THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ILLIBERALISM
by Anna Kende

Social and political psychology treats social relations within stable and long-standing democracies as the default context for human existence, while in fact political instability, social conflict, structural discrimination, and illiberalism may be a more common and, therefore, more "default" context of existence. Social and political tensions, nationalism, homophobia, prejudice against indigenous and immigrant minorities, as well as the success of (right-wing) populist and authoritarian politics that capitalize on these tensions represent the reality of most people living in the world today. Therefore, when addressing the psychology of illiberalism, we are grasping broadly shared human experiences that should be considered just as universal as the experiences of humans in stable democracies.

Using Laruelle's broad definition of illiberalism as a skeptical or negative stance on liberal democracy as a political system, my aim is to show some common psychological mechanisms that, on the one hand, appear as antecedents of creating and maintaining political instability, conflict, and structural discrimination; and, on the other hand, are direct psychological consequences of living in societies characterized by illiberal political systems.

The role of basic human psychological needs can be recognized in all forms of human behavior and thinking. One such psychological need is to exercise some level of control over and mastery of a situation. Being and feeling in control is undoubtedly a more challenging task within a political context of instability and within a position of structural disadvantage than in socially and politically stable and advantaged social settings. Social psychological research has identified important mechanisms that create the illusion of control for individuals regardless of their background. Although these mechanisms are psychologically meaningful, functional, and even adaptive, on a societal level they create a downward spiral that deepens social conflicts and structural discrimination and solidifies illiberal regimes. These concepts build on individual psychological processes, but they can be contingent on societal-level, collective phenomena. In the next section, I present key collective psychological processes that can be characterized as means to achieve a sense of control and contribute to the creation and maintenance of illiberalism.

Ingroup Glorification

Hungary and most of the surrounding region is characterized by a history of benefitting from patronage, being the victim of oppressions and violence, and perpetrating violence. These collective experiences influence how people identify with or disidentify from their ingroup (i.e., their nation or Europe) and affect current intergroup relations. Groups offer everything we need in order to function in the world. People's behavior, information processing, emotions, self-concept, and positive self-esteem are all derived from belonging to positively evaluated groups. Hence, identifying with one's ingroup is foundational to human existence. Groups not only

make us feel similar to others, but also offer a sense of uniqueness, the source of which is group comparison (see Social Identity Theory). However, beyond the positive outcome of group belonging, group comparison can easily turn into competition and discrimination; ingroup love is accompanied by outgroup hate. The main conditions of outgroup hate are the level of importance we attach to the groups to which we belong, the values of the group, and the attributes we attach to other groups.

A division between different modes of identification is rooted in Adorno's concept of genuine and pseudo-patriotism, and reflected in all other conceptualizations of patriotism and nationalism. More generally, we can distinguish between two dominant modes of identification: (1) attachment, which is a form of identification serving one's positive self-esteem; and (2) a blind and uncritical commitment that glorifies the ingroup due to a belief "that the in-group is better and more worthy than other groups" (p. 700). While the two are positively associated—that is, those with a stronger attachment are more likely to glorify their ingroup than weakly attached group members—they have vastly different consequences for society.

Ingroup glorification entails a proneness to conflict. High glorifiers use more stereotyping, they are more likely to disregard moral considerations for members of other groups, and they are more sensitive to threat and provocation. Furthermore, glorification itself intensifies in the context of intergroup conflicts as group members increase their loyalty and commitment in the face of threats.

To show that glorification as a mode of identification is an important predictor of hostility and conflict, we compared national and European glorification (alongside national and European attachment) in a survey conducted in Hungary. We identified important differences between national and European attachments. Specifically, those with high national attachment held more negative attitudes toward immigrants and Muslim individuals than those with high European identity. This difference suggested that the values and content attached to a group can increase or decrease intergroup hostility. However, we also found that European glorification likewise predicted both anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim attitudes. The fact that national and European glorification were both predictors of hostility suggests that besides the importance of values attached to a group with which we identify, the specific mode of identification (i.e., attachment vs. glorification) can override the inclusive values of a group and itself become a source of hostility and conflict. When right-wing populist politicians put ingroup greatness at the center of their politics, their support thrives on intergroup conflict and the crises created by these tensions.

