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Illiberal spectatorship – the disfigurement of citizenship in Hungary and Poland

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ABSTRACT

Hungary and Poland have been forerunners of democratic backsliding in Europe. Both governments have been building an 'illiberal democracy' using the populist promise to return power to the people. We argue that despite this promise, the Fidesz and PiS governments have undertaken political reforms that turn citizens into spectators with a very limited say or take in politics and willing objects of propaganda and disinformation. The turning of citizens into spectators is integral part of democratic backsliding as illiberal policies empty citizenship of its meaning, thus facilitating transition to autocracy. Illiberal regimes 1) capture media to control public opinion, 2) remove the opportunities for citizens to exercise their political agency, 3) redefine the contours of the political community to the extent that critical citizens' belonging is questioned, 4) and instead of political choices, they present an emotional spectacle, often based on propaganda, fake news or straight lies. Spectators do not merely watch the show, they assist in its creation as fans of leaders who supposedly express and realize their collective will – the voice of true people. This way, spectatorship becomes the societal and cultural underpinning of the illiberal regime, where leaders fake democracy to hoard and hold onto power.

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Citizenship is the building block of all classic and modern concepts of democracy. Democracy cannot function without citizens as it draws its primary legitimacy from citizens' participation and their oversight of political decisions. While ideal citizens are considered active participants of politics – not only voting but also performing watchdog functions over government (for an overview see Dalton 2008), democracies have been plagued by declining trends of public input (Blais, Gidengil, and Nevitte 2004; Kostelka and Blais 2021). One of possible explanations is that something has been happening to citizens along the expansion of visual mass media such as TV, a trend that Sartori (1997) described as the rise of the 'homo videns'. The 'watching person' clings to pictures, video messages and crude entertainment, instead of being an active citizen. With new media, internet and social media there is a never-seen abundance of information, yet citizenship seems to have given way to audience, whereby watching politicians on TV or reading their 280 characters on Twitter becomes the key political activity (Levinson 2011).

Modern public life is increasingly based on individuals viewing spectacles (Kohn 2008), the 'hominem videntes' of liberal democracies and spectator citizens of illiberal regimes differ. We

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argue that illiberal regimes[1] do not only disfigure democratic institutions, such as parliaments or courts, but they also disfigure citizenship into what we call illiberal spectatorship. This is a transformation of the very nature of citizenship. If we understand citizenship as having three main dimensions: (1) citizenship as a legal status, (2) as a political agency of political institutions, and as (3) a membership in a political community (Carens 2000; Cohen 1999; Kymlicka and Norman 2000), then illiberal regimes aim at disabling all these dimensions of citizenship. In this sense, the process of making spectators out of citizens is the opposite of the hitherto historical dynamics of citizenship, where citizenship is believed to be subject to expansion to include new types of rights (civil, political and social) to an ever-larger number of societal groups (Marshal 1950). While liberal democracies may be plagued by passive citizens, in contrast illiberal regimes purposefully hollow out citizenship and turn it into a special brand of spectatorship to enable transition to autocracy.

While Mathiesen (1997) depicted 'the viewer society' as a general trend of media-affected modern societies, we argue that illiberal spectatorship results from specific illiberal politics. The resulting illiberal spectatorship is not a trend nor a general mediatization process of society. It is a conscious top-down reconstruction of citizenship by illiberal political elites as part of democratic backsliding. Illiberal regimes are distinctive in that media control allows for altering public opinion, executive aggrandizement disables political agency of citizens, populist reframing of the community questions the belonging of opponents, and politics is transformed into theatrical spectacles. Illiberal spectators are expected not only to 'consume' the political spectacle but also to participate in it by offering their support. This way, illiberal spectatorship is based on the uncritical reception of government messages on the one hand, and the willingness to be politically mobilized in support of the government/leader, on the other. This is particularly important near the time of elections, as illiberal regimes still draw on (unfair, but not completely rigged) electoral processes to generate their political legitimacy (Scheppele 2022).

To sketch the contours of illiberal spectatorship, we examine Hungary and Poland, countries that have been leading the wave of anti-democratic developments in the European Union. Both governments have set out to build an 'illiberal democracy' – a contradiction in terms, as it is in fact a dismantling of liberal democracy using populist promises to return power from the corrupt elites to the 'true' people. We argue that despite the populist promise to (re)empower the people, both Fidesz and PiS governments have undertaken measures to enact the opposite, that is, to turn citizens into spectators with limited say or take in politics, who are objects of propaganda and disinformation, easily mobilized to support the regime against the alleged enemies.

Our central argument is that Fidesz and PiS aim at establishing illiberal spectatorship as the societal and cultural underpinning of the new political regimes in Budapest and Warsaw. Illiberal regimes transform citizens into spectators with the goal to alienate citizens from democratic politics and channel their activities into an emotionalized, acritical support of the government and/or leader, while excluding dissidents, critics, and supporters of the opposition from the new community of the 'true people'. In this way, citizens become either illiberal spectators who follow illiberal regimes like sports club fans or they can oppose and protest (if still possible) but have no real impact on the political decision-making as their citizenship becomes meaningless. While Poland is less advanced in establishing the illiberal regime than Hungary, it follows the Hungarian roadmap almost to the letter. Concentrating on these two cases allows us to delineate the contours of illiberal spectatorship, which is also likely to apply to other illiberal regimes – not only in Europe (e.g. Slovenia, Serbia) but the wider world (Turkey, India, the US under Trump).

We proceed as follows: first, we briefly discuss how illiberal regimes turn citizens step-by-step into spectators via the enacted institutional changes that allow for political control over media and public opinion, executive aggrandizement, the redefinition of the 'true people', as well as the transformation of politics into spectacles. The second section outlines how illiberal spectatorship operates in real life. Relying mainly on secondary sources, we trace how Hungarian and Polish governments have enacted authoritarian institutional changes that allow for a control of public will and limit citizens in

their ability to oversee executive power and exercise their political agency to ensure leaders are subject to acclamation rather than critical evaluation. We conclude by summing up how the dismantling of democracy results in disfiguring citizenship, turning citizens into illiberal spectators.

