

# Conversations on Illiberalism

Interviews with 50 scholars

Marlene Laruelle, ed.



**illiberalism**  
Studies Program





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The Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies

The George Washington University

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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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A collection of 50 interviews from the Agora section of the Illiberalism Studies Program

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## Jean-Yves Camus on the Far Right in France

*Originally published September 25, 2020*

**Jean-Yves, you have been following the political situation in France very closely for several decades. How do you see the evolution of the National Rally? Is the ‘normalization’ process successful, especially in capturing Les Républicains’ electorate and narrative? What do you think of the ‘schism’ between Marine Le Pen being more mainstream and Marion Maréchal speaking to a more radical audience?**

The National Rally chronologically succeeded the National Front (NF) in 2018 after Marine Le Pen lost the presidential election to Emmanuel Macron and thought that it was necessary to signal, especially to conservative voters, that she wanted to move further away from the NF ideologically, as it used to be under the chairmanship of Jean-Marie Le Pen between 1972 and 2011.

Her basic idea was that her father had ruined all hopes of coming to power with his many, and almost obsessive statements, about the Nazi gas chambers being a mere “detail in the history of the Second World War” (1987) and the alleged power of the “Jewish International” (1989). Le Pen had also supported the idea that “Races are not [all] equal” (1996). It was Le Pen’s anti-Jewish ramblings, however, which convinced the conservative right that any alliance with him was morally unacceptable. Marine Le Pen’s “normalization” process began with her decision to forbid party members from simultaneously belonging to any extreme movement. She continued by stripping her father from his honorary chairmanship of the party. The message was clear:

*Marine Le Pen wanted to prove that the new National Rally (NR) had nothing to do with the traditional far right, namely, that it was an “anti-system” but nevertheless democratic party.*

How has she intended to capture Les Républicains (LR)’ voters? By telling them that they have been betrayed by conservative leaders since the 1980s in the sense that during electoral campaigns, presidential hopefuls always make promises through law-and-order policies, putting a halt to illegal immigration, and taking care of hard-working common folks. When they are elected, however, they pursue a liberal agenda. In her speech to the party’s Summer University (September 6, 2020), Le Pen asked the French to “wake up,” to rebel against both Macron and Les Républicains.

Her discourse on law-and-order was similar to that of many Republicans in the United States: zero tolerance for crime, life without parole for the most cruel crimes, and deporting convicted foreigners—she even cited Rudy Giuliani’s policies when he was Mayor of New York City. Her speech focused on crime much more than on immigration, although she suggested that crime and terrorism were two different faces of “chaos,” which she stated was emblematic of present-day France. In her criticism of the elites, the European Union, liberalism, globalization, and her “France above all” patriotism, she spoke the very same language I heard from the rank-and-file members of Chirac’s *Rassemblement pour la République* in the mid-1980s.

*Le Pen continues to appeal to the “French Middle Radicals,” a category that is much like that of the Middle American Radicals (MARS), who were so dear to the late Samuel T. Francis, who remains famous for disseminating this concept within the American Right.*

Marion Maréchal, her niece, sings a different song. When it comes to moral issues, she is a national-conservative with strong Catholic beliefs. When it comes to the economy, moreover, she believes in free enterprise but, like her aunt, she is a protectionist. She thinks that a free market is the only way to achieve prosperity but only on the condition that French goods, companies, and jobs are protected from unfair competition from abroad through tariffs. That, of course, means opting out of the EU and all other international free trade agreements. Is this “radical,” as opposed to Le Pen becoming mainstream? I do not think so, they simply belong to different generations.

*Marion Maréchal, born in 1989, belongs to the young people who reject the values of 1968 and, instead, propound the traditional family, the Catholic ideal of the common good, and a kind of upper-middle class conservatism that refers to the social doctrine of the Church.*

Interestingly enough, she said in August 2015 that she came back to Catholicism because of her involvement in politics rather than the other way around. The problem with this political agenda is that it appeals to a very narrow social base: unlike the United States, France is a highly secular country and we have nothing that resembles the religious Right.

Marine Le Pen, born in 1968, is in the tradition of the Populist Right as we know it from Général Boulanger to La Rocque and Pierre Poujade’s movement. She fits well into the category of Bonapartism, which, according to Roger Eatwell, “sought to synthesize charismatic leadership with plebiscitary legitimacy,” claiming to be “neither Left nor Right, or to be above parties and social interests that divided the nation” (Eatwell, *Fascism*, 1995). Though she is culturally Catholic, this does not shape her worldview, as evidenced by her very cautious stand on same-sex marriage (to be replaced by a “civil contract”) and abortion. She is also much less of a free-marketer than her niece, and her voter base is certainly broader among the working-class, the lower middle-class, and the young. On the opposite, Marion Maréchal (born 1989) does not want to go beyond the left and right, as she regards herself as belonging to the right and is proud of such an association. Whether she really understands anything about the many shades of American conservatism when she delivered her speech at the 2018 CPAC Convention is dubious, but she fits somewhere in between President Trump and Pat Buchanan.

**The transnational connections of illiberal movements have been in the spotlight these last few years. Do you think trans-European strategies have worked so far for European**



## **illiberal groups and their leaders? What about US and Russian influences, do we tend to overstate them?**

Illiberal movements are not a united force. In the European Parliament, Fidesz is not completely out of the European People's Party group, while RN, together with Vlaams Belang, the German AfD, the Austrian FPÖ, the Italian Lega and Geert Wilders's PVV, sit in the Identity and Democracy group. The European Conservatives and Reformists group include the Polish PiS, the Spanish Vox, the Swedish Democrats, the Czech ODS, the Latvian TB/LNNK, and the Dutch Forum voor Democratie. These are big or relatively big players in the politics of their respective countries. So, despite Le Pen's and Matteo Salvini's efforts prior to the 2019 European election, in addition to having Fidesz and PiS join them, the illiberal movements remain divided.

That said, does it really matter what European Parliament (EP) group each of these parties belong to? There is a tactical aspect of joining any group. What really matters is ideology, and regardless of their affiliation, all the aforementioned parties share a few basic beliefs that constitute the core values of far-right populism, such as: believing that only a nation can provide for legitimate decisions; thinking that representative democracy must be replaced with direct democracy through referenda; favoring a strong presidential regime that restricts the powers of the legislature and the judiciary; and defining nationhood and citizenship along ethno-religious and ethno-linguistic criteria, as opposed to the idea of the Enlightenment according to which one can, by contract, choose to what and where one belongs.

*Ultimately what is important with these illiberal parties is that they have, since the 1980s, reshaped the political landscape of the broader right by breaking the post-1945 monopoly of the liberals and classical conservatives.*

With regard to foreign influence, one must be reminded that both the USSR and the US have been trying to influence politics in Europe for decades! That was part of the Cold War's strategies and was further concerned with both ideology and geopolitics. The USSR relied on the communist parties but also tried to influence the Gaullist right. The US, furthermore, had a significant role in funding anti-communist groups such as the center right's "Paix et Liberté" in the 1950s, and in supporting the anti-communist left in France, including trade unions which were opposed to the communist-aligned Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT). Though the present situation is different, one truth remains: it is not because a party receives money from a foreign state that it will support this or that state. The opposite is true. Instead, a party's ideology may be aligned with a nation that provides them with financial aid.

*In other words, it is not because the National Front/National Rally allegedly received money from Russia and borrowed money from a Russian bank that they will speak in favor of Putin. They look at Russia as a model of an ideal society and a good government.*

Both share values, with a common goal of weakening the EU. Both also reject the United States, and at any given moment, some specific Russian actors may bet on either Le Pen or Maréchal. But Russian money did not "buy" the NR. Maréchal and the Orthodox oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, for instance, have common concerns. Le Pen, Thierry Mariani, and others have their own channels. Dugin's influence has been exaggerated and does not go beyond influencing a limited number of national-revolutionaries outside of the NR, for example, Christian Bouchet and his group, once named "Les nôtres," which is

French for Nashi, is part of the New Right. The only NR official I know of who has participated in a Dugin-sponsored Eurasian conference is MEP Hervé Juvin.

*Looking at the United States' influence, Steve Bannon's role has been grossly exaggerated. His attempt to build a coalition of the European illiberal right has failed miserably.*

It is also highly doubtful that he ever got a mandate from President Trump to meet Le Pen and others. Bannon is a political consultant who needed to find clients for his firm. Le Pen may have contemplated soliciting his advice with respect to public relations and training her party's candidates but, in the end, Bannon has a very limited knowledge of European politics and is no longer a direct channel to President Trump. Ergo, mutual interest just vanished.

Besides, one should look at other foreign influences on European politics, i.e., China, of course, and the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Turkey is a new player in the field, trying to mobilize the Turkish diaspora to support Erdoğan's new caliphate. Most interesting, however, is the fact that Qatar and Saudi Arabia are often accused of funding radical Islam, but they first and foremost try to influence mainstream parties.

**How do you assess COVID-19's impact on illiberal movements' success? What factors will and will not play in their favor in the new context we're living in?**

At this moment, it is too early to tell, as we may face a second wave and the recession may hit much harder than expected. Prior to the pandemic, there were illiberal parties on the way to success. I have pointed to two cases: the Belgian-Flemish Vlaams Belang and the Fratelli d'Italia, both of which began to rise in popularity well before the pandemic. If the federal election was held this June, the VB would poll 29.7% of the Flemish vote (+9.7%) compared to 20% (-5.5%) for the mainstream conservative Nieuw Vlaamse Alliantie (NVA). The reason for this discrepancy has to do with ideology. In 2019, NVA leader Bart De Wever, published a book entitled *Over Identiteit* (On Identity). He advocates for Flemish nationalism and independence for his people, but within the framework of the Enlightenment, calling for an end to cultural relativism and a return to the Flemish "leidcultuur," that is, assimilation for foreigners (the fewer foreigners, the better) and French-speaking citizens living in Flanders. This is not enough for diehard nationalists who feel betrayed by the NVA because of its participation in the federal government and do not believe in assimilation.

As for Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, it now polls at 17%, compared to 23% for the Lega. Fratelli is certainly on an upward trend, thanks to a sound conservative agenda with a distinct Catholic flavor and well-established international connections to intellectuals such as Yoram Hazony, Rod Dreher, Douglas Murray, Ryszard Legutko, Marion Maréchal, and Viktor Orbán. The COVID-19 crisis, at first glance, was a perfect opportunity for illiberal parties in Western Europe to advance their agendas and gain popularity. They quickly understood the benefit they could derive from criticizing their respective governments along with "elites" in general, in the management of the health crisis.

*The COVID-19 crisis, at first glance, was a perfect opportunity for illiberal parties in Western Europe to advance their agendas and gain popularity.*



Their communication focused on three main areas: (i) claiming that the “managerial class” that is now at the helm of most liberal governments and parties was not able to effectively protect the people, either because it is not competent or it does not care about the common folk; (ii) criticism of globalization presented as the root cause of the pandemic; and (iii) criticism of the threats that the lockdown and other measures, such as wearing masks, imposes on the individual freedoms of citizens.

The illiberal right, and the radical right also developed the idea that the “elites” knowingly took advantage of the health crisis to hasten the imposition of an authoritarian form of government. I believe it is the most interesting side of the illiberal response: such parties as the Rassemblement national, as well as the Spanish Vox, the Italian Lega with Salvini and Fratelli d’Italia, the German Alternative für Deutschland, all tell their prospective voters that they are the sole defenders against the Orwellian society the “elites” want to impose. They say they are standing for the rights of the individual against forms of tyranny, and for free speech against the “official truth” on the pandemic. We tend to think of these parties as authoritarian if not outrightly “fascist,” but they have a point in saying that the French government, for example, has made a mistake in asking the media to relay only “checked news” about the pandemic, in order to counter what it labels as “fake news.” Promoting an “official truth” is not efficient, and less so when you have obviously failed in several aspects of fighting the virus.

The radical right in Western Europe, however, was not able to capitalize on the crisis as much as it expected. First, because the pandemic is unrelated to non-European immigration from Muslim countries and Africa: it originated in China. Anti-Chinese racism did not work, as most people quickly understood that the one to blame was not the average Chinese traveler to Europe, but the Chinese government and its old communist habits of withholding information from their own citizens and the international community. This left the radical right with the only opportunity to denounce the European Union and globalization, which is nothing new.

*More convincing is that the radical right were the first to have warned the public, well before the pandemic, of the dangers of relocating potentially strategic industries such as the pharmaceutical industry in emerging countries such as China and India.*

Their idea is that the pandemic was caused by globalization itself, which generates continuous flows of travel and international exchange, immigration notwithstanding. Globalization they say, allows multinationals to make financial profits in times of a health crisis, while the poorest are hit the worst by unemployment and a non-efficient medical system. Do not forget that, in Europe, there is a consensus about the necessity of the state providing health insurance for everyone, as well as a state-controlled system of care for the elderly and hospitals with the highest standards of performance. When successive governments of the social democratic left and the mainstream right fail to keep the welfare state working, the illiberal, or even radical right, are quick to say they will restore it, with the condition that it will only benefit nationals and not foreigners.

**How do you relate to the term illiberalism? Do you think it fits better conceptually than other existing terms to describe the current evolution or is it limiting?**

In order to define illiberalism, you need to first agree on what liberalism is. Liberalism is the prevalent doctrine in the West and most people think it means representative democracy, human rights, freedom of speech, a market economy, and free trade. That is, of course, part of it, as are all the provisions of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and, in fact, all the values of the Enlightenment. But liberalism is

much more than that. Liberalism is a doctrine shared by all those, from the left to the right, who believe that rights must prevail over duties, that progress has been the ultimate goal in human history, and that it can (and must) go on without any limitation other than those imposed by the current state of science. Liberals also believe that any other component of society other than the individual is either oppressive or places undue limitation on the advancement of the ideal of a world without borders, whose only rule would be efficiency and profit.

*Patrick Deneen's book, Why Liberalism Failed (2018) is a must-read for all those who want to understand criticisms of liberalism from a conservative point of view.*

Illiberal democracy is, in fact, the opposite of what I have described above. It does not shun representative democracy but unequivocally rejects the belief in indefinite progress. Instead, illiberalism stresses tradition, civic virtues, and the necessary stability of social order. Deneen explains that liberalism hijacked the classical notions of freedom and democracy and has a point in doing so.

Let's include a personal note to my analysis. My political home is the anti-totalitarian left and I am an observant Jew. How is it that I sometimes feel disillusioned with liberal democracy to the point of agreeing with Deneen on many issues? I have become wary of the term "populism," which describes all parties that think a self-proclaimed elite of technocrats (and elected officials) have stolen the will of those they think are not socially or intellectually fit for leadership because they are either too poor, too old, or too uneducated. I do not believe in continuous progress and even feel that technical progress is sometimes alienating. I concur with Deneen in that "borderlessness" is the ultima ratio of liberalism: liberals believe that the market must expand beyond national borders; that the sovereignty of nation states must be replaced with a distant, technocratic governance whose model is the managerial method of private companies; that man must free himself from any limitation set by natural law on issues such as gender, family values, and civic virtues; and that every man must become his own master without paying any consideration to the customs set forth by the previous generations.