Threat and Moral Exclusion

Beyond emphasizing the greatness of the ingroup, populist politicians also aim to influence the perception of outgroups (i.e., groups to which we compare ourselves) to increase their own support. A glorified ingroup image is in need of constant defending from external and internal threats. When outgroups—either minorities or external groups—are presented as threatening, it contributes to ingroup loyalty and support for authoritarian leadership; simultaneously, it increases intergroup tensions and conflict. For example, a study conducted in Slovakia showed that experiencing a cultural threat to one's identity was a more important predictor of anti-refugee attitudes than racism. Outgroups perceived as threatening can become the subjects of various forms of hostility because any expression of hate toward them is considered an appropriate defense against that perceived threat. For example, dehumanizing rhetoric and inhumane treatment of refugees are justified as a proportional response to the perceived threat of migration.

Importantly, intergroup prejudice is not simply an expression of intergroup threat. Instead, it is a strategic element of ingroup identity, as it defines acceptable and unacceptable forms of hostility. For example, after centuries of co-habitation, Roma people continue to be treated as second-class citizens in most countries of East-Central Europe and to be discriminated against in all areas of social life, treatment that is implicitly sanctioned by the authorities and supported by dominant social norms. General anti-immigrant attitudes are

highest in East-Central Europe, despite the low number of immigrants in these countries (Schlueter et al., 2020), supporting the notion that threat has more to do with experiences within one's ingroup than with the outgroup.

Political discourse has the potential to create the basis of moral exclusion. Moral exclusion refers to the tendency to draw a line between those who deserve fair treatment and those who do not. Importantly, hostile, aggressive, discriminatory, and inhumane behaviors do not necessarily count as immoral if directed against morally excluded individuals or group members, and one can still have a positive self-concept as being a good and moral person. Politicians sometimes deliberately use language that leads to the moral exclusion of some groups in line with an ideology or tradition—or simply for short-term political gain.

Political discourse regarding the Roma, Europe's largest ethnic minority group, is almost unanimously negative in all countries, and not just in the countries of East-Central Europe, where most of the Roma population live. It is dominated by hostile, discriminatory, and dehumanizing language. Politicians depict the Roma as a financial burden on society with a culture of criminality, reinforcing the idea that Roma people are a threat to the ingroup. Mainstream political discourse often employs dehumanizing language that positions the Roma outside our moral considerations. These openly hostile messages normalize the moral exclusion of Roma people, which in turn justifies their negative treatment and discrimination.

However, political discourse does not need to be overtly hostile in order to maintain structural inequalities and discrimination. Social hierarchies are often maintained through more subtle and even seemingly positive acts that are more socially acceptable. For example, when liberal or left-wing politicians make statements of exclusion, they often employ a disclaimer to reinforce their positive ingroup image, such as stating their tolerance or egalitarianism, a move that also serves to legitimize their message. Furthermore, messages are not always positive or negative merely because they facilitate either positive or hostile behaviors. In fact, political discourse can promote positive and helpful behavior while also solidifying unequal status relations. This is reflected in the patronizing language of "Roma inclusion." This seemingly positive discourse argues for helping the Roma while denying their structural oppression. Paradoxically, when it comes to Roma people, this type of paternalistic political discourse that does not aim for social change may be the only one promoting deservingness and, consequently, moral inclusion.

In a survey conducted in five European countries (Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, France, and Ireland) with large, representative online samples, we investigated how different types of political discourse promote pro- or anti-Roma action intentions by creating a sense of moral inclusion or exclusion (for more details about the project, see www.polrom.eu). Overall, we found very low intentions to either engage in anti-Roma action (i.e., openly hostile, racist action) or pro-Roma action (i.e., making donations or engaging in political actions against discrimination). It seems that indifference (identified by scoring around the midpoint on a scale of anti-Gypsyism as an attitude), rather than explicit hate, was the most common response of individuals, both in terms of attitudes and actions (see Figure 1).