Disfiguring citizenship – enabling illiberal spectatorship

There is a vast literature on the crisis of liberal democracy (for a review, see Dimova 2019) that identifies problems of both the supply (Carothers 2015; Mair 2011) and the demand (Brennan 2016; Gaventa 1995) side of democracy. The crisis of liberal democracy is certainly multifaceted and can assume different forms, but we concentrate on how illiberal regimes can affect citizenship because within this type of regime, authoritarian leaders impose political changes at the expense of the citizenry. In such cases of elite-initiated transformation, supply can indeed determine demand for democracy, i.e. the voter's will is 'largely not a genuine but a manufactured will' (Schumpeter, Capitalism, and Democracy 2003, 263). In other words, populist authoritarian leaders such as Orbán or Kaczyński do not only represent the 'voice of the people' but they actively craft popular will according to their own liking.

We argue building 'illiberal democracy' disfigures democratic citizenship and therefore establishes a kind of 'spectator democracy'. The concept of 'spectator democracy' seems to have been suggested for the first time by Barnes and Kaase in 1979 (quoted in Andersen and Torpe 2000, 5), yet it has not been used extensively (except for Scandinavian literature on political participation, see Arter 2006). Spectator democracy is usually understood in contrast to participatory democracy, where active citizens are replaced by spectators – who are passive and uninterested in politics. In a slightly different meaning, van Deth claimed that in spectator democracy citizens are superficially interested in politics, but they are not engaged because politics plays only a minor role in their lives (Andersen and Torpe 2000; van Deth 2003). Andersen used the term 'spectator democracy' to define a society where citizens are engaged and competent in forming their opinion but there are no opportunities for dialogue with those who govern (Andersen and Torpe 2000).

This strain of literature on spectator democracy shares similarities with Manin's 'audience democracy', which posits that the public is too passive and does not want to participate in politics (Manin 1997, 223). It also resembles Green's (2010) 'ocular democracy' that claims, in contrast, that the passive audience is in fact empowered, as spectators can be participants in politics just by 'watching'. Indeed, Green argues spectators can monitor and exert disciplining effects just by observing politicians as the latter expose themselves to the public in so-called 'candour moments of unmanaged surveillance' (Green 2010, 20–22), such as parliamentary questions, interpellations or even press conferences. These should work as checks on politicians and compel them to act (more) responsively.

We posit illiberal democracies produce a very different type of spectatorship. In contrast to Manin and Green, we argue (1) illiberal political elites are in (or seek) control of media to influence public opinion at the expense of general citizens' will. In this case, media ceases to be part of the independent public sphere and become subject to 'illiberal conditioning' (Surowiec, Kania-Lundholm, and Winiarska-Brodowska 2020). Moreover, (2) authoritarian changes of the illiberal regime offer limited or no possibilities for candour moments and thus camouflage rather than reveal 'true' intentions of politicians. As a result, illiberal spectators have limited opportunities to influence those who govern and the ruling elite engineers support through propaganda and disinformation. These measures purposefully alienate citizens from the democratic process and lead to a decline in their sense of citizenship (van Zoonen 2004). Furthermore, (3) a populist political strategy is employed to disintegrate the political community into the 'true people' (followers) and its enemies (opponents). This helps present the world in a totalizing binary view of a righteous struggle to rally the people behind leaders. (4) Such simplified and emotional messages, often displaying blatantly false information, help transform politics into the political spectacle displayed to citizens. As a result, illiberal politics ensures the unchallenged primacy of the rulers over the ruled (Fitzgerald 2015) and

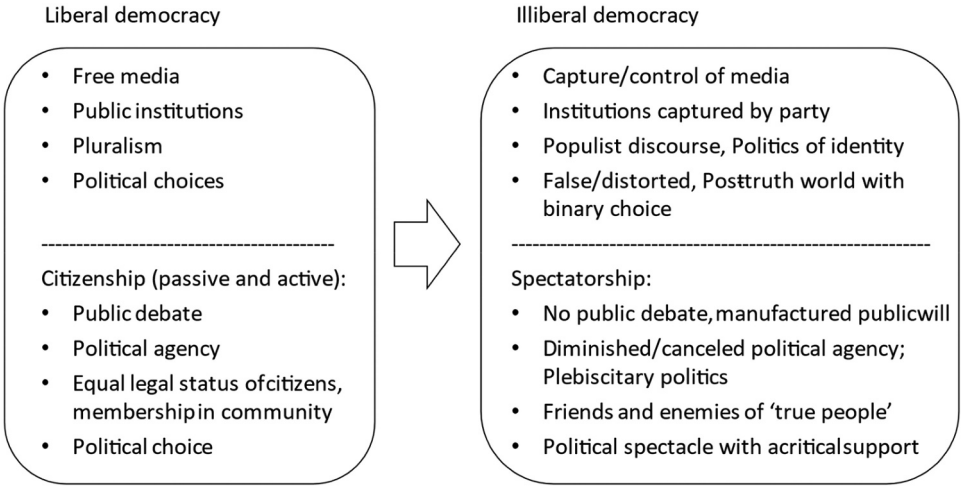

Figure 1. Turning citizens into spectators.

enables incumbent political actors to render citizens uncritically passive yet unreflectively supportive – turning them into loyal illiberal spectators. These four steps – media control, limited candour moments, disintegration of the political community and political spectacles – add up to the creation of illiberal spectatorship.

Figure 1 depicts how the policy changes of illiberal democratic backsliding enable illiberal spectatorship in contrast to democratic citizenship.

Let us address each of the four steps of creating illiberal spectatorship. *First*, illiberal regimes seek control over the media to be able to manipulate public opinion. Leaders claim to speak people's will, but in fact they actively craft it. Media control and one-sided messages do not only disable public debate but also ensure a proclaimed shift from partisan politics to identity politics (Michailidou and Trenz 2013) and the ascendance of populism (Son 2020). Since in today's world, it is mass media that creates the conditions to produce the 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006), by controlling media, illiberal regimes profoundly alter 'the framing values and ideas that determine how we live together' (Walter and Ghazarian 2018, 14) and what are the boundaries of the political community.

The *second* essential element of turning citizens into spectators comes into place, as illiberal regimes work on disabling checks on executive power to ensure no interfere with the rule of the leader. Since liberal democracy is weakened, hollowed out and then dismantled, citizens have less and less opportunity to influence rulers, who in turn aim to take over not only the legislative institutions or command over the judiciary, public administration or the state apparatus but also seek to dominate further aspects of social life. Citizens cannot exercise political agency as executives become free of any public scrutiny.

