-illiberalism-in-europe/>

Hungary

Freedom House²⁰

Global Freedom: 65/100 (Partly Free)

Nations in Transit: 43/100 (Transitional of Hybrid Regime)

Bertelsmann Stiftung²¹

Political Transformation:

score: 6.30/10 (defective democracy)

rank: 45/137

Economic Transformation:

score: 6.82/10 (limited)

rank: 25/137

Governance Index:

score: 3.79/10 (weak)

rank: 103/137

V-Dem Institute²²

Liberal Democracy Index rank: 95/179

Regimes of the World Designation: Electoral Autocracy

Hungary is by far the most illiberal country in the V4. Ever since Viktor Orbán, the current prime minister assumed power in 2010, Hungary has been backsliding on democratic rankings. After the upward trends since the democratic changes, Hungary lost its status as a “Free” country at the Freedom House designations.

Orbán has openly declared in 2014 that he is building an illiberal state, citing Russia, China, and Turkey among others as positive examples²³. The Hungarian governing part which enjoys a supermajority severely eroded institutions and checks and balances limiting the powers of the constitutional court, placing loyalists at the head of the prosecutor’s office or at the presidency, undertaking a state capture in the media weakening its plurality and utilizing pro-government media channels to suppress critical voices²⁴. While Hungary is still a democracy, that is opposition parties can still

²⁰ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary>

²¹ <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/HUN>

²² https://v-dem.net/documents/54/v-dem_dr_2025_lowres_v1.pdf

²³ <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>

²⁴ <https://democratic-erosion.org/2025/04/18/how-to-erode-a-democracy-hungarys-illiberal-turn-under-orban/>

emerge and have a legal way to win, there is not a level playing field due to the tampering of election laws, the legal system and weaponization of the media²⁵.

The government often passes laws quickly without public debate, or exercises its right to rule by decree, a licence gained through the maintenance of a state of emergency²⁶.

However, due to the rampant populism and corruption which also saturated the economy causing structural problems, people are experiencing financial problems. This is one of the reasons (the others being inadequate explanations by the government on key issues, such as child protection, transport, and healthcare), that for the first time since Orbán has been in power continuously, his party, Fidesz, is not leading at the opinion polls²⁷. General elections will take place in April, where illiberalism will be in the focus, and voters will have to choose between a further plunge into illiberalism, or a promise of more liberal democracy.

²⁵ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/hungary>

²⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/hungary>

²⁷ <https://apnews.com/article/hungary-orban-election-campaign-challenger-1da1467e8e57e5049fbd57b32f9dc62>

Poland

Freedom House²⁸

Global Freedom: 82/100 (Free)

Nations in Transit: 57/100 (Semi-Consolidated Democracy)

Bertelsmann Stiftung²⁹

Political Transformation:

score: 7.40/10 (defective democracy)

rank: 23/137

Economic Transformation:

score: 8.14/10 (highly advanced)

rank: 13/137

Governance Index:

score: 5.12/10 (moderate)

rank: 51/137

V-Dem Institute³⁰

Liberal Democracy Index rank: 46/179

Regimes of the World Designation: Electoral Democracy

Poland has been following a similar trajectory for a while as Hungary, but still the country does better in rankings than its historical friend. The Law and Justice (PiS) party, which is generally seen as the major political force pushing illiberalism, was in power between 2005-2007 and then again in the period of 2015-2023. This latest tenure coincided with Poland's democratic backsliding as evidenced by the Liberal Democracy Index (Figure 5).

The PiS government has been eroding the independence of the judiciary, the media, and democratic institutions, following the more or less the same playbook as Hungary. Immigration, LGBTQ, and culture wars were in the focus of the populist PiS government, while using the pretext of democratic legitimacy they eroded the rule of law³¹.

In 2023 however the opposition coalition won at the general elections, and ever since Poland has been trying to reverse the illiberal trends. This, according to the Liberal Democracy Index, has been successful so far.

²⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/poland>

²⁹ <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/POL>

³⁰ https://v-dem.net/documents/54/v-dem_dr_2025_lowres_v1.pdf

³¹ <https://www.illiberalism.org/ryszard-zieba-illiberalism-and-nationalism-in-polands-politics/>

In the 2025 Presidential elections the PiS candidate won, raising concerns that illiberalism could return. The president could hinder the efforts of prime minister Donald Tusk³², and thereby attempt to raise the popularity of PiS for the next elections, bringing back illiberalism to the government.

Slovakia

Freedom House³³

Global Freedom: 89/100 (Free)

Nations in Transit: 70/100 (Consolidated Democracy)

Bertelsmann Stiftung³⁴

Political Transformation:

score: 8.60/10 (democracy in consolidation)

rank: 10/137

Economic Transformation:

score: 8.64/10 (highly advanced)

rank: 7/137

Governance Index:

score: 6.27/10 (good)

rank: 19/137

V-Dem Institute³⁵

Liberal Democracy Index rank: 48/179

Regimes of the World Designation: Electoral Democracy

Slovakia has made considerable improvements in the late 1990s catching up with the other V4 countries in its commitment to liberal democracy (see Figure 5). This however changed when Robert Fico regained power at a snap election in 2023.

Ever since he became prime minister most recently he made considerable attempts to weaken liberal institutions by replacing the police leadership, enacting new criminal laws and dissolving the National Crime Agency overseeing corruption cases, thereby paving the way for corruption. Fico's government also started pressuring the media and the civic society in order to repress critical voices³⁶.