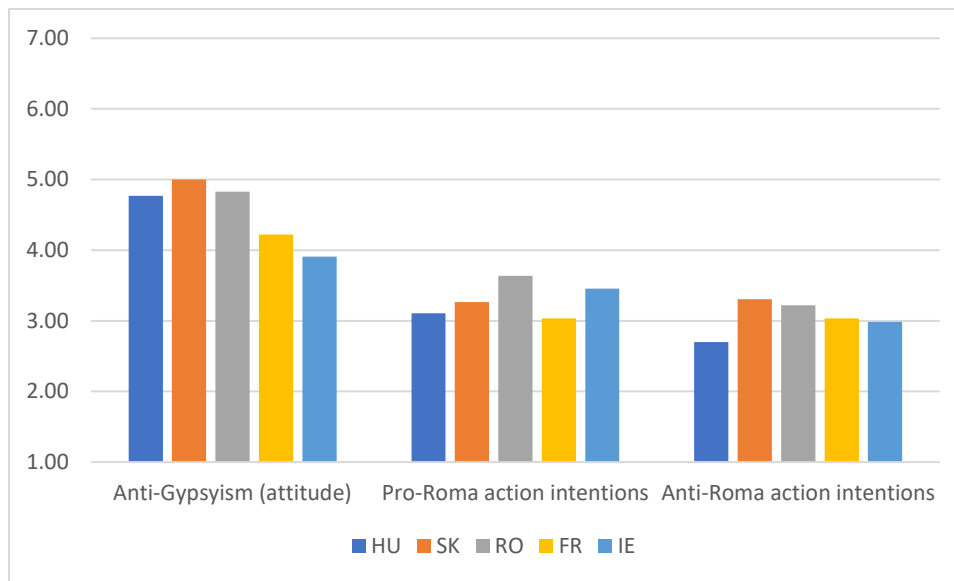**Attitudes in Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, France, and Ireland**

Figure 1. Means of anti-Gypsyism as an attitude and pro-Roma and anti-Roma action intentions, measured in 5 countries on a scale from 1 to 7 (1=completely disagree, 7=completely agree with statements of the scale, 4 being the mid-point of the scale).

We could identify a positive connection between acceptance of paternalistic political discourse and pro-social intentions toward the Roma, and indeed this connection was mediated by moral inclusion. This statistical connection suggests that paternalistic discourse creates a norm through which Roma people are included in the moral ingroup and therefore deserve fair treatment and help. Those who found paternalistic political discourse acceptable were also more willing to offer some form of help. The findings indicate that paternalistic discourses may not be sufficient to promote social change, but they promote moral inclusion, which is the first step toward fair treatment and justice.

Importantly, across all samples, we found no evidence that acceptance of hostile discourse predicted lower intentions to engage in pro-Roma action or higher intentions to engage in anti-Roma action. Based on our findings, we can suggest that this type of speech does not directly mobilize the general population for action. The relevance of this finding is that anti-Gypsyism in many East-Central European countries has become an arena for political mobilization by (extreme) right-wing political parties. However, it seems that finding hostile political speeches acceptable is not sufficient to prompt individuals either to engage in overtly racist action or to withhold help from the Roma. That being said, hostile political messages are not harmless: those who found hostile political discourse acceptable were more likely to accept the moral exclusion of Roma people.

System Justification

For those directly benefitting from unequal and unjust social systems, supporting these systems has psychological benefits (e.g., lower feelings of guilt); this is a well-known and well-documented motivational process. However, for disadvantaged groups, the psychological benefits of supporting unequal social systems are less straightforward. System justification theory suggests that there is a motivational tendency to defend and justify the legitimacy of existing social, economic, and political institutions and arrangements, and this motivational tendency may be especially strong among marginalized and disadvantaged members of a society.

Unjust systems are defended by their principal victims because this justifies everyday cooperation with the system and passivity. It also follows that system justification is associated with support for the social and political status quo and cognitive rigidity. Cognitive rigidity refers to a need for simplicity, structure, closure, and order, all of which are more common in right-wing, conservative ideologies. In sum, system justification has a palliative function for victims of unjust and unstable social structures; high system justification creates support for right-wing conservatism through cognitive rigidity, making disadvantaged minority groups prone to supporting illiberalism, as shown, for example, by the overwhelming support for Fidesz among Roma people in the 2022 elections in Hungary. Therefore, in illiberal contexts, high system justification can be a way of coping with an unjust and unpredictable society, even as it contributes to the maintenance of structural inequalities, social conflicts, and illiberalism.