As the *third* element, the illiberal regime demands the support of spectators, and the populist images of the 'good people' and its enemies are key in fostering loyalty to the leader/regime through exclusion. Populist discourse and identity politics invoking images of friends and enemies are key in diverting citizens' attention from political accountability and the power-grab by ruling elites, who claim to fight for people's interest in face of various (real or discursively created) crises (Sata 2023). Illiberal spectators' role is defined 'by their bond to the people as incarnated in the nation and its leadership' (Rosenberg 2021, 11). Illiberal spectators do not merely watch the show, they assist in its presentation (Fitzgerald 2015). However, this is not a meaningful participation but an acritical support, where the leader is authorized by the spectators and the spectators are authorized by the leader, creating the illusion that this is the best outcome achievable at the time and under the given circumstances.

The *fourth* element of turning citizens into spectators is the presentation of political spectacles to cultivate emotional appeals – often using disinformation – for the development and maintenance of affective bonds with voters. As a result, illiberal regimes turn politics into theatrical spectacles of catchy slogans and images, often relying on false information. In this setting, there is only one political truth, which is constantly reaffirmed. As such, Weber's account of recognition in charismatic leadership (Joosse 2017) is twisted paradoxically: it is the leader's task to sustain their spectators and see that they both prosper and remain attentive (Fitzgerald 2015, 308). Politics becomes distinguished by a personalization of the relationship between candidates and voters (Wilson 2014). At the same time, preference of emotional over factual content turns the community of citizens into something like a 'fan community' of political leaders portrayed as the 'telegenic embodiments of particular ideals' (van Zoonen 2004, 44). In turn, acritical illiberal spectators support their leader-showman via acclamation, based on the politicians' media performance, rather than their accountability.

To summarize, while in liberal democracy media functions both as a source of information and a watchdog of executive power for both active and passive citizens, in illiberal democracy, the watchdog function of media is disabled and media as source of information or space of public debate becomes obsolete as illiberal leaders seek direct contact to their followers. While liberal democracy is based on the political agency of citizens, illiberal regimes obstruct the interference with executive power and aim to cancel the agency of ordinary people. While the political community is open in liberal democracies, illiberal democracy restricts membership by defining who are the 'true people', excluding all who are critical of the regime. Last but not least, while in democracy politics should be about reasoned truth, in illiberal democracy disinformation and propaganda ensure citizens turned spectators are not presented political choices but rather a political spectacle to captivate their support.

Illiberal spectatorship in practice – Hungary and Poland

Let us now turn to how Orbán and Kaczyński have replaced democratic citizenship with illiberal spectatorship as part of their deconstruction of liberal democracy. We show how media capture and control, deconstruction of checks on executive power, populist division of society and the political spectacle turn citizens into spectators of the illiberal regime.

Media capture and control to spread propaganda

Media capture by the ruling parties considerably limits press freedom in both countries. In the World Press Freedom index, Hungary has fallen to 92nd, Poland to 64th position in 2021, compared to their 2010 positions at 23rd and 32nd, respectively (RSF 2022). The extensive political influence over media outlets helps both regimes spread their message, while critical voices have little chance to reach the audience. In Hungary, much of the public can only access government-controlled media and its propaganda. In Poland, propaganda reach is more limited, although as the recent efforts by the government show, PiS seeks to follow Orbán's footsteps.

In Hungary, Orbán has always blamed alleged media headwind for his political failures. Convinced that his own media is needed to realize his political goals, Orbán has started to build a media empire already while in opposition (post-2002) and only stepped up his efforts (re)taking office in 2010.[2] Using Fidesz's parliamentary majority, his government adopted new media legislation, which allowed for exerting considerable political influence on media content (Dragomir 2017a). Despite large-scale protests (Jenne and Mudde 2012; Wilkin, Dencik, and Bognár 2015), Fidesz set up a new media authority under the de facto control of the party to combat 'unbalanced reporting' that ensures media self-censorship (Kelemen 2017). In addition, Hungary's public service media outlets – national TVs, radio stations and the national news service – were packed with party loyalists (Brouillette and van Beek 2012). Public media outlets have been used for party-political goals,

including attacks on the political opposition, often using false information despite libel fines (Lendvai 2017, 115–120).

Following considerable political pressure, much of Hungarian private media has been bought up by Fidesz party affiliates (Dragomir 2017b). The party has a monopoly of regional dailies (e.g. *Délmagyarország* and *Kisalföld*), controls the second largest national private TV (TV2) and some of the most popular news websites (origo.hu, index.hu) (Krekó and Enyedi 2018). Orbán is also infamous for closing down Hungary's largest leftist daily newspaper, Népszabadság (Nagy 2018, 207). At the same time, party cronies donated free of charge 476 media outlets, including some of the biggest in the country, to a newly created foundation (KESMA) allied to Fidesz (The Economist 2019). Apart from one independent TV station – the internationally owned RTL Klub – the remaining independent press has minimal public reach. With new plans to hike up RTL's tax rates under way at the time of writing (May 2022), there is a strong likelihood that this channel will too soon fall under the influence of Fidesz.

Control of over 90% of Hungarian media outlets enables Orbán to direct public debate as he wishes. This guarantees that only regime-friendly messages and reports critical of the opposition reach Hungarian citizen spectators. The success of media control is well illustrated by the latest, 2022 election campaign coverage. Indeed, the dismantling of democratic institutions and systematic rule of law violations were hardly covered in the lead up to the elections. Orbán was instead presented as a guarantor of peace, stability and prosperity (in wake of the Ukraine war). By comparison, the coverage was ripe with false reporting that a potential win by the opposition could lead to the country's entry in to the war and the start of widespread poverty due to Russian gas and oil shortages (Garamvolgyi 2022). The united opposition's PM candidate, Péter Márki-Zay, received a total of 5 minutes on public TV to dispel these accusations.