Liberalism pretends that freedom began with the Enlightenment and, in the case of France, with the Revolution. I stand against all that. My own belief is that whether morally right or wrong, tradition is a part of one's inheritance and should not be seen as merely "reactionary." While I think that citizenship can be acquired by an act of individual will, I also believe it imposes duties on the newcomer and I do not believe in multiculturalism.

*Multiculturalism means that the national community comes second to one's ethnicity and religion, eventually ending in civil strife and a cultural war between conflicting narratives, whether it be on slavery, colonialism or the genocides of the 20th century.*

However, I do not endorse the bigotry and ethnocentrism of the illiberal right and I am committed to a balance of power between the executive, the judiciary, and the legislative branches. And equality, of course.

### **What is your next research project?**

I am now working on a political biography of the late Guillaume Faye as one of the prominent thinkers of the French new right in the late 1970s-1980s. Faye later authored *Ethnic Apocalypse: The Coming*

European Civil War, which was published with a foreword by Jared Taylor of American Renaissance. The article will be part of an edited volume dealing with thinkers of the radical right. When it is finished, however, I shall come back to the history of illiberal right conservative movements in Central and Eastern Europe.

## Cas Mudde on Threats to Democracy and the Far Right in the United States

Originally published November 11, 2020

**Cas, our program uses the term of illiberalism. It defines it as a strain of political culture that, over the past two decades, has emerged in response to liberalism as experienced by various countries and has accused liberalism of having gone “too far.” How do you assess the heuristic value of that term compared to the notions of (national) populism that are more often used? Do you think it captures some important elements for the study of the far right in 21st century?**

The term “illiberalism” is less known than terms like “populism” or even “national populism.” It is also much broader, particularly when not combined with democracy, i.e., “illiberal democracy,” which is more specific.

*Illiberalism does include populism, and the far right, but it also includes, possibly, Christian democracy, conservatism, and socialism, including social democracy, which are all, in one way or another, fundamentally illiberal.*

Illiberalism is also more ideological, and perhaps even philosophical, than “illiberal democracy,” which is more practical and systematic. That being said, some colleagues (like Jan-Werner Mueller) don’t like the term “illiberal democracy,” as they argue that democracy is either liberal or not a democracy. That debate is prevented by the term illiberalism.

**You have been complementing your research on Western Europe by looking at the US and at Israel. Could you tell us about what you see as the main shared features of the far right and the differences in context between Europe (itself very diverse), US, and Israel?**

Israel has always been much more similar to (Western) Europe than the US, because of its highly fragmentized, multiparty system. At least since the early 1980s, far-right parties have been successful; even if they were electorally small- to medium-sized, they often worked with the mainstream (right and, sometimes, left) in broad coalition governments. Of course, there were important differences: anti-immigration was a marginal issue, religion, and irredentism played a bigger role than in Western Europe.



Also, the Israeli far right has always been much more fragmented than in Europe. In the 21st century, one of the main things that US, Israel, and parts of Europe have in common is the mainstreaming and normalization of far-right ideas and parties. And, more specifically, Israel, the US, and some European countries have seen the transformation of conservative parties into full-fledged far-right parties, like Fidesz in Hungary, Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, Likud in Israel, and the Republican Party in the US.

**You are working on a kind of second version of your 2007 Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe that will look at new developments in the field. Can you summarize the differences you see between the far right in the 20th century and far right in the 21st century?**

To be perfectly honest, I am not really working that much on it, and the reason is not just the many side projects I have had in the past years. One of the key issues I have had with starting work on a follow-up, rather than second edition, of my 2007 book is, unsurprisingly, definitional. It took me a long time to come up with the definition, and terminology, of the “populist radical right.” I never thought it would catch on. I thought it was too long, and would, at best, be one of those fringe terms. But it is a foundational part of the book, as definitions almost always are to my work.

A part of the book that is a bit less noticed is the second chapter, which addresses the often ignored, or minimized, issue of classification. It is striking how much consensus there is in the academic and public debate on which parties are far right (or whatever the term, not choice, is), and how few studies we have that empirically prove that these parties actually meet the definitions. This is, to a large extent, because it was almost only applied to outsider parties, which focused on immigrants or integration issue, and were openly negative towards immigrants and minorities. Today, many mainstream parties meet the rather simplistic test that we applied in the 1990s, and yet we don’t include them. The Republican Party, not just under Donald Trump, is much more nativist, authoritarian, and populist than, say, the Dutch List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) used to be or the Norwegian Progress Party (FrP) is, and yet few people (still) consider the party “populist radical right.”

*It is striking how much consensus there is in the academic and public debate on which parties are far right (or whatever the term, not choice, is), and how few studies we have that empirically prove that these parties actually meet the definitions.*

In Eastern Europe, the distinctions are extremely hard, particularly in the wake of the so-called “refugee crisis” of 2015–16, when most mainstream parties in the region took, at least, as nativist and Islamophobic positions as the core populist radical right parties in Western Europe, like the Italian League and the French National Rally (previous National Front). At the same time, some extreme right parties have entered parliaments. First, the Golden Dawn in Greece and later, Kotleba-People’s Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS) in Slovakia, while some parties flirt with extreme right features like open racism (e.g., the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia, EKRE).

Despite the massive literature on far-right parties—more articles and books are published on this one group of parties than on all other groups of parties, from conservatives to social democrats, together. Systematic empirical analyses of individual parties remain rare and basic information on quite a lot of parties is still hard to come by—particularly in the few languages that I read.

This is one of the reasons that I wrote *The Far Right Today* instead. As a popular scientific book, the expectations are different, and I can suggest certain things, without having to prove systematic empirical analysis. It is here that I developed my idea of a fourth wave of postwar far-right politics, which started roughly in the new century, and is characterized by extreme heterogeneity as well as mainstreaming and normalization. It came, fairly organically, from looking at developments, reflecting on them, testing them in newspaper columns (mostly in *The Guardian*), and discussing them with colleagues and other experts.

*I developed my idea of a fourth wave of postwar far-right politics, which started roughly in the new century, and is characterized by extreme heterogeneity as well as mainstreaming and normalization.*

It made me realize that, while we have a massive amount of solid academic research on radical right parties in Europe, this is primarily situated in the third wave, between 1980 and 2000, in which the radical right were reasonably successful, but still relatively new and outsiders. We still theorize primarily about the radical right as opposition and protest parties, while parties like Fidesz in Hungary and the BJP in India have been in power for two to three terms. At the same time, we assume certain taboos, like antisemitism and racism, which seem to be disappearing rapidly. One of the few certainties in the literature, for example, was that the extreme right parties could not be electorally successful. And yet, Golden Dawn and L'SNS were, open racism is expressed by EKRE's leader and its youth branch, and presidents like Trump and Jair Bolsonaro openly flirt with anti-democratic measures.

*We still theorize primarily about the radical right as opposition and protest parties, while parties like Fidesz in Hungary and the BJP in India have been in power for two to three terms.*

**The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have weakened some populist parties in Europe, such as the AfD, but at the same time saw the broad circulation of conspiracy theories and popular movements of defiance toward science (medicine in that case) and state decisions. How do you assess the long-term transformations of European politics and how mass political dissatisfaction will express itself?**

I just published an article on COVID-19 and European far-right parties in *Nationalities Papers* with my graduate student, Jakub Wondreys, that looks at the responses of European far-right parties to the COVID-19 pandemic, their policy proposals, the electoral support during the first wave of the pandemic, i.e. between March and July, and how governments with and without far-right participation handled the pandemic. Turns out, most far-right parties took the pandemic very seriously, often earlier and more seriously than mainstream parties, asking for swift and stringent policies (closing of borders, distribution of PPE and tests, face masks and social distancing, and in most cases a quick but short lockdown). Once mainstream governments introduced a lockdown, many far-right opposition parties started to change their position, criticizing the lockdown for being too long, too harsh, too bad for the economy, etc. In power, far-right parties responded pretty similarly to mainstream parties and even seemed to have handled the first wave of the pandemic slightly better.

*Turns out, most far-right parties took the pandemic very seriously, often earlier and more seriously than mainstream parties, asking for swift and stringent policies (closing of borders, distribution of PPE and*

*tests, face masks and social distancing, and in most cases a quick but short lockdown).*

Now, to come to your point, the electoral consequences between March and July were minimal, overall. Some parties lost a bit, some won a bit, but only a few lost more than 1–2 percent, incidentally, well within the margins of error of most polls. And the parties that did lose big, like the Forum for Democracy (FvD) in The Netherlands, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the League in Italy, often had primarily unrelated causes. For instance, the FvD had gone through various plots and scandals, the AfD is caught in an internal fight between the radical right and extreme right factions (as well as various splits within regional parliamentary factions), and the League has lost the spotlight of being in government. Moreover, both FvD and the League have mainly lost to other far-right parties in their country, the Party for Freedom (PVV) and Brothers of Italy (FdI), respectively.

In short, the pandemic is not a transformative event, at least not yet. In fact, neither was the Great Recession, outside of a few of the hardest-hit countries (e.g., Greece and Spain). Now, the second wave, which Europe is undergoing at the moment, seems to be worse, but is met with more COVID fatigue, which is leading to more protests, including violent ones, and more dissatisfaction with government measures. Moreover, the economic price of the pandemic is yet to be paid in many European countries, and could lead to populist success, although probably temporarily, and mainly within the current political divisions. So far, there are no big new movements, let alone parties, that are founded and organized around the COVID-19 issue. Hence, the issue is being largely integrated into existing political divisions, leading to a further move away from austerity and neoliberalism, as well as toward a broadening of the “culture war.”

**You have been working on democracies’ response to far-right threats. How do you assess the current discussion in the US about limiting the right to express racist opinions and the role of social media in spreading them, but also in deciding what to block on those democracies’ platforms? Are we really defending democracy with such methods?**

This is actually one of the few issues on which I am more American than European. I am a staunch believer in freedom of speech, almost absolute, unlike the vast majority of Europeans, including most of my colleagues. I grew up in a country with some of the toughest anti-discrimination laws, which were quite strictly enforced in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly towards the far right of that time. And look where The Netherlands is right now: for two decades politics was characterized by chasing Pim Fortuyn’s voters, orphaned by his assassination in 2002. The Netherlands now has one of the most Islamophobic political and public debates, together with Denmark, despite all those laws. They are simply no longer enforced, or only selectively and inconsistently, because now the mainstream breaks them too. And how can you ban nativist speech when you have a Minister of Foreign Affairs who literally says that he does not know one example of a successful multicultural society?

The situation is a bit more difficult with regard to social media, as these are private companies. They have a right to uphold certain norms, many companies do. At the same time, companies like Facebook have a near-monopoly on certain social media, so being excluded by them is to be excluded from a significant part of the political and public debate, which is an infringement upon your rights as a citizen.

In the end, I am highly skeptical towards measures that are primarily, and often even exclusively, directed at weakening the far right. They tend to fight the symptom, not the cause. The far right emerges because

of fundamental dissatisfaction with the state of liberal democracy in Europe, and I prefer to prioritize the strengthening of liberal democracy over the defeating of its enemies. Because I believe that a liberal democracy can only thrive, and be worth saving, when its people support it. And to understand what people think is wrong, I need them to be free to speak their mind.

*I am highly skeptical towards measures that are primarily, and often even exclusively, directed at weakening the far right.*

Don't get me wrong, there are exceptions—incitement to violence, for instance—and I am not so naive to believe that you can convince true far-right believers that liberal democracy is a better system. But I do believe that the majority of the citizens in European countries believe that liberal democracy is the best system, but many are disappointed and dissatisfied with the way real existing democracies function. In many cases, this is not without reason.

As Peter Mair has argued, many parties are more “responsible” than “responsive,” i.e., trying to please “the market” rather than their voters. Corruption is a massive problem in many European countries. Many issues are depoliticized to keep them away from “the people.” But the way to win them over is to improve democracy, to explain why certain decisions have been made, and to stand firm on certain core values—as Jan-Werner Mueller has summarized so perfectly, you can talk with populists but not like populists. It doesn't work anyway. As Jean-Marie Le Pen already said decades ago, and as has been proven again and again, the people prefer the original over the copy.

So, rather than focusing primarily on how Russia exploits social divisions, or how Facebook and YouTube feed disinformation, try to overcome that social division, which is real and not created by Russia; find out why people are susceptible to disinformation and try to change that. But to do this, the broader elites in democratic countries, from politicians to professors, have to first understand and truly believe in liberal democracy. They had to understand that it will always remain a contested and temporary compromise between liberalism and democracy, simply stated between minority rights and majority rule, and that is built on pluralism, the belief that society consists of different groups with different interests and values, which are legitimate (i.e., they have a right to try and achieve them, but only within the confines of the liberal democratic system), even if you disagree with them.

*Rather than focusing primarily on how Russia exploits social divisions, or how Facebook and YouTube feed disinformation, try to overcome that social division, which is real and not created by Russia; find out why people are susceptible to disinformation and try to change that.*



## David Lewis on Carl Schmitt and Russian Conservatism

Originally published November 16, 2020

**David, you just published *Russia's New Authoritarianism. Putin and the Politics of Order*. You explain that the Russian regime has been articulating a “chaos versus order” narrative as one of its key legitimacy tools. Can you develop that point for our readers?**

I always found the simple binary of democracy vs authoritarianism too simplistic a frame to understand Russia's complex post-Soviet development. There is this dominant Western narrative that tells a partial truth, in which a struggling democracy that emerged under Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin reverted to authoritarianism after the coming to power of ex-KGB officer Vladimir Putin. But for many conservative Russian thinkers, the Western narrative of failed democratisation makes little sense—and misses a completely different conceptual binary, that between ‘chaos’ and ‘order’.

*For many conservative Russian thinkers, the Western narrative of failed democratisation makes little sense—and misses a completely different conceptual binary, that between ‘chaos’ and ‘order’.*

In this view, the period from 1985-2000 was not, as liberals would argue, one of liberation from Soviet rule and democratisation. Instead, conservatives describe it as yet another ‘Time of Troubles’—one of the periods of disorder and state collapse that have punctuated Russian history since the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In this cyclical view of Russian history, Putinism is understood as a necessary period of political order and consolidation of centralised power, critical to ensuring Russia's continued existence as a viable state.

This cyclical theory of history, between periods of chaos and periods of centralised power, has a long tradition in Russian historiography. But the chaos-order binary also fits with a long-standing strand of European conservative thought that views political order as fundamentally threatened by liberalism. Illiberal conservatives argued that political pluralism—the existence of multiple interests and centres of influence represented in institutions and civil society—fatally undermined the state and political order.