³² <https://www.illiberalism.org/fertile-ground-for-illiberalism-polands-new-president-and-the-difficulties-of-democratic-repair/>

³³ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/slovakia>

³⁴ <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-dashboard/SVK>

³⁵ https://v-dem.net/documents/54/v-dem_dr_2025_lowres_v1.pdf

³⁶ <https://www.freiheit.org/central-europe-and-baltic-states/path-illiberal-democracy>

Hungary and Poland have followed similar paths before, Fico does not need to reinvent the techniques through which to extend his power, but he experiences pushback in the form of citizens, the office of the President, and even the EU. Still Fico moves in an alarming pace in building an illiberal state³⁷, further eroding the previous accomplishments of the country.

AN ILLIBERAL BLOCK?

The V4 countries are often mentioned together not only due to their geographical proximity, but also because of historic and cultural similarities as well as shared interests.

As the previous section demonstrated all 4 countries experience or experienced illiberal tendencies by the governing parties, and certain techniques, such as using culture wars, the attacks, on the LGBTQ community, fearmongering about immigration, the crackdown on the media and civic society and the amalgamation as often common aspects of the illiberal populism of parties to a varying extend.

Is there therefore a specific type of illiberalism growing in the V4, mutually helping each other?

As the participants of Republikon Institute's conference agreed at the panel³⁸, there is a definite connection between illiberalism in the V4 countries. Orbán can inspire and embolden others, such as Fico, while illiberal leaders can learn tired and successful best practices to build illiberalism using populism.

Yet this doesn't mean there is a close illiberal alliance. The illiberal parties in the V4 are nationalistic, populist, and therefore for historic reasons the communicated populist interest of the parties will clash with each other³⁹.

The V4 is not a unique illiberal block, the development of the countries will influence each other, and as such there simiélar tendencies, but no organic grand design. A grand design exists nonetheless but it did not develop organically. It is in the interest of Russia to help build and support illiberal states all over the world, weakening the EU, NATO and western values in their commitment to fight autocracy, spearheaded by

³⁷ <https://www.dw.com/en/worries-for-rule-of-law-in-slovakia-as-fico-targets-courts/a-67985576>

³⁸ https://republikon.hu/esemenyek/251014_v4pluskhk-beszamolo.aspx

³⁹ <https://www.ft.com/content/4c825adc-11ac-4fd7-be9f-37155468e8a3>

Russia⁴⁰. The war in Ukraine showed that despite the obvious Russian aggression many illiberal parties in the region failed to distance themselves from Putin, and even in the fiercely anti-Putin Poland, the support of Ukraine became a debated topic.⁴¹

The V4 as a political block is also experiencing its ups and downs due to the varying degrees of illiberalism, mostly due to the block's relationship to Russia. The once strong Hungarian-Polish friendship is at a low level as the two countries starkly split on their relationship with Putin⁴². It is not in the interest of Russia to see a unified V4 against the country, but a unified illiberal block weakening the EU would help Putin. Fortunately this is not yet a reality, due to the varying strengths of liberal institutions in the countries.

OUTLOOKS

Illiberalism can be reversed, although as evidenced by previous examples it is not easy. Illiberalism in the V4 is of interest not because it would be an illiberal block. The example of Poland, where the illiberal government was ousted in a good example, and the Czech Republic has not yet crystallized as an illiberal state under an illiberal government, yet the concerns are valid.

It is impossible to say what illiberalism will look like, how fast can Fico dismantle liberal institutions, what will be the agenda of the Czech government, could PiS make a comeback in Poland if Orbán will survive the next elections.

No matter what, liberals need to defend their values even in the darkest illiberalism and in the brightest liberal democracy. The Czech Republic is a good example that illiberal forces can be threat even in a country that did consistently well in measurements of liberal democracy, and Poland is an excellent example that even a party, which extended its grip on the country through illiberal means can be defeated.

A study on freedom of speech shows that freedom of speech truly disappears not when laws hinder it, but when people are stopping to exercise their freedom⁴³. This is at the heart of the fight against illiberalism. A constant pushback on illiberal tendencies will ultimately be successful. It might not have seemed like that from the Eastern block

⁴⁰ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21599165.2024.2420967>

⁴¹ <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/polish-election-pis-softens-ukraine-stance-fearing-konfederacja-surge/>

⁴² <https://www.dw.com/en/poland-hungary-how-two-close-allies-came-to-be-estranged/a-71530372>

⁴³ <https://phys.org/news/2025-10-risky-hidden-dynamics-censorship.html>

during communism, yet people did not relent and in the end liberal democracy won. This illiberal tendency will also push if liberals don't give up.

CONCLUSIONS

Illiberalism is a growing threat worldwide, fuelled by Russia. In the V4 countries illiberalism is coupled with populism and nationalism, yet despite the mutually reinforcing and influencing trends the countries differ in their strengths of institutions, the strength of liberal or illiberal democracy and the in the political trends.

They are all similar however in that it is in the interest of Russian and the disinterest of Europe to see a V4 which goes against liberal democracies, and the support of such systems.

It is evident there is always a way out of illiberalism, even if all trends suggest that once democratic backsliding begins it often ends in increasing autocratization, rather than experiencing a stable system after initial changes. That is to say once a democratic country turns illiberal the situation is expected to get worse. That is not a reason not to counter illiberalism. When there are people defending liberty there is hope for liberal democracy to return.



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