In Poland, PiS ensued the takeover of the public media as soon as the party formed the government in 2015. All state-controlled public media stations (both radio and TV) came under the control of party loyalists, which heavily influenced the content of the broadcast programs (Kublik and Sobotta 2016). Media Law was changed as early as December 2015 (Guzek and Grzesiok-Horosz 2021) and the public television, in particular its news channel TVPInfo, were turned into crude propaganda machines in favour of the PiS government, using falsehoods, manipulation and character assassination techniques against the opposition leaders and PiS critics. Like Fidesz, PiS has funded 'public' media generously from the state budget to push propaganda and disinformation, which are key to spectatorship. This became visible even to independent commentators in the parliamentary election campaign in 2019 and the presidential election campaign in 2020, in which PiS candidates were given full support by the state media, whereas opposition candidates were attacked and often lied about (OECD 2019).

While PiS has no national holding of media outlets such the Hungarian KESMA, there are attempts to imitate it. In fact, the Polish state-owned energy conglomerate PKN Orlen bought 500 regional and local media outlets (internet portals and newspapers, including the biggest 20 local newspapers organized as Polska Press) from the German Passau Group in 2020. This move was part of the so-called 'repolonisation' campaign, an attempt to concentrate as many media as possible in the hands of PiS and its satellite organizations (Banasiński and Rojszczak 2021). With this move, PKN Orlen has acquired access to 17.4 million readers, a substantial part of the Polish market and turned it into a propaganda machine of the government. Despite the initial claims of maintaining standards of journalistic neutrality, the chief editors of the regional newspapers were replaced by PiS-friendly journalists. Danuta Kania, a well-known PiS sympathizer and right-wing journalist associated with PiS-friendly *Gazeta Polska*, was appointed as the president of the board of Polska Press. Kania is infamous, among others, for being sued and sentenced in several libel cases for false statements in her articles.

Similar 'repolonisation' policies were applied to private television broadcasters who were either pressured or brought into collaboration with PiS, such as Polsat, a corporation that has been

'convinced' to hire pro-PiS journalists and well-known right-wing propagandists (Cieśla and Pawlicka 2018). The other strategy of 'repolonisation' aims at co-optation of some private media that remain formally independent, but represent increasingly the government's points of view, even though in a less crude way than the state-owned TV does. This is also an effective way of promoting spectatorship, as it lures citizens into trusting PiS-leaning messaging via seemingly independent journalism.

Openly critical news outlets such as TVN particularly its news channel TVN24 have been targeted and pressured to sell to PiS allies. For a long time, the corporation was immune to various pressures (e.g. fines by PiS-controlled media bodies), as it is a corporation with US capital belonging to Discovery Group. Attempts to extort one of the independent oligarchs Leszek Czarnecki into buying (and destroying) TVN24 (Drabik 2021) have also failed. PiS also pushed through parliament the so-called Lex TVN (threatening to revoke TVN's broadcasting license) in August 2021 and it was only US pressure that stopped Polish President Duda from signing the law into effect. Hence, parts of the public space are still independent of PiS, as some news outlets and TV stations have not yet been captured by the ruling party and its networks of influence.

At the same time, there are several right-wing media outlets sympathizing with PiS for financial, ideological and personal reasons. These include *TV Republika, Gazeta Polska, DoRzeczy* and *Sieci* (or its internet version wpolityce.pl). These outlets exercise so-called 'identity journalism', spreading a message supporting the PiS government and attacking the opposition as well as the EU (for proceedings of the rule of law violations against Poland). These outlets are kept alive by the financial support of the government, mainly through the purchase of advertisement space. In return, they compete in 'sucking up' to PiS politicians and their enablers, often giving out prizes and awards (Szacki 2021). For instance, the government-friendly weekly *Sieci* has given the award 'The Year's Person of Freedom' to prominent PiS politicians and apparatchiks including Andrzej Duda (2015), Jarosław Kaczyński (2016, 2021), Julia Przyłębska (2017), Mateusz Morawiecki (2019), and Daniel Obajtek (2020). These outlets are a relevant part of spectatorship politics as they limit the information space for citizens and channel their opinions into PiS-friendly tracks.

Disabling citizens' agency and limiting candour moments

Another essential aspect of illiberal spectatorship is the inability of citizens to influence politics or affect leaders between elections, since executive power is unchecked and the legislative power is in the hands of the party. In both Hungary and Poland, parliamentary functions are becoming meaningless and state institutions, in particular the legislative system, are insulated from citizens' intervention. This also means that politicians do not have to face 'candour moments', thus citizens have no opportunities to question elites and force them to reveal their 'true selves'. Since citizens have limited influence, even if they have interest in politics, they cannot change or influence the political agenda. These limitations on the exercise of political agency all weaken citizenship and alienate people from the political process, eventually turning citizens into apolitical spectators.

Orbán came to office in 2010 with a populist promise to return power to the people. Despite the promise, many of his legislative and institutional changes after 2010 in fact strengthened executive power at the expense of the people. Parliament was cut in half and new parliamentary practices were adopted that ignore the opposition entirely. Using its majority, Fidesz prevents the opposition from setting up committees in parliament (Enyedi 2015). Legislation is often submitted by individual Fidesz MPs using the fast-track procedure to avoid parliamentary rules, leaving no time for any meaningful debate or consultation on the proposals (Majtényi, Kopper, and Susánszky 2019). The shorter parliamentary cycle with less frequent meetings of the legislative also provides less opportunity for 'candour moments' to question the government on the floor. As a result, opposition supporters and representative of minority groups lose their political agency via parliament that has become Fidesz's playground.

The strengthening of Fidesz's legislative power at the expense of the opposition was simultaneous to the weakening of judicial checks and balances – further weakening the agency of citizens.

The Fidesz government severely curbed the competencies of the formerly strong and independent Constitutional Court, thus limiting the possibilities to appeal executive power. Political interference in the judiciary has become the new norm (Dimitrova 2018) as judges were replaced with party loyalists, using a lowered retirement age (Kelemen 2017; Körösényi 2019). Simultaneously, the wife of a Fidesz political affiliate, Tünde Handó was entrusted with leading the National Judicial Office. Having a two-third majority, Fidesz repeatedly amended the constitution to grant constitutional status to laws that would otherwise not pass basic constitutional requirements (Dostal et al. 2018). As a result, there is no more fora where legal challenges against the government can be voiced, as illustrated by Hungary's Pegasus affair. Despite reports identifying the Israeli spy software on phones of leading opposition and civic figures, the ombudsman's report found nothing illegal with the surveillance (Kacskovics and Lengyel 2022). This is in tune with the logic of illiberal spectatorship, as the bottom-up control over the ruling class is supposed to be close to zero. Knowledge about scandals does not generate disciplinary 'candour moments' and power abuse by the rulers has no legal or political consequences.