*But the chaos-order binary also fits with a long-standing strand of European conservative thought that views political order as fundamentally threatened by liberalism.*

For conservatives in Russia, the 1990s were not a period of nascent democratisation, but instead represented a dangerous fracturing of society through the rise of oligarchs, regional elites, separatist movements, criminal gangs, and so forth, that all threatened the very existence of the Russian state. From this point, it was only a short step to argue that the promoters of pluralism and democracy—Russian liberals and their Western supporters—were deliberately seeking to weaken Russia as a political actor in the world. So the search for political order in Russia became by definition both an illiberal idea and an anti-Western geopolitical project.

But this understanding of political order as opposed to liberalism does not necessarily mean that it was seen as anti-democratic. From the very beginning of his political career, Putin made the point that the demand for political order was a democratic demand from below—a response to what ordinary people wanted and needed. He had a point. Back in 2000, opinion polls showed more than 80% of the Russian public was willing to prioritise order over individual rights. Putin came to embody this popular demand for political order and was able to form a solid majority of support throughout his first two terms for this prioritisation of political values: first order, then rights.

*This understanding of political order as opposed to liberalism does not necessarily mean that it was seen as anti-democratic.*

Russian conservative thinkers spent a good deal of time thinking about how to form a democratic majority in support of their understanding of illiberal political order—using ideas such as conservative values to mobilize support, while painting liberal values as those of an urban, Westernised, elite minority distant from ordinary people. This attempt to divide liberalism from democracy has been a central feature of illiberal conservative philosophy—not only in Russia, but in the global trend towards authoritarianism and illiberalism.

**You insist on the major role of Carl Schmitt in Russia’s promoting a politics of regional spatial projects as an answer to the liberal world order. How do you see Schmitt being read and used by the Kremlin’s thinkers or polit-technologists?**

Despite his reprehensible personal history as a Nazi and an unrepentant anti-Semite, Carl Schmitt has enjoyed a renaissance among political thinkers on both the left and right of European politics since the 1980s. For leftists, his powerful critiques of parliamentarism and U.S. foreign policy undermined the self-righteousness of Western liberalism. For rightists, he was simply the foremost critic of liberalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; someone who enables a “critique of liberalism in a liberal world,” as Leo Strauss put it. So it was not surprising that Schmitt would also find followers in Russia. He was read by an eclectic array of philosophers, publicists and political technologists, and influenced many of the debates among conservative thinkers that dominated political thought in Russia after 2000.

There was something about Schmitt’s style that particularly resonated with Russian thinkers, perhaps it was his polemical tone or the sense of existential angst that overshadows much of his writing. Certainly, Schmitt’s analysis of the failings of Weimar democracy struck an obvious chord. Comparisons between Yeltsin’s Russia and Weimar Germany became almost a cliché in the 1990s. But what really attracted Russian conservatives was the way Schmitt’s work seemed to offer a conceptual framework for developing ideas about how to build illiberal forms of political order. You can see the influence of these illiberal ideas in political concepts such as Surkov’s ‘Sovereign Democracy,’ and later on in some of the conservative amendments to the Constitution in 2020.

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Schmitt offered two big ideas that resonated with Russian conservative thinking about domestic political order. First, Schmitt argued that only a genuinely sovereign leader, able to act outside the law and the constitution—to declare an exception, as he phrases it—could ensure lasting political order. A sovereign power needed to have a monopoly on decision-making, unconstrained by institutions or political opponents. This conceptualisation of sovereignty became central to the Putinist state. It involved taking back control from regional leaders, oligarchs, civil society, parliament, the IMF and so forth. But it was also about declaring the exception—acting outside the law. Take Chechnya for example—it became a space of exception where normal constitutional rules did not apply. But very soon the basic flaw in Schmitt's conceptualisation of sovereignty became obvious: the exception was not reserved for genuine emergency situations where the state was threatened. Instead the line between the exception and the norm became blurred and exceptionality became a common feature of Russian governance.

Schmitt's second big claim is that the fundamental distinction that defines the political is that between friend and enemy. The idea that a political community could be defined by identifying its enemy—its Other—seemed attractive for many Russian thinkers during a search for identity. For a brief moment, during the so-called Crimean consensus, there was a glimmer of this sense of unity—a nation poised against the outside world in a common purpose. But the Crimean consensus was short-lived as the underlying political and social fractures in society re-emerged. Instead, the obvious problems of Schmitt's simplistic friend-enemy formulation have become evident in the search for internal enemies in Russia, the obsession with 'color revolutions' and with a 'fifth column' of CIA-trained activists, and the growing repressions and attacks against political opponents, including the murder of Boris Nemtsov and the attempted assassination of Alexei Navalny.

Finally, to come back to your original question, Schmitt's international theory envisages a world divided into 'Great Spaces,' essentially spheres of influence dominated by a Great Power. For Schmitt—as for other realist thinkers—a balance of power among major powers is the only way to ensure lasting international order. For Schmitt, this concept of world order is in fundamental opposition to a liberal world order, which is dominated by the West and which promotes universalist ideas. For him, this is not a sustainable order, but one that instead risks a constant threat of total war—an ideological war of liberals against the rest.

*Schmitt's international theory envisages a world divided into 'Great Spaces,' essentially spheres of influence dominated by a Great Power.*

For Schmitt, these geopolitical spaces are an ideological concept: they are spaces created in opposition to the liberal international order. Unlike traditional realist ideas, Schmitt argues that these spaces are united not only by military means or economic influence, but by a political idea. For Russian geopolitical thinkers, this idea of a multipolar world divided into grand regions has obvious attractions: if Russia can develop its own region—some versions of Eurasia—in which it is a pole, then it can also ensure its role as a global great power. But it also introduces an existential edge to Russian debates about world order: the liberal international order in this way of thinking is not a benign system that can be easily accommodated or reformed, but a threat to Russia's existence as a fully sovereign power.

**There are many debates about the “nature” of the Putin regime: pragmatic and cynical, or led by deep ideological beliefs. How do you position yourself on that question? A whole chapter of the book is devoted to the notion of katechon and Russia’s sense of a moral mission.**

I think this question is often discussed with a particular view of ideology in mind—one that harks back to the age of the great *-isms*—in the Soviet case Marxism-Leninism, a codified ideology based on the interpretation of written texts. Of course, in this sense Russia does not have a state ideology, either for domestic use or for export. But a broader understanding of ideology (that proposed by Michael Freeden for example) sees it as a set of shared concepts about the world, a kind of lens through which we interpret reality. So, in this sense, Russian decision-makers—like everybody else—have ideological frameworks through which they interpret the world. My argument is that over the last two decades Putinism has produced a fairly coherent shared set of ideas and concepts about how the world works. It is a worldview shared by a large part of the Russian elite, and it also resonates with some other political movements and political leaders around the world.

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In that sense, there is an ideology that shapes and informs decisions, but it is not a set of rigid rules or norms that prevents more pragmatic or cynical decisions being made. It’s perhaps easier to understand this as a form of ‘common sense’—shared ideas about the world—or in more academic terms, a hegemonic discourse that polices language and dictates meaning about the world.

Russia’s intervention in Syria was driven by a range of factors—geopolitical, economic etc.—but the emphasis in Russian narratives on a moral mission, a messianic element, was an important device for self-legitimation. The famous concert in 2016 when the Mariinskii orchestra conducted by Valery Gergiev played Chopin in the ruins of Palmyra is a perfect illustration of this messianic framing of Russia’s military mission. Russia presents itself as a kind of tragic bulwark of stability against the forces of disorder in a way that echoes the idea of the katechon—the Biblical figure that holds back the anti-Christ. In this messianic discourse, Russia is a civilisation fated to play an essentially tragic role in an imperfect world; a bastion against the chaos and destruction unleashed by the dangerous excesses of American liberalism. You can identify this katechontic trope in official Russian narratives, from Sergey Lavrov, for example, who talks about Russia as the historical defender of Europe, as well as from conservative writers who explicitly cite the idea of the katechon.

Whatever the view of the role of ideology in the Putinist regime, I think it’s certainly the case that not enough academic research has focused on the role of ideas in Russian politics. The popular focus on kleptocracy in contemporary Russia, or the rationalist approach of much of the comparative literature on authoritarian regimes tends to overlook the importance of ideas. That’s a pity, because by studying common ideas and conceptual frameworks I think we can better locate Russian illiberalism within the wider global trends in illiberal and authoritarian politics.

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**You theorize the Putin regime as promoting a “politics of order.” Does that mean that the liberal world order is not an order? Isn’t a rule-based order an order? How do you entangle that conceptual definition of a “politics of order?”**

Certainly, there are multiple interpretations of order and how it is produced. After all, the disciplines of political science and international relations are essentially devoted to understanding competing views of how human life should be ordered. In more concrete terms, the political history of post-Soviet Russia can also be interpreted as a struggle over how to define order and how it can be constructed. The Russian tragedy—at least in the view of liberals like me—is that the search for order under Putin was based on a fundamentally flawed theoretical premise, i.e. the Schmittian view that political order can only be produced in opposition to liberal values.

*The political history of post-Soviet Russia can also be interpreted as a struggle over how to define order and how it can be constructed.*

Russian conservatives picked a flawed theory of political order. But the mistake of many Western political thinkers was to assume that order did not matter, that it was sufficient to promote political and economic pluralism and assume that a sustainable political order would follow. The idea that in 1999 what Russia needed was more liberalization and more political pluralism in a situation of serious state weakness seems to me to be highly questionable. But the Russian conservative response—that political order must come first, and all democratic procedures and civil rights be subordinated to that end—was also inevitably flawed. Illiberal conservatism produced an ideological dead-end in which political order is only achieved at the expense of all other values—justice, individual rights, democratic representation, private property, and economic prosperity. And paradoxically, such an order is itself unstable and faces frequent institutional and political crises.

*Illiberal conservatism produced an ideological dead-end in which political order is only achieved at the expense of all other values—justice, individual rights, democratic representation, private property, and economic prosperity.*

On the international scale, the argument of Russian conservative thinkers is simple. The liberal world order is neither liberal, nor global, nor an order, but is a Western imperialist project that produces chaos. Again, Schmitt is the most brilliant exponent of this view, which is why this former Nazi became so popular among leftist critics of U.S. foreign policy. The façade of humanitarianism in which liberal internationalism wraps itself is hypocritical—Schmitt famously quips that “whoever invokes humanity wants to cheat.” The rules-based order is one in which, as Putin claimed in his Munich speech, you have ‘one master, one sovereign,’ who not only makes the rules, but also breaks them at will. Putin’s argument is that this hegemonic system leads not to a rules-based order, but to a world without rules, in which Russia presents itself as the status quo power, the bulwark against chaos.

This leaves us in a paradoxical situation—Western analysis portrays Russia as a purveyor of disorder in the international order, while Russia views Western powers as the creators of chaos. Consequently, even when Russia breaks the rules blatantly—as in its intervention in eastern Ukraine in 2014—it is still convinced that it is engaged in an order-producing act. The geopolitical divide between Russia and the West is based on deep-seated conceptual differences.

**How do you see the Russian case as specific or, on the contrary, archetypical of the rise of illiberal regimes or movements across the globe?**

This is an important question, and a difficult one. Each case has context-specific drivers and factors. But it is also obvious that the rise of illiberal regimes in such disparate places over the last decade is more than just coincidence. That's why arguments claiming that Russia is simply reverting to historical type are not sufficient to explain the emergence of Putinism. We must be able to discuss some common, comparative factors that go beyond Russian political culture. Of course, there is a long tradition of autocratic governance in Russia, but historical precedent does not fully explain the emergence of the current authoritarian regime.

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Talk of the rise of populism or nationalism in global politics describe essentially secondary phenomena—there is something much deeper going on across these cases. The most fundamental common theme is a rejection of the tenets of liberalism (defined in all sorts of different ways) and the assertion of national or civilisational spaces that deny the application of universal norms. So, in that sense, it is a spatial and anti-universalist movement, aimed at 'de-spatialising' normative institutions—the European Union, transnational civil society and so forth. A second common feature is the attempt to separate democracy from liberalism—we can call this illiberal democracy or democratic authoritarianism, but in each case an illiberal political order denies the validity of political pluralism, but still claims a popular mandate from society.

In politics, two features—both of them typical of Schmittian politics—also run through these cases. The first is the willingness of political leaders to break the rules, to step outside the law and to reject all sorts of constraining institutions—constitutional courts, international law, political conventions and norms. This is a politics of transgression and exception, and that in itself appears to draw an emotional response in some parts of society, reveling in a kind of vicarious rebellion against liberal rules.

Second, Schmitt's idea that the political is not about forming a wholly liberal consensus but is something forged through antagonism—through division into friends and enemies. This is an identity-forming political divide that cuts across liberal ideas about citizenship and civic identity. A politics of division can mobilize communities in tribal ways, something very effective in plebiscite-styles politics. But this politics of division and exception is much less successful at achieving normal governance. The difficulties that populists have faced in managing the COVID-19 pandemic are witness to the shortcomings of this type of mobilizational politics.

**In your book, you seem to use 'authoritarian' and 'illiberal' as quasi-synonym. Our Program is named 'Illiberalism Studies.' How do you relate to the term illiberalism? Do**

**you think it fits better conceptually than other existing terms to describe the current evolution or is it limiting our understanding?**

I think illiberalism is the best term to describe a wide ideological turn in global politics, which involves a broad range of negative reactions to liberal ideas, institutions and practices. Illiberalism is a negative concept, but I think it gets at the central point that whatever claims may be made about liberalism being obsolete—as Putin claimed last year—illiberal ideas are still articulated in a world where liberal norms and liberal ideas are still powerful. Authoritarianism, on the other hand, describes a political system informed by illiberal ideas, but it is not simply defined by a ‘lack’—the lack of democratic process or the failure to develop the rule of law. Authoritarianism has ideological and political content in its own right—it is a hierarchical political order, in which authority is the primary concept around which political life is constructed.

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There are a couple of challenges in using the concept of illiberalism. First, as I say, it’s a negative concept and that accurately describes its dialogic relationship with liberalism. But there is also a risk that it is viewed as only a shadow of liberalism—existing without its own tradition of political theory and political ideas. There is a tendency to dismiss the ideological content of illiberalism—instead referring to it as a kind of psychological reaction rather than an ideological shift—as Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes tend to do in their fascinating recent book. I think this overlooks a long tradition of illiberal conservatism in political thought and downplays the role and power of ideas in these political movements. This risks underestimating the power and influence of illiberalism and its ability to generate new political forms and alternative ideological and political orders.

Second, illiberalism is useful in that it takes us beyond the binary of regime types that I mentioned at the beginning—the divide between democracy and authoritarianism. It allows us to identify illiberal practices in established democracies and—potentially—liberal spaces in authoritarian regimes. This usefully blurs regime categories, but also perhaps runs the risk of overlooking the importance of democratic thought and democratic institutions in thinking about these trends in global politics. For Schmitt, liberal democracy was an oxymoron—liberalism undermined any political order and therefore the people who were represented by it. In Russian thinking, liberalism and democracy were also often conceptual opponents—Russian liberals have often seemed dismissive of the views of wider Russian society beyond the Moscow bubble—while Russian conservatives talked constantly about the need for representation of a silent majority, a term borrowed from American conservatism. In using the term illiberalism we should also continue to keep in mind the complex but vital relationship that has always existed between liberalism and democracy.

