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Book Review: Joanna Rak, Roman Bäcker (Eds.), *Neo-militant Democracies in Post-communist Member States of the European Union*, **Routledge, London and New York 2022, pp. 268**

Neo-militant Democracies in the Post-Communist Member States of the European Union, edited by Joanna Rak and Roman Bäcker, is a collection of texts that can help us understand the differences between neo- and quasi-militant democracies. This volume consists of three parts divided into thirteen chapters. The book opens with an introduction that outlines the common methodology for all chapters and explains the most relevant concepts and the differences between them. The next ten chapters are a detailed analysis of all post-communist member states of the European Union (EU). The last two chapters are devoted to the conclusions drawn by the editors of this publication regarding the victories and failures of quasi-militant democracies, as well as a comparative constitutional law perspective to the analysis of neo-militant democracies in Europe by Agnieszka Bień-Kacała. This book considerably expands the knowledge of the crisis-driven present countries and reveals their political systems. The authors present reflections on the state of democracies in the analysed countries and the directions they are heading, but they also leave room for future researchers to extend their study after the end of the coronavirus pandemic (cf. Rezmer-Płotka, 2020b).

Militant democracy is a concept that took shape in the 1930s when Karl Loewenstein (1937a, p. 242) compared democracy to a "Trojan horse by means of which the enemy enters a city". Nevertheless, today's neo-militant democracies differ from Nazi Germany (Loewenstein, 1937b), as the authors point out in the introductory chapter. As the authors write, the measures used in earlier years would not have shown such effectiveness due to technological developments, among other things (Rak, 2021). Thus, the means of (neo-) militant democracies define the distinction between Loewenstein's militant democracy and its contemporary variant (p. 4) (see also: Rezmer-Płotka, 2020a; Rak & Bäcker, 2019). It is also important to mention that the authors use the term neo-militant democracy to distinguish between restrictions imposed before and during World War II and the present

(p .5). It is also worth noting that the authors decided to depart from a normative approach to optimise the study and minimise the risk of cultural bias or their own opinions. The authors aim to explain why the dynamics and consequences of the relationship between democratic and anti-democratic forces in the post-communist countries of the European Union differ, despite their common past.

In the introductory chapter, the authors also argue for the originality of this study due to the inclusion of the concept of the sovereignty of political nations in the definitions of neo- and quasi-militant democracies. Indeed, the original development of the theoretical framework makes it possible to distinguish between the goals of the previously mentioned democracies. While neo-militant democracy seeks to increase the sovereignty of a political nation, quasi-militant democracy aims to reduce it, which in turn may lead to authoritarian rule. Nevertheless, both use the same measures, such as anti-terrorist, anti-extremist legislation, restrictions on political party registration, public assembly, social media protests, passive and active electoral rights, access to public employment, citizenship or referendum (Rak 2020a; 2020b). However, the authors argue that this catalogue is not closed, and with the expansion of democratic threats, it can and should be supplemented with more measures. According to the authors, to conduct this study reliably, it would have been necessary to include as a criterion not only a study of the acceptance of democratic values by the ruling elites and generally applicable documents but primarily applied political practice. Nevertheless, as the author argues, this criterion is problematic and requires the introduction of an additional qualitative indicator of the purpose of the measures. Whether they were intended to serve the rulers to protect or weaken democracy in the analysed state, it is necessary to differentiate between neo- and quasi-militant democracies (cf. Rezmer-Płotka, 2021).

Based on the theoretical assumptions made in the introductory chapter, the authors analyse individual countries in the following chapters. The first part is entitled „Neo-militant democracies under Russian pressure" and focuses on the Baltic states: Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Based on their research, the authors argue that despite anti-democratic measures, these countries have not drifted towards the limitation of sovereignty and remain democracies. As Przemysław Osiewicz mentions, Estonia is close to an ideal type of neo-militant democracy, the only doubts being the restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic introduced in 2020 and their possible continuation after the end of the pandemic (p. 37). Nevertheless, the author claims that at this point, there are no legitimate concerns about the state of democratic change in Estonia. Latvia is in a similar situation, characterised by a "soft" form of neo-militant democracy. However, Latvia's policy, carried out due to the fear of the Russian-speaking minorities, may lead to a paradox of neo-militant democracy and thus achieve the opposite effect to the intended defence of democracy. In addition, the authors highlight important issues in future studies of democracy in Latvia, such as censorship and access to information. As this is a means to fight Russian disinformation, it also may lead to limits on sovereignty in the future. According to the authors, Lithuania, as the third analysed Baltic state, is characterised by a weak neo-militant democracy. The

measures applied to changing the regulation of public gatherings were in response to the protests against the global economic crisis in 2009. These protests turned into riots, which posed a threat**.** The delayed appointments to the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court are also questionable, but Lithuania should still be considered a neo-militant democracy despite these problems.