The most direct weakening of citizens' political agency is the Fidesz made electoral system that became more majoritarian and offers Fidesz the upper hand (Bogaards 2018; Tóka 2014). International monitors concluded elections since 2010 were unfair, opposition candidates having much weaker chances in the new system (Scheppele 2022). In addition to the unfair electoral system, Fidesz ensures citizens have no power to directly interfere with Orbán's rule. The new constitution has taken away 'actio popularis' or the right of any citizen to challenge the constitutionality of a parliamentary law (Bogaards 2018). Similarly, organizing a successful national referendum has been made unlikely as for a valid result, at least half of all voters must cast a valid vote (Pozsár-Szentmiklósy 2017). This way, the classic tools of direct democracy have been disabled and replaced by Fidesz with the instrument of national consultations, regular questionnaires sent to citizens. This populist plebiscitary tool has no legal basis and only further disables citizens' input into politics (see below).

Moreover, Fidesz dominates every aspect of social life often limiting citizens' agency. Key officials in every relevant public institution have been exchanged with party cronies. Civil servants had been fired *en masse*, and Fidesz allies were installed in vital positions. Even head teachers or hospital directors have been replaced, often with people without training or experience (Dimitrova 2018). The unquestionable dominance of the ruling party is present in every aspect of life: in culture, the arts, or even sports, leaving no voice for citizens – a turn to full illiberal spectatorship, despite many citizen protests. Even street protest is curtailed since the politics of spectatorship ignores or ridicules demonstrations against the regime, while state authorities are used to harass organizers and participants to silence dissent. Fidesz adopted law also permits government to ban demonstrations, e.g. a disproportionate blanket ban on assemblies in public spaces has been introduced under the pretext of the pandemic (State Department 2021).

In Poland, even though PiS demanded more citizen involvement in its slogans of the 2015 electoral campaign, once in office, it has done quite the opposite – limiting democratic citizenship and promoting illiberal spectatorship. The PiS government followed the same scenario as its Hungarian counterpart in taking steps to limit the agency of citizens. In the legislative process, the opposition has been sidelined, draft laws were pushed through legislative committees, Polish President Duda of PiS signed the drafts into law or accepted nomination of PiS judges at night in order to avoid protests and curtail public debate. Orbán's trick of introducing draft proposals by individual parliamentarians, which allows for ignoring the opposition, has also been widely used (Kopińska 2019). All these steps reduce the role of the opposition and thus disable debate of PiS policies.

Moreover, limiting citizens' agency has been carried out by other means as well. As PiS took over the Constitutional Court, this normally independent institution has become a new tool for the executive power of the party. The loyalist judges – often former PiS politicians – follow the party line to the letter and are willing executioners of Kaczyński's decisions. This has become apparent with

the abortion law in 2021, as PiS did not discuss the issue in parliament, given its highly controversial nature. Instead, the Court was charged to make only a 'legal' decision. The result – in tune with Kaczyński's will – tightened the ban on abortion, taking it to a much higher level of repressiveness vis-à-vis women's rights (HRW 2021). Street protests of the Court decision were met with police brutality, legal harassment by the state attorney office and propaganda by the public TV that charged opponents with anti-Polishness. This shows exactly how citizens' agency is suppressed. At the same time, spectators are mobilized to criticize protesters and even physically attack them on the streets, as it happened during the LGBT parade in Bialystok in 2019.

The Catholic Church in Poland plays a central role in disabling citizens' agency. Similar to some private broadcasters, the Church entered a symbiotic relationship with PiS, even though it has been a privileged institution by previous governments for a long time. The Church is a powerful ally of the illiberal regime in forging spectatorship, oftentimes from the priest's pulpit. Spectatorship is promoted with 'God's support' and demand for compliance of true Catholics, who supposedly can only vote for PiS, no questions asked, no doubt expressed. In return, the church receives great amounts of real estate from the Polish state free of charge (at the expense of the Polish citizens), which then is either sold at market prices or given to befriended allies at attractive prices or used commercially (e. g. to run hotels). In this sense, the Catholic Church has become allied with PiS in its goal of creating a state, in which the agency of the citizens is strongly reduced, civil rights constrained, and repressiveness of the state increased in its policies of exclusion of minority groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community or feminist activists (Klauziński and Chrzczonowicz 2019).

Furthermore, formal institutional changes are coupled with informal practices to limit the political agency of citizens in both Hungary and Poland. Given the extensive party capture of state institutions, state authorities such as the tax office or anti-trust office are often used to harass opponents, silence critics, or drag protesters to courts. This has been an extensive practice with the Polish women's rights protests and Hungarian authorities employ the same tactics against organizers of teachers' protests or human rights activists, who were fined for calling a boycott of the Fidesz referenda on child protection. Furthermore, the Pegasus affair shows both governments are ready to use illegal means to silence their critics. All these have considerably reduced the agency of citizens, thus promoting illiberal spectatorship.

Redefining the political community by exclusion

Spectatorship in illiberal regimes means that the democratic public is disintegrated, it is homogenized and divided into the 'true people' and its enemies. Both governments integrate their followers by delegitimizing opponents, who become secondary citizens, being clearly expulsed from the community. Crises are often evoked to rally support for a righteous fight against all 'others', blamed for the crisis. Presenting a Manichean world, the world becomes binary – you can only be either with us or against us. In turn, identity politics generate feelings of belonging that bond spectators together and identify with the leader, while their loyalty is to be confirmed by actively co-creating political closure by acclaiming propaganda, fake news, conspiracy theories and straight lies. The essence of this exclusionary identity politics is to disintegrate the community and make regime supporters think of the 'others' exclusively in terms of 'enemies', generating more resentment against the various 'others', thus successfully diverting the attention of citizens from political deliberation or accountability of the regime. Illiberal spectators follow without questioning; they give in to resentment and even embrace it.