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## Noah Tucker on Jihadist Ideology and European Populism

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**Noah, you have been following jihadism for several years, trying to disentangle the personal trajectory of jihadists and our ideological (mis)reading of the reasons for their engagement. Could you tell us more about how you interpret the factors that push individuals to join jihadism?**

I think the way I have come to approach trying to understand these factors mirror, and is informed by, the same progression that has happened in the whole field. The 9/11 attacks were such a pivotal moment in both sort of forming the field as it is now, and the academic generation that I belong to in terms of funding, opportunities and emphasis. Much of the work that came in response to that attack was at its root, driven by trying to understand the motivations of *individuals* for joining a group like al Qaeda and their allies, which included the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and later the Islamic Jihad Union in Central Asia. I'm speaking as an American, of course, but I think as other places experienced similar traumatic AQ-affiliate attacks in the years that followed. Whether London or Madrid, or smaller scale attacks like the Tashkent bombings in 2003 and 2004, they sparked the same kind of reactions.

I think the first impulse was to try to understand that at the individual level. There was so much time, energy and funding put into the question of "*who* becomes a terrorist?"—with the understanding that it was about individuals and ideology. If ideology really *is* the fundamental driving factor, and that ideology only seems to appeal to or capture certain people, the question is, "who are those people?" The tactic of suicide attacks also led us to assume at first, that there was something deeply individual about the problem and also something fundamentally different about contemporary jihadism. Although the research has evolved, I've been in so many briefings with government officials, even in recent years, in which the only real takeaway they want is some kind of "profile of a terrorist," so that we know which buttons to push and which levers to pull to influence individual behavior.

Earlier in my own research, I tried to begin with that individual-level focus on the recruiting process. I watched it happen online, I read and watched all kinds of ideological material, I spent time in the groups where recruiting was happening and for some projects, I even experienced recruiters trying to attract me. One of the things I found in this process was that the ideology that, we assumed, was this key causal factor seemed almost incidental to the process of recruitment. This is one of the reasons why I've come to feel uncomfortable with the "pathways to radicalization" model in general, because



it assumes that people become radicalized as individuals and therefore join a radical group dictated by their ideology. My experience from looking at individual cases is that just as—or more—often, it works the other way around: they join the group first for other reasons and only *within* the group may become “radicalized.” Often, they are introduced to that new extremist group by one of their existing groups—their personal network of friends, family members, or classmates, rather than even having an interaction with a recruiter.

*I've come to feel uncomfortable with the “pathways to radicalization” model in general, because it assumes that people become radicalized as individuals and therefore join a radical group dictated by their ideology. My experience from looking at individual cases is that just as—or more—often, it works the other way around: they join the group first for other reasons and only within the group may become “radicalized.”*

In recent years as I've had the opportunity to interview more people who demobilized from jihadist groups, I've asked them about why they chose to join the specific group that they did. I have been somewhat surprised at how little importance they often assign to ideology in that decision. More often, this process seems to have more to do with a larger conflict they find themselves within, and the mechanisms joining that group might offer them to resolve that conflict. Often, for Central Asians, it has to do with being displaced or cut off from the pathways they expected to have for making a better life for themselves and their children, in whatever way they perceive that goal. On an individual level, that looks so different in each case that it's very hard to make generalizations about it; this goes with one of the overall findings in the whole field in recent years, that this individual level “profile” of someone who ends up in a jihadist organization just doesn't exist. For every ten people mobilized, you often have ten very different stories.

Broadly then, I would say that in my own work and in the field overall, we have come to find it may be more useful to begin with a different question: not *who* gets mobilized to a jihadist organization that might then mold them into being a terrorist or suicide bomber, but *what kind of conflict* might have been happening that motivates clusters of people to go to Syria? This conflict-based model that looks at community-level factors helps us to understand why violent extremism often overlaps with other types of (non-ideological) violence. It also suggests that even if we arrest all the ideologues, ban all the literature or block all the accounts, we are unlikely to achieve the ultimate goal of preventing violence. Unless the underlying conflict is resolved, the groups and their ideologies may simply mutate, and in some cases become only more ruthless and extreme. The Afghan conflict that has now spanned three generations is unfortunately a good example of this.

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**Do you consider the term ‘illiberalism’ relevant in defining jihadism? How is liberalism presented as the enemy of Islam in jihadist perceptions? Which aspects of liberalism—political, economic, cultural—are the most criticized?**

I do, although unlike in some Western contexts, the word liberalism is not usually the one defined in the negative, since the putative “transition” from the Soviet political order to a liberal democratic

order was generally collapsed into a single word: “democracy.” In jihadist and political Islamist circles in Central Asia, “democracy” is used to signify everything negative that came after the collapse of the Soviet political and social order.

*In jihadist and political Islamist circles in Central Asia, “democracy” is used to signify everything negative that came after the collapse of the Soviet political and social order.*

From authoritarian leaders “elected” in farcical contests without competition, corrupt judges and police, young women trafficked into prostitution, money lost in the little casinos that cropped up like mushrooms all over cities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s, organized crime that took over markets and demanded insurance payments from shopkeepers, to the alcoholism and drug addiction that ruined lives and families during that same transition period, and still does. Everything that came with the profound sense of disorder and unpredictability in the chaos of the 1990s to the very predictable oppression you could expect in April this year if you were a Tajik journalist challenging the government’s claims that COVID-19 wouldn’t affect the country or wasn’t already killing people. All of this is lumped together in jihadist narratives as the fruit of liberalism and democracy.

In Central Asia, what is the most criticized are not really parts of liberalism, but the caricature that liberalism has become in much of the former Soviet space. More than any specific cultural or political aspect, it’s this association with chaos, disorder and oppression: being left vulnerable to the naked political and economic power of oligarchs and elites. At least, [that’s] the rhetoric used. The economic aspect most criticized is corruption and the really significant inequality that is perceived (correctly, in some cases) to have resulted from that. Corruption is certainly not a liberal economic value, but because corruption is so central to the lived experience in the era self-defined by these states as democracy, it becomes one of the narratives that gains the most traction.

Neither these overlapping crises nor the current very non-democratic political order in most Central Asian states has much objectively to do with liberalism or democracy, but for very different reasons both jihadist groups (in condemning it) and political elites (in justifying it) consistently define the current system as essentially representing “democracy.” Each of them benefits from presenting the public with a false dilemma: there are only two stark choices: us or them. Authoritarian regimes like the late Islam Karimov’s in Uzbekistan, or Tajikistan under Emomali Rahmon in 2020, constantly claim that those abusive and corrupt police states are as “liberal” as they could possibly be while still holding back the line against wild-eyed jihadists. Essentially, Jihadist groups agree. They claim that what you had under Karimov are the consequences of liberalism, the only real source of justice and security would be theocracy that rejected the flimsy liberal principles designed by mere men.

To make it more confusing, in their more acrobatic rhetorical moments both the authoritarian regimes and jihadist groups denigrate *one another* with accusations of being the “poison fruits of liberalism,” since in their internal messaging, local governments, Islamist and even some jihadist groups engage with the very popular conspiracy theory that terrorism is itself part of liberalism in the most direct sense—that Western governments created, fund, and control ISIS and orchestrate terrorist attacks themselves in order to provide a pretense for military invasions or orchestrating coups. This is the ground where very different forms of illiberalism and anti-liberalism meet.

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As much as it can seem like a farce, the tragedy in all of this to me is that in both of these very different visions of re-ordering society after the chaos and trauma of the 1990s, actual democracy and what we define as universal values and human rights are rejected by both sides. In both of these versions actual democracy in which people have political agency over their lives or can make their own decisions is not a choice, and ordinary people are left without a non-revolutionary mechanism for political change.

The longer I work on conflict, the more I feel that the genius of democracy, with or without its much better track record for helping us achieve broader access to those basic human rights, is that it provides a mechanism to resolve political disputes without violence. This comes back to the first question about factors that drive people into jihadist movements. If real democracy is left off the table and instead the one-party state that becomes an engine for astronomical inequality is what you grow up believing is “democracy,” why bother to struggle or take risks for it? I think liberalism is facing a real crisis in the former USSR, and jihadism fits into that.

Of course, jihadism is only one of the (smallest) movements, construing itself as a response to disappointment with this version of pageant democracy. I will leave aside far-right, nationalist or neo-traditionalist movements since I am sure they will be explored by authors who know them far better than I do. But I can’t imagine having this conversation without at least lightly touching on the broader trend of religiously inflected “re-traditionalization” that is in many ways a response to those same experiences. Farideh Heyat’s 2004 article [“Re-Islamisation in Kyrgyzstan: gender, new poverty and the moral dimension”](#) captured this movement as it was coalescing and still a very direct response to the experiences of the 1990s in a way I really admire.

Here the distinction between democracy and liberalism becomes relevant again, because within this trend we find groups and figures who will participate in democratic institutions such as they are—who might run for parliament in Kyrgyzstan, for example—but who might define themselves in a way that is distinctly (and proudly) illiberal, particularly on women’s rights and LGBT+ rights. Strong civic and legal institutions can survive this kind of internal contradiction (we hope) and still preserve equality under the law while offering a mechanism to debate and resolve those differences. Without those strong institutions, including political parties that can actually govern or develop plans and platforms that are appealing to an electorate, it becomes very tempting for aspiring political elites to appeal to dark populist instincts that pin the blame for inequality and suffering on “liberalism.” While Islamist and jihadist groups are the perennial favorites for this scenario in no small part because of the rhetoric from incumbent regimes mentioned above, a (ethno)nationalist candidate who can co-opt some of the identarian, quasi-Islamic anti-illiberalism is in my view a far greater and more realistic threat.

**You know well the evangelical circles in the U.S. Do you see links between jihadism and the US Christian Right in terms of their vision of the world? More broadly, do you make parallels between the rise of national populism in Europe and the phenomena you are studying in the Islamic world? Are there similar forms of disempowerment for some individuals? Do you see challenges to traditional masculinity as a key driver for illiberalism in both the Western national populism sense and jihadism?**

The short answer is “yes.” To all of the above. Which is why this project is such a fantastic idea and so well timed. I think more broadly, to the point about national populism in Europe and the “re-traditionalization” that I mentioned above, we see a wide spectrum within both of these contexts that mirror one another at many different points, not just at the violent ends. Everyone can probably guess the Central Asian country I had most in mind when writing that final paragraph in the last answer—Kyrgyzstan—but substitute identarian for Catholicism and we could easily be describing Poland. A sense of disempowerment, and that inability to see a path to achieve the basic goals a person or group has in life, I think, is something that is common in both contexts. I certainly see challenges to traditional masculinity across both contexts too. This is something that deserves a great deal more attention, as well as the blatantly misogynistic character of movements from the far-ends of both of these broad camps, and the centrality that defining itself in opposition to feminism has, in both contexts.

At the same time, it’s important to remember that the picture is complex: women in these movements can also have agency, and they also sometimes join jihadist groups as an act of asserting that agency. In research over the past couple of years I can think of several cases from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan; women joined groups in Syria on their own because they believed those groups would offer them more respect or equality than they were receiving in their own community, or from their husbands at home. That said, in the Central Asian context what we’re seeing is not so much a rejection or reaction to liberalism as it actually exists in social mores and norms in France or Scotland or the US, but maybe more a sense that the promise of liberalism and its benefits has not led to anything that looks like everyday life in those places, and what an illiberal movement promises is an improvement over the status quo, to turn back the clock with a sort of magical time machine to what I’m told engineers call the “last known good configuration.”

Both of these broad movements idealize a mythical “golden age” and promise they can return to it. I think in both of these contexts, people are attracted to deeply illiberal movements at times under the false promise that political equality for other members of society—women, immigrants, minorities—was part of the historical change (or the key historical change) that brought about the inequalities or disempowerment they face now. Having never had the opportunity in most cases to experience actual liberalism as a political or social order might put Central Asians at a disadvantage in evaluating these narratives, but obviously, we see strong rejections of liberalism and even basic democratic values in mature democracies too, so I think that indicates that there are deeper conflicts here that we need to explore, that again, make this project very timely.

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### **How would you compare and discuss jihadism and far-right terrorism?**

There are some striking parallels, especially in the Christian Identity movement that developed in the U.S. after the Vietnam War. Kathleen Belew’s fantastic book *Bring the War Home*, explores that broader movement so well within a historical context. More recent iterations, militias like the *Hutarees* in Michigan for example, so closely mirror jihadist propaganda that you could almost just swap the identifying terms and you wouldn’t know whose texts you were reading. I think that using illiberalism

as a frame to explore those parallels may be a more useful approach than referring to them as religious movements—since neither White Power groups that claim Christian identity nor tiny jihadist groups that claim to represent the world’s Muslims can be well understood as having evolved within their religious contexts, they are deeply political.

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I had not worked as much on European national populism or far-right groups until I spent a summer on a project on political violence in Tbilisi in 2016, just after finishing the series published by the GW’s Central Asia Program on ISIS recruiting in Central Asia and had worked on jihadist mobilization in from Caucasus as well. I was really struck by the parallels, especially in the messaging and recruiting techniques used online and in social media, by neo-Nazi and ultranationalist groups in the Caucasus and jihadist groups from other parts of the same region.

Obviously far-right and jihadist movements have many important differences, that goes without saying, and so it’s less analytically interesting. It’s important to be clear about those differences. In classifying both as violent extremism, we often presume that policy measures or programs that prevent one would also prevent the other. That’s a question that I’m very interested in, and I’m not sure how much it’s been empirically tested. From a social psychology or even sociological perspective I think there’s pretty wide consensus it’s more or less settled as true that mechanisms for mobilization to extremist violence are broadly common across both types.

Political violence is something we can discuss as a broad phenomenon, and I have found that adopting that comparative perspective very helpful especially in the context of Central Asia where religion itself is often treated as the primary causal factor behind jihadism; while no one or virtually no one would or should argue that protestant Christianity is the primary root of the White Power militia movement. This is where I think adopting a conflict focused perspective might help us see some important differences, although, the local context that informs that conflict is important too. An 18-year-old in rural Michigan who is thinking about joining a group like the Hutarees and an 18-year-old in Zhezkazgan, Kazakhstan, watching ISIS videos might be responding to some of the same global situations and even watch the same movies or the same Mixed Martial Arts fighters. They might even describe their goals or their beliefs in nearly identical ways, but the context they are experiencing and responding to still has local specifics that are vastly different. I suspect that those specifics, especially the political context they take place in, is probably still very important to defusing both of those situations and interrupting the cycle of violence.