The second part focuses on countries where struggles between autocratic and democratic forces have dominated the former. This analysis covers Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania. Describing the case of Poland, the authors show how, from the moment Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS – Law and Justice) took power, the country slowly drifted towards a quasi-militant democracy until 2018, when key judicial bodies were politicised. Then, Poland began to meet the essential criteria for a quasi-militant democracy (p. 16). The situation in Hungary seems to be even more advanced than in Poland. Since 2010, quasi-militant democracy has become, as Timea Drinoczi and Gabor Meszaros write, a characteristic feature of the ruling political parties. It is aimed at consolidating power in the hands of the ruling elite rather than defending constitutional democracy (p. 110). The situation in Romania is somewhat different from that in Poland or Hungary. The authorities in this country have effectively used the fight against corruption to limit the sovereignty of the political nation. Under this pretext, they have used quasi-militant means to consolidate power in the hands of the elite. In addition, there is great concern about the secret police, which has resumed its activities within Romania, and cases have been transformed into matters of national security in order to prevent those involved from having access to evidence. Romania has strongly curtailed the sovereignty of its people at this time, and the COVID19 pandemic has only exacerbated the anti-democratic measures and given an excuse to withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights. Bulgarian citizens have to face a different problem than the previously presented countries. As Kamila Rezmer-Płotka writes, the biggest problem is the power consolidated in the hands of the oligarchs, who have politicised the most important state institutions, and widespread corruption. Although most of the measures used in Bulgaria were already in place before the period in question, one can see the changes leading this country towards a quasi-militant democracy. As in Hungary or Poland, the authorities find a "scapegoat" who becomes the enemy of the people. Among others, these are members of the LGBTQI+ community or refugees. As one can conclude from these chapters, the situation in these countries is becoming increasingly unstable, and the threat of a quasi-militant democracy is increasing year by year, which could lead to the total collapse of democracy in these countries.

The third part analyses countries that, as the title indicates, are balancing between neo-militant and quasi-militant democracy as clashes between democratic and anti-democratic forces continue. The authors include the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia in this group. As Maciej Skrzypek writes, some of the legal changes concerning the judiciary were quasi-militant due to the goal of undermining its independence (p. 160). However, these were not the only problems of the Czech Republic. These measures also included measures such as the

accumulation of power in the hands of the president and the prime minister, the merging of parts of the media with the ruling camp, and social problems such as the exclusion of the Roma community. Although, since 2017, the use of quasi-militant democracy measures has increased and has weakened democracy in the country, Czech citizens can still enjoy basic rights and freedoms. Moreover, elections are held under international regulations on pre-scheduled dates. The Slovak political nation has to face other challenges, such as restrictions on the activities of political parties or unclear regulations on freedom of speech. Neverthe-less, as Max Steuer and Martin Kovanic argue, at the moment, it is difficult to judge whether Slovakia is moving towards an ideal type of neo-militaristic democracy or leaning more towards a quasi-militant democracy. However, it leaves no doubt that militant-democratic means are being used. The country requires further research, especially during the ongoing PPOS member cases and restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic. According to Elżbieta Kużelewska, Slovenia is close to a perfect example of a transition from a neo- to a quasi-militant democracy. Even though the nation has basic rights and freedoms, the changes introduced in 2013 regarding legislative referendums have undermined democracy in Slovenia. The citizens in the country are adequately represented in the parliament, and the changes made to the electoral law to make voting accessible to people with disabilities can certainly be viewed positively. Nevertheless, in 2020 Janez Jansa came to power, which caused a highly noticeable change in Slovenia's democracy. Like in Hungary and Poland, opinions about "enemies" such as the LGBTQI+ community and other minorities are publicly expressed. There is also a decline in media freedom after implementing the media law package. Also disturbing is the restriction of peaceful assemblies punishable by fines. This restriction was introduced under the pretext of fighting the coronavirus pandemic, so Slovenia, according to the authors, is currently balancing on a very thin red line between neo- and quasi-militant democracy.

The conclusions of this research are presented in the last two chapters, showing that Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania are closest to the quasi-militant democracy model and are drifting towards it. It contrasts with the Baltic states closest to the neo-militant democracy model. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia remain an enigma, as both models characterise their democracies, but it remains a mystery which direction their democracy will eventually take. As Rak and Bäcker mention in the last chapter, it is important to remember that social consciousness is fluid (p. 238). Therefore, values, norms, and rules of political life change, but also myths and stereotypes matter and alter over time. Further-more, the authors point to a sense of threat as one of the most important determinants of these changes. Therefore, in the era of the coronavirus pandemic, the manipulation of fear became a powerful weapon for quasi-militant democracy. Because it carried a real threat to the health and life of the citizens. While it was harder to scare the public with the threat of LGBTQI+, it was easier with a highly infectious, deadly disease. However, as the pandemic has shown, the balancing act between neo-militant and quasi-militant democracy applies not only to post-communist countries but to all countries worldwide. The struggle to raise

or lower sovereignty continues daily, and the prevailing pandemic may lead to a desire to limit political nations.

In conclusion, it should be noted that this book introduces a new perspective on neo- and quasi-militant democracy in political science, and the country-by-country analyses conducted encourage further research on these states. It presents, unencumbered by the authors' views, the changes in the state of democracy that have taken place in the post-communist countries of the EU. It exhaustively reveals all irregularities in the use of measures and the pursuit of anti-democratic governments in countries such as Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania. It explains the use of these measures in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia and leaves room for further observations on the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia. It is an essential introduction to the research that could be carried out after the coronavirus pandemic. This book will certainly interest scholars of political systems, democratisation, autocratisation, contentious politics, and post-communist EU states.

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