Since 2010, Orbán's illiberal rule has been centred on re-defining 'the people'. As a result, the political community becomes reconfigured as a homogenized single body of supporters of the regime – the illiberal spectators, whereas all those critical of Fidesz's rule are excluded. The new Fidesz-crafted constitution (called Fundamental Law) has only cemented the reconfiguration of the political community, declaring majority interests – Orbán's supporters – above others (Majtényi, Kopper, and Susánszky 2019). While citizenship should guarantee equal status, in Orbán's illiberal

regime, diversity is denied in the name of the 'will of the people'. This way, the majority supporting Orbán silently 'watches' and even embraces the rights infringement of the (large) minority. At the same time, the same exclusionary identity politics not only rally domestic support but shield the regime from criticism both domestically and internationally. This is particularly true for the EU, Hungary's constant anti-EU propaganda portrays Hungarians as a unified community wrongfully attacked by Brussels bureaucrats, conjuring the image of the EU as enemy in the hearts and minds of Hungarian spectators (Sata 2023).

The Fidesz-crafted constitution gives constitutional preference for Christianity, conservative values, heterosexual marriage, while all others become secondary citizens, if citizens at all. This way, the constitution questions basic democratic norms and human rights and does not only undermine minorities or women's rights (see Hungary's low rank in HRW 2021) but also legitimizes regime attacks on anyone who is different or might be defined as such: migrants, asylum-seekers, sexual minorities. It also encourages anti-Roma sentiments or anti-Semitism among ordinary citizens, well-illustrated by Hungary's low scores in Eurobarometer data. Those who criticize the illiberal regime, be that academia or civil society actors, are attacked, often describing them as foreign 'Soros agents'[3] that allegedly put national security at risk, questioning the very citizenship of those who dissent.

In Poland, the homogenization of its own electoral base around illiberal spectators have also become the cornerstone of PiS politics based on exclusion. Since so-called public media are at the service of the party, they are the primary tools of disintegrating the citizenry into 'true Poles' and 'Poles of a lesser sort', as Kaczyński once put it. This type of identity politics is at pains to create 'enemies' of the 'true people', depicting political opponents as a threat (preferably to national sovereignty or cultural identity) and thus delegitimizing them and excluding them from the political community with the support the illiberal spectators. As a result, PiS has engaged in exclusionary identity politics against refugees, the LGBTQ+ community and representatives of the opposition. The opposition politicians and critics of PiS are labelled traitors, who 'denounce' their own country to the EU by criticizing the government for rule of law violations. Smear campaigns are carried out against PiS competitors, chauvinistic agitation and conspiracy theories are spun by actors closely allied with the PiS to target the opposition before elections in the Fall of 2023.

A major role is played in this regard by party-controlled television, in particular the news outlet TVPInfo, and the Catholic Radio Maryja, the latter with hardcore clerical PiS spectatorship. In addition to statements of PiS politicians, these media are the main transmission belts of populist discourse in Poland. The PiS-controlled TVPInfo was until recently run by Jacek Kurski, a former PiS politician, who specializes in smear campaigns against politicians of the opposition, dissidents and critics (Vetter 2017, 30). However, TVPInfo under Kurski is not just about spreading falsehoods, manipulation and lies. Its news programs are designed to produce the 'others' and integrate the 'us', accompanied by the feeling of moral superiority of PiS supporters. The 'others' are not just any 'others', as they are framed as traitors to be hated and fought, which also incites verbal and physical violence. A tragic example thereof is the case of Pawel Adamowicz, former mayor of Gdansk and an adamant critic of PiS, who was assassinated in 2018, after TVPInfo ran a crude and brutal propaganda campaign against him (e.g. Schwertner 2021). The case of Adamowicz is a specific case of identity politics employed by illiberals, which does not operate at the level of vague threat construction but gives the 'enemy' a face and a name.

An important ally that supports PiS in its populist spectatorship politics is the fundamentalist Catholic and anti-Semitic Radio Maryja (and its TV broadcasting station Trwam), controlled by the Dominican priest Rydzyk, who developed a media empire, mainly thanks to PiS government support. Rydzyk and his media preach largely intolerant and discriminatory beliefs under the cover of a Catholic mission. For example, Radio Maryja is well-known for its chauvinistic, conspiracy theory-driven and anti-Semitic agitation (Maszkowski 2006; US Department of State 2016). Its core activity is combating liberal culture, the 'gender threat' and the alleged conspiracy of Western media that denigrates Catholic priests as paedophiles. The activities of Radio Maryja focus on creating

a common enemy, with which it perfectly fits the ideological needs of PiS (Wysocka 2008) and help promote societal division. Justice Minister Ziobro, defense minister Błaszczak and above all Kaczyński visit the events organized by Rydzyk, pay him respect and amplify his visions of enemies, threats, and other risks to the 'true people' of Poland. Radio Maryja might not have the same broadcasting reach as the 'public' media controlled by PiS do, but it epitomizes the political and financial alliance between the party and the Catholic Church, aiming for reconfiguration of the political community.

The more recent (and old at the same time) enemy for PiS and its supporters has been Donald Tusk – former prime minister and president of the EU Council. Since Tusk returned to Poland in 2021 to become the head of PO – the major opposition party, he is subject of constant attacks as a traitor to true Polish interests and Germany's lackey. The amount of hatred against Tusk, and often against his family, has reached unprecedented level and resembles a systemically organized witch hunt – without doubts, to animate support of spectators (Erling 2021; Kowalczyk 2022). For years, Tusk has been constructed by PiS as the devil incarnate 'with blood on his hands', as advanced by the so-called 'Smolensk religion', a PiS conspiracy theory claiming Tusk and Putin agreed to assassinate the twin brother of Kaczyński (Mierzyńska 2019). The same 'Smolensk religion' has been revived by Kaczyński to rally spectator-citizens during the Ukraine war of 2022.

Political spectacles

Turning citizens into illiberal spectators fundamentally depends on presenting politics as a stage performance – both to capture and engage those watching, similarly to a reality show or a football game. Simple and catchy messages, accompanied by vivid images, are to engage people often appealing to their emotions rather than reason. Complex political choices are turned into simple slogans, presenting a Manichean world, often based on falsehoods and manipulative information. Images of friends and enemies are put on with belligerent emotions and war rhetoric to rally the people to support the regime against alleged domestic and external foes. This is sustained by one-sided communication that presents a 'single truth' of politics to ensure spectators' passionate response to politicians' performance.