## Colin Dueck on Trump's Foreign Policy

*Originally published December 14, 2020*

**Colin, your new book, *Age of Iron: On Conservative Nationalism*, defines conservative nationalism as one of the central features of the Republican Party's culture over decades. Could you briefly summarize for our readers your analysis of this trend in U.S. political culture?**

The way I trace it is really back to the American founding. You have at the founding a foreign policy tradition which emphasizes national sovereignty and freedom of action of the United States as an independent country. Both Washington and Jefferson phrase that in different ways. Jefferson calls it “no entangling alliances”—this idea that the US will retain a sort of freedom of action internationally, Washington referred to it in his farewell address as well. That actually was the mainstream American foreign policy tradition throughout the 19th century and then well into the 20th century. It is a nationalist tradition, but it is a distinctly American tradition. I would say it is conservative in the sense that it was meant to literally conserve the American experiment—the American regime, system of government, as well as American independence internationally.

This American conservatism is tied up with a civic form of nationalism, which emphasizes rule of law, constitutionalism, limited government, opportunity, individual liberty, and so on. That is a bipartisan tradition throughout much of the 19th century. It is really challenged most aggressively by Woodrow Wilson during World War One when he offers a different foreign policy paradigm. That is what today we call the liberal internationalist tradition as opposed to the conservative nationalist one.

Wilson was revolutionary because he suggested that the United States needed to make multilateral, enduring, permanent, and binding commitments worldwide; a collective security system globally and universally. Of course, the U.S. Senate rejected his proposal in the short term by recusing the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations. But in the end, Wilsonism in the 1940s is vindicated in a more pragmatic form by presidents like Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman. That then becomes the mainstream tradition in U.S. foreign policy for generations.

I think one of the things that made Trump so unusual and shocking for a lot of people is that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, he refers back to an older tradition prior to the 1940s. In other words, he questioned that entire Wilsonian-liberal-internationalist framework. He never said exactly what he

planned to do to replace it; it was more a question of disruption than of reconstruction. But he clearly questioned or disrupted the existing paradigm. I think in a way, whether knowingly or not, he refers back to that older nationalist American foreign policy tradition, putting great emphasis on freedom of action internationally. That is a central theme in my book. That is how I see conservative American nationalism in foreign affairs and where Trump fits in at the broadest level.

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### **Where did Trump innovate or disrupt the traditions of U.S. foreign policy?**

In some ways, there is more continuity than we might have thought. For example, Trump said, NATO is obsolete. In the end, of course, NATO still exists. In terms of continuities, I don't think Trump ever got out of bed in the morning and said, "How can I wreck the liberal international order?" I don't think he thought about it one way or the other. What he actually argued for decades was that the United States had provided benefits—economic and military benefits—for its allies without receiving proportionate benefits itself. It has to be admitted that he was pretty consistent about that. He didn't say it in the usual thinktank way, with set-piece speeches in a formal setting; he said it in off the cuff in radio interviews or on the Howard Stern Show, but he actually kept saying the same thing for over 30 years.

Trump is a kind of instinctive populist and nationalist in the sense of believing that the United States needs to retain a great deal of freedom of action and that it has been taken advantage of by its allies as much as its adversaries. Trump then ran on a platform in 2016 advocating for clawing back greater benefits materially for the United States thinking in narrow terms about material interests, looking to renegotiate trading arrangements, or renegotiating military arrangements. There was an open-endedness to it which was exactly what made a lot of people nervous about the end game. I'm not sure he himself knew the end game. I think he made some broad commitments to direction without necessarily knowing the end game.

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What is striking about his presidency is that he has pushed the envelope on a lot of commitments; some he abandoned altogether, some he renegotiated, some he kept, some remain unchanged. It has been a mixture of disruption and continuity, depending on the specific commitment or the specific arrangement if you go down the list regionally and functionally.

One could also say that there is a sense of disruption versus continuity in Republican foreign policy traditions and ideas. For example, Trump clearly rejected the George W. Bush policy of the freedom agenda in the greater Middle East. He said that these interventions were a waste, that they were a mistake, and that we should never have gone into Iraq in the first place. He questioned fundamentally why we were in Afghanistan. That is a big change from G. W. Bush. However, when you add it all up, the United States has not completely exited those regions. It still retains troops in the Middle East, it still retains troops in Afghanistan, and it has a hardline policy on Iran. It is still a player in the region, backing

its allies and opposing its adversaries. Taking the Middle East as just one example, there has been a combination of continuity and disruption and I think one finds that that is true in almost every case.

**Now that Trump is defeated, what is the future of national conservatism in a post-Trump era? Do you think there is a long-lasting “Trumpism” that will continue to shape the Republican Party’s culture and the way it speaks to its audience?**

There it depends on exactly how you define “Trumpism.” For example, some people are more sympathetic to the ideas than to the personality. I suppose one might find some people who feel the reverse. There are some who like both, and some who like neither. Part of what is so striking about Trump is just his personality—his demeanor—his character. The way he has responded to this election result, for instance, is so unusual. Part of it, I think, is what do we mean by “Trumpism.” I doubt we’re going to see an exact replica of his personality, his character, his demeanor, or his decision-making style. This is something that probably no other Republican politician will exactly replicate. He is just unique. He is a very unusual person to put in the White House.

In terms of the policy themes, I think one might see a little more continuity. For example, on trade, the Republican Party was thought of as the party of free trade for several decades. If anything, it was the base of the Democratic Party that was more protectionist. Trump, of course, leapfrogged over that distinction and took a more protectionist stand on trade. This was a stunning outcome. What we didn’t realize going into 2016 was how much appeal a protectionist stance might have to blue collar Republicans in rust belt states like Pennsylvania and Michigan. That actually played pretty well and it didn’t hurt him against Hillary Clinton either. It was one of Trump’s ingredients in his ability to break the Democrats’ hold on those upper Midwestern states initially.

As it turns out, there is a wing of the party that is more protectionist. This is an example of something that I don’t think it’s going to go away. Politicians tend to see what works politically and then copy it. Thus, if Republican politicians believe that a good chunk of their base is more skeptical of free trade, they are ultimately going to respond to that. From here we can start to make distinctions. Do we really need to pick fights with the EU? Personally, I don’t think we do.

On China, I would say Trump has won the argument. There is now almost universal agreement in the Republican Party that that free trade with China didn’t work and that China itself never practiced free trade in the first place. Therefore, it is time to get tough on China. If anything, I think we are going to see that as a major unifying theme for Republicans of different types moving forward. This is an example of where a more protectionist line on trade, or “Trumpism,” if you want to call it that, is going to probably have a legacy beyond Trump himself. This is certainly true with respect to China and maybe even in other areas depending on how Republican leaders proceed. That’s the trade angle.

Another angle would be greater skepticism toward new military interventions. Trump, oddly enough, had more in common with progressives than traditional Republican hawks on some of these issues like Afghanistan. It was very clear how he felt about it. He kept saying, “Why are we there?” I think if he had his way, we would be gone from Afghanistan by the time he leaves the White House. However, he’s finding that that’s hard to do. This represents a wing of the Republican Party that is more skeptical of military interventions overseas. It is still very hardline on terrorism. Strictly speaking, Trump’s line is pro-military defense or defense spending and very aggressive against jihadist terrorists when it comes to issues like interrogation and targeting and detention. But when it comes to large-scale, nationbuilding,

counterinsurgency operations, Trump is very much against it. A lot of Republicans, I think, now feel the same way. That is another example of a shift that is taking place that I think might outlast him.

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**Taking into consideration everything that has been said about Trump and the far right, Trump and Bannon, Trump and white supremacists, do you think this is really a key feature of Trump's political personality?**

I doubt that Trump himself has much interest in the far right, *per se*. I don't think he thinks about it very much. One thing to always keep in mind is, at the end of the day, he is a crass, outer-borough, New York real estate developer who sees the world based on his experiences over several decades. I have my own point of view on his character personality, but I've never seen him as a kind of nascent dictator. For one thing, I don't think that the system allows for it. For another thing, I don't think he has any interest in it. If what we're seeing this month is an attempted coup by Donald Trump, it is extremely incompetent and is not going to happen. That tells you something about the system that we live in.

I don't really think Trump has ever had much of a personal identification with what is called the far right. It is easy sometimes to project onto the United States movements in other countries where you really do have those movements. For example, Golden Dawn in Greece. That that is a genuinely neo-fascist movement. We can get into the specifics of the far right in America, but that that is not a mass movement. What you have among most Republicans is a traditional emphasis on law and order or being tough on crime. These are classic themes that have been there for a while. They were there under Nixon, Goldwater, Reagan, and Bush. That is actually nothing new; that is a mainstream conservative right-of-center view on issues of crime and law and order. I think that actually explained a lot of the reaction of Republicans to the Black Lives Matter movement.

*What you have among most Republicans is a traditional emphasis on law and order or being tough on crime... That is a mainstream conservative right-of-center view on issues of crime and law and order. I think that actually explained a lot of the reaction of Republicans to the Black Lives Matter movement.*

The other thing is this issue of political correctness. I don't know if this is as big a term in Europe, but there really has been a backlash against left wing identity politics, multiculturalism, and political correctness in the United States. The Republican Party has tilted to be an explicitly politically incorrect party. That was one of Trump's strengths politically as he spoke directly to that. Sometimes that meant he spoke in ways that were outrageous or offensive, or even just off the cuff, but the idea that average citizens need to police their language and behavior and thought, at all times, based on what left liberal opinion leaders say, is not terribly popular in this country. There are a lot of people that find it very annoying. That's something that Trump was able to tap into, in a big way and I don't think that's going to go away.

**Do you see conservative nationalism as specific to U.S. culture, or as a widespread phenomenon? What makes it different from the similar political projects we have in Europe and maybe even beyond Europe?**

One of the differences is that American nationalism has always been civic. That is not to deny that there has been an ethnic nationalism in the United States historically. In fact, there has always been a strain of that thought present. For example, in the 19th century, there was a strain of thought emphasizing Anglo-Saxon Protestantism as foundational for the country. That encompasses the ethnic strain. But there has also always been a civic strain which is more about ideas or values of citizenship, lawfulness, constitutionalism, limited government, or a distinct American creed, that is not specific. In other words, somebody can come to this country, from a different part of the world with any ethnicity, any religion, any race, and join that church. It is creed-based rather than ethnicity-based. That is actually quite popular on the right. There are a lot of conservatives who really do feel that way. In fact, a lot of Trump supporters feel that way. I think that that's a tradition which, at its best, is not one of ethnic nationalism, but one of civic nationalism.

Now, I think one difference internationally is that nationalism in a lot of other countries has often been identified with a more exclusively ethnic version, which really is about the prerogatives and the supremacy of a specific ethnicity. For instance, Serbian nationalism or Russian nationalism. The other difference is, in a lot of countries, nationalism has been identified more with a truly authoritarian political tendency. People will debate whether Trump and the last few years has represented a turn towards authoritarian rule in the United States, but the country remains a democracy. It remained a democracy in the last four years, and it will remain one looking ahead. It is not an authoritarian country and there just isn't really much support for that. I think American nationalism is democratic and it expresses itself democratically.

**A more conceptual question now. Our Program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. How would you relate to the term "illiberalism" and how do you articulate it with the notion of "conservative nationalism" and with that the notion more widespread among academia of "populism?" What are the gaps and overlaps?**

I think populism is a fair term to use. To me, populism simply means resentment of established elites: anti-establishment. That can take all kinds of forms that can be more benign or less benign. In the United States, there have been populist movements over the years that sometimes influence or are attached to one party or the other. Really, their only common theme is that they are anti-elitist. They tend to have a very unfriendly view toward the interests and values of some existing elite. In the 1890s, William Jennings Bryan captured the Democratic nomination as a populist and reoriented the Democratic Party. Then, he was really speaking on behalf of western farmers and the interests of western farmers. Again, it is not that he is some nascent dictator. Rather, he had an economic program that was distinct from the one that was more fiscally conservative at the time from either party. He was speaking on behalf of debtor. That was a populist movement that then was incorporated into the Democratic Party. That has tended to be the American tradition.

The Republican Party over the years has sometimes had populist movements inform it, influence it, or overlap with it, and I think that absolutely describes Trumpism: Trump is a natural-born populist for better or worse. He is not really even conservative; I don't think he claimed to be one. But he is a



populist, he actually does have that. Odd as this is to say about a New York billionaire, he is an instinctive political populist and his style, of course, is just as important as the substance.

*Trump is a natural-born populist for better or worse. [...] Odd as this is to say about a New York billionaire, he is an instinctive political populist and his style, of course, is just as important as the substance.*

Illiberalism is something I'm a little more skeptical of because I've never been exactly clear as to what it means. It could include almost any political group internationally that does not accept a specifically progressive policy agenda. I think we're familiar with Karl Popper and the notion of an open society and its enemies. But I think the word illiberal, in journalistic circles last few years, has been used to describe almost anyone who isn't liberal in the narrow sense. Thus, you could include everyone from Vladimir Putin, to ISIS, to democratically oriented conservatives. I'm not sure what the analytic utility is of that, but I'd be curious to hear more about that.

I think that the other question has to be, whether the term illiberalism allows space for democratic actors. In other words, parties, individuals, or factions that are committed to democracy but are not specifically liberal in the narrow sense. One of the things that makes the United States interesting, of course, is that there actually is a consensual American creed in both parties that is classically liberal, even though we argue about its meaning and implications vociferously. You're not going to find very many Americans in either party saying that individual freedom is a value that is repellent. I think American nationalism has a classical liberal element built into it from the start through that civic nationalism. That's one of the qualities of that makes the United States unusual. What's happened the last few years is that some people feel clearly that that's under threat, but there's no agreement from which direction. Democrats and Republicans disagree very much on where they see the threat to that.

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## Václav Štětka and Sabina Mihelj on Illiberal Attitudes and Media in Central Europe

Originally published December 20, 2020

Václav and Sabina, you run a research project called **The Illiberal Turn**. As our program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program, I first would like your assessment of the term—adjective and noun—“illiberal/illiberalism.” In your view, why does this term allow us to capture the current political and societal trends we are studying better than other terms; for instance, “populism,” “national-populism,” “far right,” etc.?

All these terms are relevant and useful for the analysis of the contemporary political landscape in many countries around the world, but they provide only partial answers to the question of what is going on with democracy today, and especially with regard to Central and Eastern Europe, the region that we are focusing on in our project. Several of these countries have recently been going through a process of significant democratic backsliding, gradually dismantling the very foundations of liberal democracy as it has been established there following the 1989 transition.

When speaking of “illiberal trends,” many scholars point to the systematic assault on the system of checks and balances, decreasing independence of key democratic institutions—including the media—or the removal of protections for minorities, and this is exactly what we have been seeing nowadays in countries such as Hungary and Poland. As Yasha Mounk says, it ends with “democracy without rights”—[democracy] stripped of liberal institutions that protect individual and minority rights. In other words, illiberalism is not just an equivalent of populism, although it often shares its rhetoric; it is an umbrella term that refers to the attempts to decouple democracy from constitutional liberalism, as well as to the exclusionary political programs promoting social conservatism and ethno-nationalism, and aimed against minorities and civil liberties.