Using representative online survey data from Hungary, we investigated the levels of system justification and their connection with cognitive rigidity and political party support in 2014 and 2017. Although in both studies we found that overall, endorsement of system justification beliefs was somewhat below the mid-point, such beliefs were more strongly supported by right-wing respondents—and especially by Fidesz voters—than by left-wing voters and those in the opposition (see Figure 2). Moreover, we found that cognitive rigidity, system justification, and right-wing political orientation were all positively associated, and political orientation was a strong predictor of both cognitive rigidity and system justification.

Levels of system justification and economic system justification across Hungarian political parties
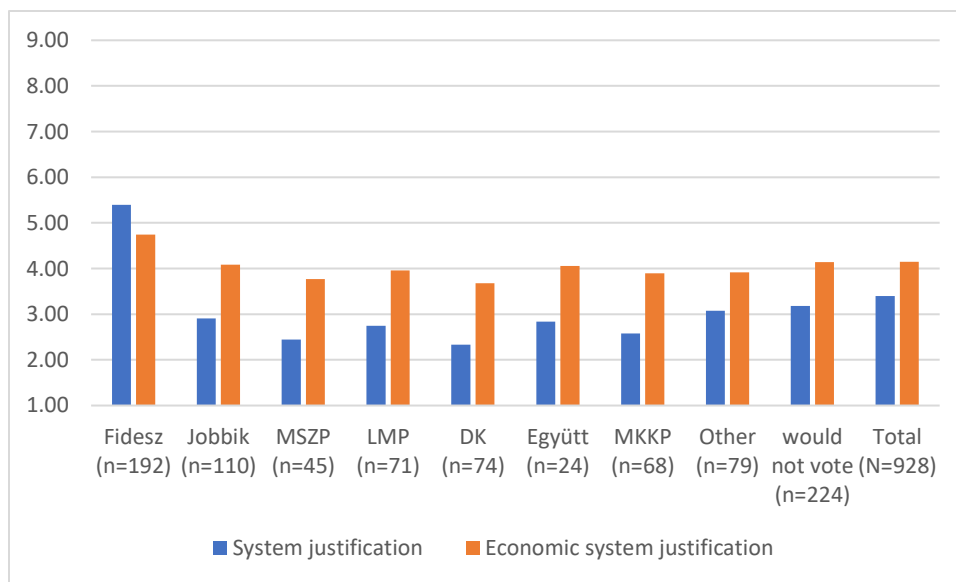

Figure 2. Means of general and economic system justification from a representative survey conducted in 2017 (see Jost & Kende, 2020). Both variables were measured on a 9-point scale (1=completely disagree, 9=completely agree, midpoint of the scale is 5). Party explanations: Fidesz: right-wing party in government, Jobbik: extreme right-wing party in opposition, all other parties are in opposition and positioned at the center or on the left wing of the political spectrum).

In Hungary, as in other former socialist states, conservative attitudes are often connected not only to cognitive rigidity and a fear of change, but also—building on the socialist nostalgia for a strong state—to the idea that powerful authorities should "take care" of citizens (which also explains why economic liberalism is alien to

supporters of right-wing and conservative parties). This gives rise to leaders who aim to appear as "entrepreneurs of identity": they depict themselves as representing the experiences of their followers, in the process exploiting their fears, which are often instilled by political propaganda. Therefore, right-wing political orientation, the need for a strong leader, and support for Fidesz are sources of cognitive rigidity and the psychological need to support an illiberal political regime, and, simultaneously, the outcome of the psychological response to experiencing structural disadvantages.

Conclusions

Illiberal political systems are not psychologically inevitable. At the same time, nor do they require unique and exceptional psychological conditions. This paper has shown that proneness to illiberalism cannot be explained solely by ad hoc political processes; it is embedded in normal psychological responses to (a long history of) instability and in the collective memory of historical experiences of injustices experienced within and between societies. Support for leaders building illiberal regimes is based on people's genuine need to control situations that are unpredictable and unjust, to find comfort in the face of threat, and to build a positive self-concept. Recognizing the psychological needs that are used and exploited for political mobilization may take us a step closer to identifying ways to satisfy these needs outside illiberalism.