In Hungary, the so-called national consultations are regular questionnaires sent to the citizens with titles such as 'Let's Stop Brussels' and 'The National Consultation on the Soros Plan'. While the precise outcome of these consultations has never been public, Orbán uses this plebiscitary tool to claim his public policy is the undisputable 'will of the people' (Enyedi 2015; Körösényi 2019). The topics are always linked to on-going political propaganda that outlines the crisis of the time and enemies to be blamed for it, a proven way to forge uncritical support of spectators. Questions and messages addressed to citizens are not informative but rather signal the 'right answer' to the questions. In fact, government does not use these consultations to explore the will of the people but to build legitimacy and support for governmental action, in other words to present its own political show.

National consultations are also accompanied by extensive billboard and media campaigns to 'inform' citizens. In fact, these are disinformation campaigns creating the political spectacle, often distorting information or simply lying. The billboards are present everywhere in the country and demonstrate visually the government's command over public space (Zimanyi 2020). Moreover, (mis) communication through billboards also shows the government is mainly interested in sending simple messages to citizens about often complex issues rather than engaging in any meaningful debate. A 2021 campaign went as far as it used emoji to call people fill in the national consultation on various complex topics such as family support, taxation, Hungary's vaccine factory, migration, George Soros, and the EU (Vass 2021). Creating the political spectacle is the very essence of Orbán's politics, well-illustrated by the fact that in addition to general advertising, the government spent more than 216 million EUR in 2010–18 to pay for billboards, leaflets, television ads, and mass mailing campaigns of 'public information' to shape public opinion in ways beneficial to Fidesz (Bátorfy 2019).

The political spectacle is routinely exaggerated to be convincing: Fidesz's communication campaigns often display blatantly false news – e.g. untrue facts regarding migration, terrorism or Brussels, the civil sector, not to mention conspiracy theories about Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros. This is a conscious and strategic use of fake news in propaganda (Bede 2021) that is carried out by all government-friendly and government-funded media simultaneously. In turn, independent journalists are regularly attacked by Fidesz politicians for spreading false information. In addition, Fidesz is especially active on social media, providing detailed info to members and supporters on how to attract followers or create and spread smear campaigns to discredit political opponents (Haszán 2018). This helps integrate spectators even into the virtual world: although substantial messages are rarely posted, even a post displaying an image of a crowd with the slogan 'Only Fidesz' can reach thousands of likes (Karl 2019).

Orbán, a gifted speaker (Vágvölgyi 2019), words all his political messages in apolitical, non-technocratic everyday language suitable for political spectacles. His speeches often appeal to emotions and rely on fake news to stir up people's reactions. He uses his regular weekly interviews on public radio to set the political agenda instead of having political debate take place in parliament. The 30 minutes interviews are carefully constructed political spectacles, following a script to convey Orbán's personal charismatic message, through direct contact with his spectators. Even 'spontaneous' meetings or visits of Orbán are carefully planned and documented, always conveying an image of a great leader (Alfahir 2012). At the same time, there is no debate in the media: Orbán does not respond to any questions from independent media and his government officials deny responding to questions that have public interest.

Disinformation is an organic part of the illiberal spectacle, heightening emotions to capture and bond the citizens to their leaders. Orbán himself often spreads these false information – from conspiracy theories about Soros to false news that he negotiated reduced energy prices to shield citizens from price hikes in 2021. Similarly, the Fidesz government introduced caps on energy prices already in 2010 (and yet more in 2021) and all providers must display on bills how much was saved for the consumer, reminding everybody whom to thank. Yet, this info is simply false as it does not consider price fluctuations on the market that should have resulted in even lower prices at times. Disinformation also characterizes Fidesz's 2022 call for a referendum on supposedly protecting children but in fact promoting anti-LGBTQ+ legislation (Rédai 2022). At the same time, these simplified messages that resemble slogans, coupled with vivid images of threats, lull spectators into uncritical support of the government, without any reflection. The emotional messages translate any policy choice into a totalizing binary choice of 'with us' or 'against us', leaving no choice to the illiberal spectators.

PiS also uses spectacles to transform citizens into spectators. Sometimes the PiS spectacles take on a very crude form, such as a 2021 press conference, when the minister of Interior Mariusz Kamiński showed pictures presenting zoophile activities, allegedly taken from the cell phones of the refugees, to justify controversial measures of the PiS government against migrants at the Polish-Belorussian border (Leszczyński 2021). This spectacle backfired, as it was ridiculed by the public, but the other spectacles have been more successful.

Apart from press conferences, spectacles often take the form of TV campaigns, billboards or propaganda information carried out by state-controlled institutions such as energy firms and loyalist media, similar to what we see in Hungary. The goal is to enhance acceptance for often controversial political measures, such as the so-called 'Polish deal' (Polski Lad), a comprehensive tax reform that came into force in January 2022 but turned out to be a political disaster due to its chaotic nature and negative financial outcome for many citizens (Kalinowska 2022). However, billboards highlighting the advantages of 'Polish deal' were visible many months prior to its introduction to build support. The manipulative billboards showed statements like 'Local government thanks for Polish deal', which were straight lies, as local government rather feared funding deficits due to the changes. At the same time, state-controlled TV showed propagandist interviews with people claiming to profit from 'Polish deal'. All this turned out to be a spectacle in face of the actual effects of the 'Polish deal', which

extracts more taxes from the bulk of citizenry to benefit the less educated, poorer and unemployed PiS spectator voter.

PiS propaganda targets mainly the less educated people, their main supporters, to prevent them from turning their backs on the party. People in smaller and rural areas can only watch state-controlled TV rather than private and PiS-critical TV, the former being broadcast terrestrially 'for free', whereas private stations are available through cable or satellite. 72,50% of the PiS voters use TV as the main source of information (P 2021). False news of higher taxation, increases in energy prices are at the centre of state propaganda as these are major concerns for PiS voters.

The state-controlled energy corporations, among others Tauron, ran (dis)information campaigns blaming the EU for the electricity price increases in 2022. Emails sent to Tauron clients claimed that the new measures of the PiS government, called the 'anti-inflation shield', would level out the price increases – a further straight falsehood (money.pl 2022), as the price increases are already there, but the information has been presented in an appealing graphic form including a light bulb in the colour of the EU's blue flag, with stars to clearly remind whom to blame.