*[Illiberalism] is an umbrella term that refers to the attempts to decouple democracy from constitutional liberalism, as well as to the exclusionary political programs promoting social conservatism and ethno-nationalism, and aimed against minorities and civil liberties.*

However, in our project, we don't focus primarily on the political actors; instead, we turn to media audiences across four Central and Eastern European countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, and

Serbia), and explore how their attitudes—both liberal and illiberal—are being informed by their news media diets, and what is the relationship between the changing information ecosystem and the rise of illiberalism in general.

**Indeed, you have explored how exposure to some media impacts attitudes on immigration in the Czech Republic: could you tell us more about your findings?**

One of the most important contributions of this study is that it provides evidence of an actual causal impact of certain kinds of media on people's immigration attitudes, unlike much of the existing research that relies on simple correlations between these variables. Our research shows that exposure to commercial television increases anti-immigration attitudes and the likelihood of people voting for populist parties, while exposure to public service TV weakens negative attitudes toward immigration. This corresponds with results from other studies; however, ours was the first one from within this region, and it drew on data measuring real media exposure, rather than on self-declared consumption.

*Our research shows that exposure to commercial television increases anti-immigration attitudes and the likelihood of people voting for populist parties, while exposure to public service TV weakens negative attitudes toward immigration.*

What we did not expect to find was that the more diverse was people's media diet, the more hostile were their attitudes toward immigrants; this challenges the popular notion that a diversity of media consumption can act as an antidote to enclosed information spaces, or "echo chambers," in which attitudes against immigrants (as well as other illiberal attitudes) are formed and strengthened. Our results indicate that if a substantial proportion of the news media scene is amplifying anti-immigration rhetoric—as the Czech media scene tends to do—then a greater diversity of news sources is no guarantee of [the public's] being shielded from negative stereotypes about migrants.

**You have also been investigating public trust in both private and public media in several Central European countries. How does conservative (for instance, anti-LGBT+) support for authoritarian leadership correlate with anti-immigration feelings? Are they always observed together, or can we offer a more granular reading, depending on the media and the country?**

Overall, media are rather distrusted across our four countries—the most in Serbia and Hungary, where only 11 and 13 per cent of the population say they trust news media, respectively. On the level of individual brands, those that are most trusted are the independent ones (including the public service broadcasters in the Czech Republic), while the government-controlled media are on the opposite side of the spectrum. However, our qualitative analysis indicates that the normative foundations of media trust—that is, the bases on which people decide which media to trust—can differ significantly, with some participants trusting the media because they thought they were independent, balanced, and/or professional, while others based their trust primarily on the fact that their preferred news sources were aligned with their own political and ideological views.

In most countries—the Czech Republic being an outlier—the media scene tends to be heavily polarized: rather sharply divided between pro-government and anti-government news outlets. This polarization is then mirrored in the relationship between news consumption and political attitudes. As we found out, heavier consumers of news media that are under strong political influence or more pro-government tend

to display more illiberal attitudes (for example, more opposition toward immigration and gay marriage, or less support for representative democracy) and are also more prone to believe in conspiracy theories than those who are relying more often on independent and opposition sources.

These patterns are observed across all four countries. However, we found some interesting differences in the relationship between the use of digital platforms and conspiracy beliefs. In those countries with the lowest level of media freedom, users of social media and messaging apps tend not to believe government-propelled conspiracy theories, indicating that despite all the legitimate concerns about online disinformation, digital platforms might serve as a counter-balance to the government-controlled part of the news media ecosystem.

**Part of your fieldwork was conducted during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Did the fact that people were locked down at home, resulting in a higher consumption of news and especially of television, impact their political views? Did it accentuate polarization, or, on the contrary, did it create a feeling of unity vis-à-vis the crisis?**

We found out that in countries with higher levels of polarization, lower levels of media independence, and higher politicization of the pandemic—Hungary and Serbia in particular—people were considerably more divided in their opinions on the pandemic and generally more distrustful of government communication. This has included expert communication as well, because experts were perceived as lacking in independence or as directly subordinated to the government. On the other hand, we have seen more unity in citizens' responses to the pandemic in the Czech Republic and in Poland, at least in the initial stages of the lockdown. In other words, our observations suggest that the declining independence and polarization of the media has a real impact on people's willingness to accept and support government responses to the pandemic—which can obviously have serious, life-affecting consequences.

*Our observations suggest that the declining independence and polarization of the media has a real impact on people's willingness to accept and support government responses to the pandemic*

**The Polish presidential elections were held during the pandemic. How would you assess the impact of the sanitary conditions on the election campaign and lockdown? Would you confirm the general impression that the authoritarian regime used the pandemic to consolidate their power and limit further public freedoms and independent institutions?**

This has been a pattern across various Central and Eastern European countries, where, according to many observers and international organizations, the governments have attempted to use the crisis for a power grab, especially in Hungary and Serbia. In Poland, the government tried to take advantage of the pandemic by changing the rules for the upcoming presidential election in a way that would benefit the incumbent candidate, but it created chaos and contributed to the breakdown of trust between people and the government. We think it is plausible to assume that this breakdown could have contributed to the dramatically harder impact of the second wave of the pandemic in autumn—and not just in Poland, but also in some other Central and Eastern European countries where the governments have tried to politicize the pandemic and abuse their powers, including Hungary and Serbia.

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**What are the next steps for your research? What do you think is missing in our knowledge of the “illiberal turn” in Central Europe? What avenues for comparative studies do you see with Western Europe, Russia, Turkey, the United States?**

The general ambition of our research has been to highlight the importance of the role of the media in the “illiberal turn” as a crucial conduit and enabler of the spread of illiberalism in the region. It is probably fair to say that while the rise of illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe has already attracted significant scholarly attention, existing research has not been very much interested in the role of the media in this context—and our project seeks to fill this gap, while also inspiring more work in this direction. We are indeed hoping our research on the media and the illiberal turn might inspire more comparative work beyond just this region, particularly given that the spreading of illiberal ideas, and the process of democratic deconsolidation, is certainly not constrained to Central and Eastern Europe.

We also need to learn more about people’s actual news consumption practices, especially with regard to online sources and social media. Too often, empirical research pays attention to a very limited segment of the media environment, and it focuses on people’s relationship with particular media types (especially social media) and news brands in isolation from others. However, we know from our research that people consume news from multiple different channels at the same time, and arguably people are forming their attitudes and opinions based on their exposure to all of these, but also based on information from non-media sources, like friends and family. This is something we are trying to unpack in our data right now, using the concept of “media repertoires,” and examining how different types of media repertoires are linked to different “repertoires of illiberalism” emerging from people’s observed values and attitudes.

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## Samy Cohen on Israel's Illiberal Governance

*Originally published January 4, 2021*

**Samy, would you qualify Israel as an “illiberal democracy,” i.e., as a country that has functional democratic institutions but where public opinion is shifting toward illiberal values?**

Israel is a hybrid democracy, one that combines elements of liberalism and of illiberalism. I will call it “semi-liberal.” From the beginnings, the founding fathers established a democracy quite remote from the liberal model. The Declaration of Independence, which promised equality for all, was betrayed. Around 20 percent of the population does not enjoy political rights equal to those of the Jewish majority. All the key positions of state are held by Jews. Certainly, the liberties of citizens are preserved, but not all are equal in terms of rights, or the Jews are more equal than the Arabs.

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Israel's distance from the liberal model is clear with regard to the status of clergymen. The ultra-orthodox, a small intolerant fraction, have been granted the power to impose the supremacy of the *Halakha* (Jewish law) in a number of domains of everyday life. This situation is utterly foreign to liberal democracies. Israel is thus the only state among Western democracies that does not allow civil marriages and divorces. The state claims to be “Jewish and democratic,” two terms that, despite what is said, are difficult to reconcile. This cocktail is a source of permanent tension.

In contrast with countries like France, Great Britain, or the United States, the system of checks and balances in Israel is rudimentary. The democratic culture is not well entrenched. Israel is still the only democracy in the world that, for more than half a century, has submitted another people to its domination. That is, it exercises supreme control over more than two and a half million Palestinians in the West Bank—without counting the one million eight hundred thousand from the Gaza Strip under blockade—depriving them not only of their political rights, but also of their individual freedoms and of any prospect of a future. And the Supreme Court has not done much to defend the rights of the weakest. It has not stood in the way of the occupation or of colonization. Whereas all the major colonial powers

have seen their empires come undone, Israel has been busy working against the tide of history to build one.

Since 2009, we have seen a clearly illiberal drift develop. For the first time in the history of Israel, the government has overtly lashed out at countervailing power and systematically accuses its opponents of “betrayal.” The coalition of right-wing and extreme-right-wing parties is attempting to challenge the democratic advances of the years leading up to 2009. Without attacking the principle of free and fair elections, this coalition strives to silence the voices that oppose its policies or denounce its human rights violations in the occupied territories. There has been an increase in ad-hoc laws that affirm the pre-eminence of the Jewish character of the state to the detriment of its democratic dimension. The Supreme Court itself is in the hot seat, asked to yield to the power of the “people’s elected representatives.” And there is a tendency to expunge the principles of restraint and moderation.

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Despite these weaknesses, Israeli democracy can be credited with having several positive elements. At war for more than 70 years, it has not veered toward an authoritarian regime, nor has it systematically implemented exceptional measures. It has preserved broad sections of freedoms for its citizens. A gay pride procession takes place not only in Tel-Aviv but also in the religious city par excellence, Jerusalem. A considerably larger number of establishments are open on the Shabbat than before. The government’s legal advisor and the police have been granted sufficient power to enable them to jeopardize the political survival of a prime minister. Several government members, a prime minister, some rabbis, and a former state president have, moreover, been sent to prison for corruption or sexual abuse. The army has always scrupulously adhered to the principle of its subordination to democratically elected civilian power, even in instances of deep disagreement. The Supreme Court, despite its weaknesses in the occupied territories, has more than once protected the rights of the most underprivileged in Israel and the equality of all before the law, and it acts as a bulwark against the abuses of the ultra-orthodox. The big commissions of national inquiry have caused governments to falter on several occasions.

But we must be aware that Israel is at the same time a fragile democracy and can easily slide toward a form of majority despotism. The nationalist and religious right wing waits for the least occasion to introduce legislation to make it possible to get around Supreme Court decisions that invalidate common laws.

### **Can you tell us more about what Israel shares with other illiberal or populist governments?**

It shares many points in common with the Hungary of Viktor Orbán and the United States of Donald Trump. Like in both these countries, democratic checks and balances and *corps intermédiaires* in Israel are attacked in the name of the “people’s will.” Human rights NGOs have come under repeated attacks, comparable to Viktor Orbán’s assailing of such organizations in Hungary. In February 2018, Netanyahu accused the American Jewish billionaire George Soros, Hungarian by birth, of financing NGOs that engage in “libel against the state,” and Netanyahu also condemned Soros’s campaign against the plan to deport irregular African migrants, an approach similar to Orbán’s lashing out at Soros due to his pro-immigration stance. As in the United States, the right-wing Justice Minister, Ayelet Shaked, has appointed “conservative” judges to the Supreme Court, an act that Trump would not forswear. Like Donald Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu constantly seeks to divide Israeli society to rule it but will call for “national unity”

whenever it suits him to do so. It is hard to say whether it is Trump who is copying Netanyahu or vice versa.

*Like Donald Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu constantly seeks to divide Israeli society to rule it but will call for “national unity” whenever it suits him to do so. It is hard to say whether it is Trump who is copying Netanyahu or vice versa.*

In contrast with Viktor Orbán, however, the leaders of the Israeli right do not define their country as an “illiberal” democracy. They claim to be the “only democracy in the middle East,” comparable in every respect to the most advanced democracies. They believe that their laws are perfectly democratic since they are voted on by the people’s representatives, thus ignoring, or feigning ignorance to, the duality that characterizes liberal democracies, which found their legitimacy on the rule of the majority *and* on the respect of minority rights.

Netanyahu’s Israel is not, as his detractors sometimes claim, comparable to the Turkey of Erdoğan, who maintains a brutal stranglehold over the country’s institutions and has put hundreds of opponents behind bars. The anti-democratic push of the right wing in Israel is “softer,” more insidious. Opponents are not imprisoned, but they are put under pressure. Attempts are made to discredit them, to marginalize them, to designate them as traitors. The Supreme Court is not being abolished but simply rendered harmless. The press is certainly free, but there are more and more calls coming from the right to gag journalists.

### **Which groups in Israeli society harbor these illiberal or national-populist sentiments?**

Two groups stand opposed to political liberalism, and even to democracy itself. For the ultra-orthodox, democracy, human rights, equality, and political pluralism are contrary to their values. Due to their exploding population, they will in time become one of the country’s main electoral forces, able to impose their demands with ease. The other major current is that of the religious Zionists. Well integrated into Israeli society, this group has adopted a highly ambiguous attitude toward democracy which, in its eyes, should not stand in the way of the historical rights of the Jewish people. For them, the state of Israel has to be Jewish before being democratic. They abhor liberal democracy and are obsessed by the powers of the Supreme Court. They fight for the continuation of colonization and openly state their opposition to any political compromise with the Palestinians. Opinion polls show that there is a direct relation between a high degree of religiosity and a negative attitude toward liberal democracy. But Likud has also worked at weakening democracy.

### **Indeed, Likud has led several attacks on democratic institutions and especially on the justice system in recent years. How do you explain these moves and the role of Benjamin Netanyahu in them?**

Likud has shifted to the right at the same time as the left has been weakened. It has been the spearhead of the anti-liberal offensive of the years 2009–2020. Moderate right-wing deputies like Dan Meridor, Benny Begin, and Reuven Rivlin were removed from positions of power within the party. Netanyahu has surrounded himself with loyal members who are absolutely devoted to him, sharing the same anti-liberal culture. He has played a driving role in the anti-liberal shift, and he even indulges in one-upmanship when stirring up nationalist sentiments, trying to outflank the far-right parties and seduce the settlers. With his legal battles, he has engaged in an unconcealed offensive against the judicial system, aiming to discredit the magistrates who charged him with fraud, corruption, and embezzlement.

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**How do these shifts connect with the “ethnic democracy” aspect of Israel, the Palestinian question, and the second-class status accorded to Israeli Arabs?**

The drift away from democracy, observable since 2009, is closely linked to the conflict with the Palestinians of Israel and the occupied territories. It hardly has anything to do with economic and social questions. The nationalist and religious right wishes to reaffirm that the historical rights of the Jewish people be reasserted over the entire space extending from the Mediterranean Sea to Jordan, to the detriment of not only the Palestinians but also the Arabs in Israel. In their eyes, the land belongs to the Jewish people alone, and self-determination is possible for them only. The Palestinian refugees who are part of the land and the Arabs who have stayed there do not have any national rights.