Less often than Orbán, PiS leaders such as Kaczyński, Morawiecki and Duda do go in front of the public in order to contribute to the political spectacle. Since they are lesser speakers than Orbán, their appearances often boomerang. One of the examples is the 2020 October 'speech to the nation', Kaczyński's online appearance on the PiS party homepage, after mass protests broke out, provoked by the Constitutional Court decision making abortion law more repressive. Visibly shocked by the intensity of the protests, also directed against the Catholic Church, Kaczyński delivered a speech, in which he called in a belligerent manner for the defence of the Polish churches, 'keepers of the Polish values' – despite numerous scandals of paedophile priests and their protectors. Still, it was not clear in what function Kaczyński was speaking, as he was neither president nor prime minister. The speech was far from charismatic, as his appearance in front of the camera resembled the similarly belligerent speeches by general Jaruzelski in 1981, after Martial Law was introduced in communist Poland (Czerminski 2020).

In addition, the international arena can be used for the domestic political spectacle, as shown by PM Morawiecki's speech in the European Parliament. Morawiecki spoke about a Third World War that the EU allegedly planned to wage against Poland. In his opinion, the EU was holding a gun to Poland's head in the conflict over the rule of law violations. All these belligerent statements were ridiculed as completely out of proportion by many observers. However, Morawiecki's controversial statements were directed mainly at domestic audiences, positioning himself as a 'tough' politician vis-à-vis the EU, something he thought would please Kaczyński (Lipinski 2021). Morawiecki was unable to negotiate with the EU any solution that would free the recovery funds for Poland. Even though unsuccessful, this was a spectacle to demonstrate toughness in defending 'true' Polish interests and rally PiS supporters, irrespective of how exaggerated and biased the delivered message was – an exercise for illiberal spectators, rather than citizens.

Conclusions

We have argued that spectatorship is one of the key elements of democratic backsliding in illiberal regimes. Illiberal regimes disfigure democratic citizenship by turning citizens into spectators, who form the social and cultural underpinning of illiberal rule. This way, illiberal regimes do not only aim at anti-democratic institutional changes (Urbinati's disfigured democracy) but also exercise politics that turn citizens into spectators by emptying citizenship of its proper meaning. As we have shown, media control allows leaders to manipulate public opinion and steer public debate in ways they see fit. Instead of authentic public debate, the public is often sidestepped in favour of the judgement of leaders or so-called experts of the regime. Spectators of illiberal regimes are lured by a combination of identity politics and apolitical rule without 'candour moments'. Populist identity politics is employed to disintegrate the citizenry into the 'true people' and its enemies. Political choices are

translated into a righteous struggle of 'us' vs. 'others'. In this setting, emotional messages rally an acritical identification of the masses with the leader, elected out of a campaign s/he manipulated (a new form of Caesarism, see Sata and Karolewski 2020).

As noted by many (e.g. Mathiesen 1997; Sartori 1997), we witness a mediatization of politics with passive citizens. Yet we argue illiberal regimes manipulate mediatization with a specific aim: to turn citizens into supportive spectators rather than participants of democratic politics. Turning citizens into spectators, illiberal regimes in fact question the very essence of democracy. Captured media work as propaganda machines that could be crude (usually performed by state-owned media) but also a more subtle type, performed by formally independent news corporations collaborating with incumbents. War-like rhetoric with exaggerated or untrue messages ensure spectators are captured in following the political spectacle. Yet, spectators' interest or desire to participate in politics is irrelevant as it is political elites who determine what the public debate is about or how public opinion is structured through their exclusive control of communication channels. Citizens turned spectators cannot exercise any oversight of the elite as there are no options of 'candour moments' to control the politicians – parliamentary opposition is limited, citizen initiatives disabled and even media performance is unidirectional, where no questions can be asked. Catchy slogans, arresting images and post-truth messages are used to create electoral bases for simplified yet extreme political solutions (Bucy and Gregson 2001).

The cases of Hungary and Poland show that democratic backsliding is not only about institutional change but also about changing 'the hearts and minds' of citizens. Turning citizens into non-reflective and uncritical spectators, elected politicians escape democratic accountability. They can eliminate controls of their rule. They can use politics as a vehicle for homogenizing ideas and exclusion of opposing views. They can craft public will as they see fit, excluding the public itself. They can disintegrate and reintegrate the community to exclude opponents. They can transform politics into a theatrical spectacle. They can promote an assumption that there is only a single and exclusive truth in politics that they represent. Many are lured this way into the political spectacle that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, hard to oppose.

At the same time, while there are important authoritarian tendencies in-built into the system, illiberal regimes claim to be democratic and have regular elections that can be contested. While these elections are far from fair, these regimes strive on their electoral victories that are due as much to manipulating elections as to turning citizens into spectators. In principle, illiberal governments could lose elections but in fact challengers of the illiberal regime cannot freely protest or oppose the regime. Dissent is not only ignored or ridiculed by the regime, but it is at the core of the political spectacle that all critics of the regime are betraying national interest. Moreover, governments not only stir resentment against opponents among their loyal supporters but have proven ready to use state authorities to coerce, harass or disable critics to silence dissent. The further developed the illiberal regime, the less chance to be able to exert political influence and the more difficult to raise an alternative voice to challenge the political spectacle.

We believe spectatorship is relevant not only for illiberal but other types of authoritarian regimes. We argue spectatorship is one of the central pillars of undemocratic regimes in general, yet different regimes construct different spectators. In ancient Rome, politicians offered 'bread and games' to distract and appease the population, illiberal regimes are mainly about offering the 'games', i.e. distracting their citizens. We encourage further comparative research contrasting illiberal democracies and fully fledged autocracies. We can see spectatorship gaining relevance in Russia with the war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022, after all, the war is not even a war in the political spectacle put on by Putin's regime. This research agenda is especially promising since Guriev and Treisman (2022) argue that old-fashioned 'fear dictators' are being replaced by a new kind, the 'spin dictators', who 'spin' through traditional mass media and social media to manipulate information and fake democracy in order to hold power – very much in the logic of illiberal spectatorship politics that disfigures citizenship to then claim democratic support.

Notes

1. We use the terms illiberal democracy, illiberal regime, and illiberal politics interchangeably.
2. Orbán was Prime Minister 1998–2002.
3. Fidesz created a number of conspiracy theories about Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros, who supposedly is the arch-enemy of the Fidesz government of Viktor Orbán, and uses the NGO network he funds as an army to attack Hungarian interest.

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