Jewish opponents to this grand design must be fought, ostracized, and singled out for public opprobrium. The left must be subject to public scorn because it has betrayed the “Zionist ideal” through its liberal ideas, cosmopolitanism, and universalism. And the written and unwritten norms of liberal democracy—separation of powers, respect for the rule of law, for minority rights, and a culture of tolerance—must be subordinated to the Jewish people’s own interests, as the right understands them. The strength of this nationalist and religious bloc is that it can reckon with a fearful public opinion, very anti-Arab, which is easy to reassure by flattering its patriotism and its Jewish pride. There can hardly be a better strategy than to play on the resources of identity and anti-Arab resentment and to extol the rights of the Jewish people.

## Jérôme Jamin on American Illiberal Democracy

*Originally published February 4, 2021*

**Jérôme, you worked for a long time on the populist tradition in the United States. Can you tell us its main defining characteristics on the Republican spectrum?**

There is a deeply rooted populist tradition in the United States that appeared very early compared to its European counterpart. In many ways, populism can even be linked to the Founding Fathers' debates on the future shape of the federal state at the end of the eighteenth century. Populism—and I will come back to this point—is not only a glorification of the people with a good dose of demagoguery; it is also and above all a rejection of the elites, who are understood not in the noble sense suggested by the sociological category (i.e., the most qualified individuals, who govern and exercise influence), but as a “clique of impostors and usurpers” who have appropriated wealth and put themselves in positions of power. The Founding Fathers' debates on the role, place, and prerogatives of the future federal government already heralded the emergence of a political discourse on behalf of the people against the federal government elite—a discourse that we continue to see today.

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There is no reliable consensus on the meaning of populism, but without going into detail, I would suggest two possible readings. The first sees populism as a “thin” ideology that can be found mostly but not exclusively on the right, with often inconsistent doctrinal content. The second sees populism as a simple rhetoric—a way of speaking and of producing language effects—that is grafted onto ideologies. In this latter case, it consists of a binary rhetoric that opposes a people to an elite and mobilizes different ideological contents that vary with the leader, period, and crisis.

I follow this latter view because it allows us to understand why people who are so ideologically different (Jesse Jackson and Donald Trump, for example, as discussed below) can nonetheless both be categorized as populist without falling into any contradiction. By contrast, if we study populism as an ideology in its own right, we are quickly led to classify very different people and ideas under the same term, thus



weakening the concept and causing confusion. Moreover, the term becomes politically biased if we paint all the parties discontented with the status quo with the same brush without further qualification.

Even when populism is not a “thin” ideology but a simple rhetoric, that does not make the dichotomy between the people and the elite meaningless: it refers to a supposed (1) working, (2) homogeneous, and (3) majority people against a (1) lazy, (2) heterogeneous, and (3) minority elite. These six fundamental characteristics define populism whatever the ideologies onto which it is grafted, depending on whether we are dealing with right-wing or left-wing populism.

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On the side of the people, labor is central. There is no populism without the value of labor. Homogeneity is asserted in the name of the supposed great camaraderie between often very different people brought together by common suffering (bosses and workers, the young and retirees, the rich and the poor, etc.). The majority carries the legitimacy: it cannot be mistaken precisely because it is the majority; the “people” of populism is always the most numerous group of people. There is no populism in the name of a minority unless a majority is allegedly in danger of becoming a minority—as, for instance, with Donald Trump’s white majority in the 2016 campaign. There is, therefore, an identity between number and legitimacy that is often mechanically associated with “truth”: the man in the street, the average Joe or Jane, cannot be wrong. The charismatic leader cannot be wrong either, since he or she speaks on behalf of the people.

The elite, on the other hand, is seen as lazy, taking advantage of the “system.” They don’t know how to work the land or work in the factory. They develop their influence at cocktail parties and in lobbies. They get rich off the work of the people, either by speculating on the product of their labor (finance), by managing their money skillfully (banking), or by being elected to join the political class (the Washington, D.C., political elite). The elites are heterogeneous; no common origin or social class brings them together. The elite is about the lure of gain and manipulating the people. Finally, it is a minority, and as such, it has no legitimacy.

The six elements that characterize the two camps of populism are not at all insignificant—yet they are too simple to form an ideology, even a “thin” one. This is precisely what makes the concept problematic. It is also why this rhetoric can be grafted onto very different ideologies. When it comes to the Republicans in the United States, one can find both Ross Perot and Arnold Schwarzenegger on the center-right, and then Donald Trump further to the right, even leaning toward the extreme right, as when he mobilizes a nativist discourse like that of Pat Buchanan, to which I will return later.

These four Republican political actors exhibit different ideologies, yet each of them employs an opposition between a people and an elite. With Perot and Schwarzenegger, the people are the honest people: they are the sometimes-poor people who work hard, or entrepreneurs who pay too many taxes, and neither skin color nor origin matter here. They are all workers, homogeneous in their suffering and their courage, and forming a majority of the population; they all fall between the independent worker and the businessman but certainly do not include the “abstract” CEO of a multinational company. When

it comes to Trump and even more to Buchanan, the people is also made up of workers, but they are mostly white, of European origin, and Christian. Here, homogeneity is affirmed based on this ethnic component. This explains the racist loading implicit in Buchanan's work and in Trump's rhetoric, the latter being often crude in the sense that it is intellectually unstructured (such as his infamous "Mexicans are rapists" formula). For them, the "people" forms a majority, but a tenuous majority, one that is threatened by immigration and multiculturalism—this is the heart of the nativist project.

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The ways in which these four politicians define the elite also differ. Perot and Schwarzenegger denounce the wasting of public money by an elite born into wealth and comfort. Schwarzenegger attacks certain categories of civil servants in California, as well as the collusion between the Democrats and the unions. Trump denounces not only Washington "upstarts," but also arrogant journalists and politically aligned researchers who, he says, tell lies about global warming or COVID-19. Buchanan denounces the liberal elites and those Republican elites converted to globalism, the free market, multiculturalism, relativism, mass immigration, and so on. He adds to all this the notion of a conspiracy, a supposed "cultural Marxism" allegedly fomented by the Frankfurt School's leaders after the Second World War. (This conspiracy theory has also been taken up by Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil.)

We can do the same exercise on the left with Jesse Jackson in the 1980s, Huey Long in the 1930s, and several leaders of the People's Party at the end of the nineteenth century. In the Jackson campaigns for president (in 1984 and 1988), the people was branded the "rainbow coalition," bringing together very different people who shared the same suffering and problems. In his speeches, Jackson used the metaphor of the "quilt" to represent his conception of a plural people made up of multiple pieces, multiple sizes, multiple origins: whites, Hispanics, Blacks, Jews, Arabs, peace activists, businessmen, young people, old people, gays, and so on. All are working people, or at least people looking for work. It is the great diversity of the coalition that makes it homogenous; these people are all different but they form a unified body because they have all gone through difficult times owing to their origin or life's hazards. They are also in the majority: it is not Wall Street but the rainbow coalition that makes America.

Elected governor of Louisiana in 1928 on the basis of a policy platform that proposed wealth-sharing and a fight against inequality, Huey Long spoke of the people in terms close to Jackson's but without the ethnic, racial, and sexual dimension. For him, the people are the workers, the local entrepreneurs, but also the businessmen, who may well get rich, but by producing goods or services and not by begetting "money from money" (like speculators). In other words, the small local banker is part of the people. The people are also the poor, the sick, the illiterate, the disabled, the old, those hit hard by inequality, those who are evicted from their homes for not having paid their monthly instalments, those who are born without money, without inheritance, without family. Finally, the people are also African Americans, whom Long does not stereotype or use as scapegoats—rare at the time, especially in the South, and even more in Louisiana. "The people are good," Huey Long said a few years after the stock market crash of 1929. "If you believe that Louisiana can be ruled by the people, that the poor are as good as the rich, that Louisiana is a state where every man is a king but where no one has a crown, then vote for me."

The elite in leftist populist rhetoric is circumscribed, often in a Marxizing way; it is embodied by the masters of capitalism who control Wall Street, the mainstream media, and the Washington elite, as well

as, in the eyes of Jesse Jackson, by the military-industrial complex. But here, too, the elites are lazy, heterogeneous, and a minority. Lazy because they amass more and more considerable wealth without working hard, heterogeneous and a minority because—as we also see in right-wing discourse—only greed brings them together and they are few in number compared to the population.

Once again, this is certainly not the only way to approach the complex phenomenon of populism, but this point of entry into the topic allows us to apply the same concept to very different political positions without being confronted with untenable contradictions.

**What are the characteristics of Donald Trump that you think reflect this populist tradition, and what, perhaps, is its future in a “post-Trump” but not “post-Trumpist” America?**

I would start my answer by focusing on the technological developments that have always accompanied the great figures of populism. Huey Long broke new ground by systematically traveling all over Louisiana, including to the most isolated villages, taking with him a microphone, speakers, two bodyguards, and a trailer as a stage. In the countryside, he made an incredible number of speeches per day; he was also very present, and very early on, on the radio, giving speeches that have remained famous, such as “Share Our Wealth.” Radio, television, and then the Internet have accompanied the emergence of all populist speakers throughout the twentieth century. And in Europe, Berlusconi is at the origin of the concept of TV-Berlusconism...

*Radio, television, and then the Internet have accompanied the emergence of all populist speakers throughout the twentieth century.*

Donald Trump has innovated with his use of the tweet. For the first time in media history, a head of a democratic state has managed to establish a direct and reliable line of communication between himself and the people—without institutionalized intermediaries and mediation, without any obstacle in his relationship with his voters. Twitter is the populist’s dream; it makes it possible to marginalize all those who seek to put themselves in the way of you and your words, such as experts, commentators, or journalists. Social network studies have already demonstrated how Trump has seized on a unique and decisive opportunity to exercise his mandate. If he had submitted his communications to a traditional team, like all his predecessors did, things would have been very different.

Trump’s populism is rightist in that it gives the “people” an ethnic loading: white people of European origin threatened by Mexicans and immigration in general, and to a lesser extent by African Americans. His shift to the far right (in the European sense) is unquestionable but not recurrent. Some key moments of this shift include his decision to separate children from their migrant parents at the southern border with Mexico; his refusal to differentiate between neo-Nazi and Antifa protesters during the Charlottesville riots; and the signals of sympathy he has sent to the Alt-Right, as well as myriad direct or indirect meetings with European extreme right-wing leaders, notably through his advisor Steve Bannon. He has also been helped by demographics, no longer speaking obliquely of the transformation of the white majority into a relative majority as compared to other racial groups. Trump has clearly fashioned a discourse that mixes economic risk (unemployment and poverty) with ethnic risk (probable disappearance of the majority group). He has innovated in this area.

*Trump has clearly fashioned a discourse that mixes economic risk (unemployment and poverty) with ethnic risk (probable disappearance of the majority group).*

But in his criticism of elites, Trump has offered nothing original when he has attacked Washington's elected officials, high-ranking civil servants, the "deep state," or Wall Street financiers. He has also imitated other populists before him (including Silvio Berlusconi in Italy) when he has pointed out that, unlike his opponents, he does not come from the political class and has not been corrupted by that environment.

The only aspect in which he has radically innovated in denouncing the elite is that, even prior to his arrival at the White House, he associated influential journalists and commentators from major media outlets with the political establishment, to the point of systematically rejecting the former's investigations and associating them with fake news. He was also pioneering in calling into question the neutrality of scientific reports on issues related to global warming, the environment, and later the COVID-19 pandemic. To dare to attack these two professional categories (journalism and academia) so early in his mandate (and even prior to it)—and so frontally—was quite novel and risky, but it has worked well.

And if there is a specific contribution that Donald Trump has made here, it is the doubt that now hangs over public discourse and especially over scientific knowledge—up to influencing electoral results, even when validated by official agencies, as we saw at the end of his term in office this fall. The Tea Party had prepared the ground, but Donald Trump effected the shift.

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I would add that Donald Trump is a reality TV man (notably on *The Apprentice*). He knows that reality TV is invented and imposed as an alternative reality, which is to say that everything in it is partly true and partly false. Bringing reality TV to the level of the White House was also new and could tempt other political actors to follow suit.

**You have also worked on European populisms. Are there general features that differentiate American populism(s) from European populism(s)? Do American and European populism share a common identity or is it more appropriate to talk about specific national traditions?**

I would say that the only major difference is in history. With the federal architecture of its origins and the growing power (and cost) of the federal state over more than two centuries, U.S. populism that defines an "us versus them"—the people versus the establishment—is much older than its European counterpart. It is also coupled with trust in the local authorities (e.g., the governor, a figure who played a key role in validating election results in late December in the face of accusations of electoral fraud).

That being said, since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, a similar "people versus establishment" binary has taken shape in Europe: European Parliament deputies and especially the "bureaucrats" in Brussels have been denounced in European populist discourse in forms that sometimes resemble those deployed against Washington elites. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán speaks, for instance, unflinchingly of Hungarian history as the history of a people under foreign occupation: that of the Nazis until 1945, of the Communists until 1989, and of the arrogant elites of Brussels from 2004 (the year of Hungary's entry into the Union) until now. From Matteo Salvini (Lega Nord/Italy) to Marine Le Pen (Rassemblement National/France) via Geert Wilders (PVV/Netherlands) or Tom Van Grieken

(VB/Belgium), all see the elites in Brussels as a threat to Europe's authentic identity on the same level as immigrants and Muslims. What I mean to say is that anti-elitism is now becoming structural for European populism, too.

Another peculiarity in Europe is the strong link between populism and the far right in the collective imagination—unlike in the United States, where populism has been an integral part of political life from the outset. It has, of course, had varying degrees and intensities, including among those in the mainstream, as when Ronald Reagan, one of Donald Trump's models, stated that "the state could not solve the problem because it is the problem." In Europe, populism is associated with the far right not because there is no such thing as left-wing or extreme left-wing populism, but because historically the first populist threats to liberal democracy came from far-right parties, which were sometimes openly heir to the fascist ideologies of the 1930s.

It was during the 1980s, notably, that the concept of populism took a negative and pejorative turn, especially in the French-speaking world, where Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front grafted a people/elite rhetoric onto a classic far-right ideology. This party, founded in 1972 among many former Vichy collaborators, is the oldest, most powerful, and best-known of the far-right parties and has long been a model for right-wing extremists across the European continent.

That being said, if we want to bring the two continents closer together, we can look to Italy in the 1990s and especially to Silvio Berlusconi, who is undoubtedly the best European figure for helping us understand the Trump presidency. The very tense context that characterized Italy in the 1990s: political polarization, massive distrust of the political class, the disappearance of the Communist Party and the collapse of Christian democracy, the proliferation of partisan media outlets, Berlusconi's fortune and his links with the media and reality TV, his arrogance and verbal violence—all this evokes what came to pass across the Atlantic twenty years later.

*If we want to bring the two continents closer together, we can look to Italy in the 1990s and especially to Silvio Berlusconi, who is undoubtedly the best European figure for helping us understand the Trump presidency.*

**You recently published on Pat Buchanan and on the connection between ethnic loyalty and democracy. Can you summarize for our readers how Buchanan—as well as what is called paleoconservatism in the United States—is emblematic of a certain populist tradition? How might Trump compare (or not) to Buchanan?**

The peculiarity of Pat Buchanan is that he defends the principles on which democracy is based, but at the same time he doubts the capacity of a multicultural society to function democratically. He believes that a certain homogeneity in culture, ethnicity, language, etc., is necessary for citizens to be willing and able to make a republic work in the American sense. In his many books, he praises democracy and supports electoral processes, majority rule, etc. To put it another way, he does not advocate for dictatorship, authoritarianism, or a greater concentration of power, but instead defends the separation of powers, constitutionalism, and citizenship as the people's ability to defend their rights and freedoms and to understand what is at stake in politics. Moreover, he also denounces the omnipotence of the market, which distances us from our commitment as citizens. In many ways, he is a democrat with a strong right-wing bias.



But if we look further, we see that his conception of the Republic integrates the notions of ethnicity, ability, and loyalty. Ethnicity in the sense that only people who share a certain culture, a certain religion, and some history are, in his view, capable of making a democratic system work. The underlying idea is that non-European migrants are not predisposed to accept or to be able to play the U.S. democratic game. Buchanan maintains some subtleties. He does not think that it is because migrants are stupid, nasty, or have bad intentions that they are naturally incapable of being democrats. For him, they are simply not “culturally ready.” In other words, Buchanan claims that European Judeo-Christian culture and European history are preconditions for the development of citizens who respect democracy, without openly identifying a minority or a culture that would be incapable of such respect.

Buchanan thus establishes a causal link between ethnicity and ability for democracy, but he adds a third element: the loyalty of citizens to their political system and their nation [of origin]. Questioning the sincerity of migrants and citizens of non-European origin, he suspects them of thinking only about themselves, their religion, or their country of origin without being willing to invest in their host country. In other words, Buchanan does not believe that one can extricate oneself from one’s culture, nation, and past for the benefit of another nation. This is why he vigorously rejects multiculturalism, which he associates with the death of the soul of the nation and the “Balkanization of the United States.” Here, too, there is a trick: it is the cultural fragmentation of the public space, and not their origin as such, that would make minorities disloyal.

Buchanan’s theories illustrate the special relationship of U.S. nativists to the constitutional order, as nativists share the belief that being American means believing in a common creed embodied in the Constitution. For nativists, only those who share the race, religion, or ethnicity of the dominant group of white Americans are able to adopt this creed. The ambiguity is strong because there is both a defense of a certain idea of American democracy and a simultaneous belief that only the founding peoples of European origin have the ability, will, and loyalty to make the system work. On numerous occasions over the past four years, notably on his blog, Pat Buchanan has commended Donald Trump’s nativist agenda.

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**Our program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. What do you think of the heuristic value of the term “illiberalism” in defining the challenges facing liberalism today, and how do you see the relationship between illiberalism and populism?**

In the United States, the concept of illiberalism may fit Pat Buchanan quite well, both on the level of his critique of multiculturalism and on that of the growing power of minorities, which, in his view, weakens the silent majority. In addition, Buchanan is highly critical of international institutions and has consistently advocated for a return to a much greater national sovereignty, as well as military disengagement. He has unambiguously supported Donald Trump’s wish to “Make America Great Again.”

In Europe, I observe that more and more political parties historically associated with the far right (Rassemblement National in France, FPÖ in Austria, Lega Nord in Italy, etc.) have today become the defenders of a rather restrictive conception of democracy. In fact, if we set aside violent groupuscules or

clearly neo-Nazi parties such as Golden Dawn in Greece, one must admit that the main far-right parties are trying to defend an essentially procedural conception of democracy (separation of powers, party pluralism, elections at regular intervals) against a “liberal democracy” seen as overly influenced by human rights, internationalism, and the neoliberalism of the European institutions.

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Seen in this way, if we want to make advances with the heuristic value of the concept of illiberalism, I see several interesting questions around the transition of the far right from opposing democratic principles entirely to accepting some of them but dissociating them from anything coming from liberalism. From this point of view, the concept of illiberalism deserves to be deepened, because there is a gray zone in Western Europe covering the decades 1980-2020 on how this shift was made and what it entails for the definition of democrats and their opponents in Europe.

## Christophe Jaffrelot on India's Growing National-Populism

*Originally published February 8, 2021*

**Christophe, you have been studying nationalism in India for decades. How would you articulate the broad context of the rise of Hindu nationalism and tensions with Muslim minorities, on the one hand, and the rise of populist parties such as the BJP, on the other?**

The two things go together. This is why I use the term *national-populism* when analyzing Narendra Modi's regime. The "national-populism" formula was coined by Gino Germani in the 1970s to describe a version of populism where the part that claims to be the whole is comprised solely of the sons of the soil. Like any populist leader, Modi relates directly, emotionally, to "his" people, but while he claims to represent 1.3 billion Indians, he is in fact the spokesperson of an ideology—Hindu nationalism—that considers that the majority community epitomizes the Indian nation. Muslims and Christians may practice their religion privately, but in the public sphere they have to pay allegiance to Hindu symbols of identity, including Lord Rama, a Hindu god that is projected as the country's tutelary figure. If populism is not an ideology but a style of politics, *national-populism* certainly is one.

This "ism" injects ideology into the populist repertoire and vice versa, populism packages—in terms of political communication—Hindu nationalism, an ideology that used to be elitist—and therefore marginal. In India, the populist leader mobilizes the Hindu majority not only against minorities, but also against those who support them from abroad (including Pakistan) and those who allegedly support them domestically, including Congress, which is presented as anti-national because of its "pseudo" (allegedly pro-Muslim and Christian) secularism as well as its elitist image. Whereas Nehru and the Gandhis are depicted as a political dynasty, the embodiment of the establishment, Modi seeks to present himself as a new man coming from the plebs. While BJP used to be associated with upper castes and Congress with the bottom of the pyramid, there is a certain reversal of roles at work today. Modi's populist repertoire relies on the usual manipulation of the usual emotions: fear and anger. In order to polarize society along religious lines, Hindus "have to" feel vulnerable vis-à-vis Muslims and Pakistan; in order to angrily reject Congress, they have to "understand" that this party has compromised the country's security by protecting Muslims and being complacent about Pakistan. Thanks to friendly TV channels and social media, the Hindu nationalist forces have saturated the public sphere using the various kinds of disinformation techniques that are typical of modern populism.

*In India, the populist leader mobilizes the Hindu majority not only against minorities, but also against those who support them from abroad (including Pakistan) and those who allegedly support them domestically, including Congress.*

**In studying the case of Narendra Modi and the BJP party, you noticed the central role played in their success by socio-economic concerns, in particular social elites' fear of *déclassement* and the rise of lower classes. Can you tell us more?**

The socio-economic subtext of BJP's rise to power is very interesting indeed. One, social elites—which largely supported Congress—have shifted toward Hindu nationalism in greater numbers in reaction against the rise of lower castes, which accelerated in the 1990s in the context of positive discrimination policies. Two, the promise of new quotas for jobs in the public sector helped groups of lower castes known as "Other Backward Classes" (OBC) to mobilize politically and, after they got those jobs in 1992, to rise socio-economically. Caste-based politics and policies enabled these OBCs, who represent more than 50% of society, to democratize India in what I have called a "silent revolution." The rise to power of Modi's BJP is a counter-revolution initiated by the upper castes, which have found in Hindu nationalism an antidote to caste politics: instead of defining themselves as OBCs, plebeians were asked to look at themselves primarily as Hindus facing a threat from minorities and Pakistan. Besides, Modi belongs to an OBC caste himself and comes from a rather poor family. He could be seen by the OBCs as one of them.

*The rise to power of Modi's BJP is a counter-revolution initiated by the upper castes, which have found in Hindu nationalism an antidote to caste politics.*

The BJP strategy worked very well: while the upper castes were affected by a steady erosion of their position in power centers like the central and the state governments, they have staged a comeback and, now fully in command again, have diluted the positive discrimination system. One of their policies has been to let the public sector shrink by privatizing parts of it and downsizing state-owned enterprises.

**Would you say that Indian public opinion generally has been shifting toward more conservative/illiberal/nationalist principles? Or is this phenomenon mostly visible among elites?**

This is a difficult question, partly because there are few surveys available and partly because it is difficult to define conservatism and illiberalism. Civil society organizations remain very attached to individual and collective rights: peasants demonstrate against pro-agribusiness laws; students and Muslims have protested against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act that made only non-Muslim refugees eligible for citizenship; NGOs and RTI (Right to Information) activists are fighting and pay a heavy price for that...

But at the same time, *Hindutva* (Hindu-ness) tends to become hegemonic, the only legitimate register. Certainly, this trend is due to fear, to vigilantes' cultural policing and to Modi's charisma—a word I use in the sense of Max Weber, for whom it had no evaluative quality: charismatic leaders are exceptional personalities, for better or for worse. But a large segment of Indian society supports the Hindu nationalist discourse. First, ethno-religious nationalism, xenophobia, and pride in anything Indian has become more pervasive. Second, and relatedly, traditions have been somewhat sacralized, at the expense of the socio-religious movements that had been strong since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and had helped to emancipate

women and low-caste individuals. It is difficult to say whether social conservatism is spontaneous or the result of constraints imposed by the state (through laws) and vigilantes. Both things are probably true.

*Hindutva (Hindu-ness) tends to become hegemonic, the only legitimate register. Certainly, this trend is due to fear, to vigilantes' cultural policing and to Modi's charisma.*

**A key issue for populist leaders is the gap between what they promise during election campaigns and how they behave when in power. How has Modi's "us versus them" rhetoric been transformed since he acceded to power?**

It has been transformed just like in other populist regimes. First, if Narendra Modi fought his election campaigns in the name of the poor, the rich have been the primary beneficiaries. Under Modi, the rich have become richer and inequality has increased. Oxfam reports reveal that the richest 10% of Indians account for an increasing percentage of the nation's wealth each year (almost 80% in 2019 compared to 73% in 2017). Today, about 60% of national wealth is in the hands of India's "one percent" (higher than the global average of 50%). This reflects, in part, the intensification of crony capitalism, symbolized by Mukesh Ambani (the fourth-richest man in the world) and Gautam Adani, whose meteoric rise has made him the second-richest man in India today. This is due in part to a pro-rich taxation policy that has found expression in a constant shift toward indirect taxes (on petroleum products in particular) under Modi.

*Like other populists, Modi retains his pro-poor image because of his "politics of dignity," which some observers have called "right New Welfarism."*

But like other populists, Modi retains his pro-poor image because of what I call his "politics of dignity," that some observers have called "right New Welfarism." Instead of increasing the financial resources of the poor the way the Manmohan Singh government did—via, for instance, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)—the Modi government gave the poor tangible things like toilets, bank accounts, and gas cylinders. These gifts are not as costly as the NREGA; they align with the dominant ideology, which opposes assistance and favors entrepreneurship; and they allow Modi to position himself as the benefactor of the poor, something he emphasizes every month during his radio program, Mann ki Baat ("Words from the Heart"). Here, in contrast to the aggressive tone he takes when he canvasses and fights the opposition, he is compassionate and gives people a new sense of self-esteem and self-respect. He shows that he cares for them—he is like a father or a guru. In fact, he speaks like a guru and he looks increasingly like a guru since growing a beard.

**You have been theorizing nationalism and populism for years. Our Program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. Do you consider the term illiberalism to have heuristic value or do you prefer other terms—such as populism or national-populism—and if so, why?**

I find "illiberalism" more euphemistic than heuristic. I prefer the word "authoritarian," used as Juan Linz does, to describe any limitation on pluralism. There are degrees of authoritarianism, just as there are "democracies with adjectives." Certainly, "illiberalism" reflects a very important idea: we need to admit



that regimes exist on a continuum from more to less liberal. But why should this continuum refer to liberalism?

*I find “illiberalism” more euphemistic than heuristic. I prefer the word “authoritarian,” used as Juan Linz does, to describe any limitation on pluralism.*

To say that there are shades of authoritarianism—that regimes are more or less authoritarian—would do the job even more effectively. I like the formula “electoral authoritarianism” for that reason. It implies some degree of competition, but in contrast to the situation that prevails in a democracy, the playing field is so uneven that alternation in power is almost impossible—and between elections, opponents, journalists, intellectuals, NGOs, any dissenters, including farmers in India today etc., are bound to be targeted. Last but not least, by presenting authoritarian regimes as “illiberal democracies,” we help them to retain some legitimacy and even a rather acceptable image: after all, populists claim that they are in politics not to fight against democracy but to rejuvenate a democracy that has been captured by elites—that’s why they are so attached to the word democracy.

## Alexandra Yatsyk and Andrey Makarychev on Illiberal Biopolitics

*Originally published February 18, 2021*

**Alexandra and Andrey, you have both been working for several years on the concept of biopolitics as applied to Central and Eastern Europe, including Russia. Can we talk about the rise of an illiberal biopolitics? And is there a liberal biopolitics, or are the terms antinomic?**

The idea of biopolitics is largely known for its Foucauldian iteration of the late 1970s, which explained how European disciplinary institutions were gradually replacing their repertoire of direct coercive methods of control with more nuanced and “soft” tools of surveillance. On the one hand, this transformation indeed implied some degree of liberalization. On the other hand, the exponential transfiguration of techniques of governance and population management into a panopticon does not sound very liberal: the omnipresent state is increasingly capable of monitoring all spheres of life. Practices of biopower often merge with the state apparatus, since the sovereign power appropriates biopolitical instruments and even makes them central to their governance toolkits. In this case, the liberal/illiberal frame of analysis becomes quite relevant.

Generally speaking, the pivotal liberal/illiberal biopolitical divide corresponds to the distinction between individual and collective bodies. Foucault approached population mostly through a technical (numerical or statistical) lens and paid much less attention to individual bodies. We tend to think that liberalism is a more pertinent reference point for anatomo-politics, a concept that implies and leaves substantial room for the values of the individual body, as opposed to collective corporeality, which is always punitive and oppressive. Anatomo-politics may take different forms of resistance and contestation. Some actors reinterpret Giorgio Agamben’s idea of bare life in a positive sense, making individual—and often literally naked—bodies into loci of radical disagreement and protest (Piotr Pavlensky, Pussy Riot and Katrin Nenasheva in Russia or FEMEN in Ukraine serve as good examples of this). Within this cultural frame, the body in all its nakedness symbolizes freedom and challenges the biopower operated or hijacked by the state.

*The pivotal liberal/illiberal biopolitical divide corresponds to the distinction between individual and collective bodies.*

Another form of contemporary anatomo-politics is mass-scale protests against COVID-related bans, restrictions, and limitations, including the current vaccination campaign. This completely new phenomenon—mainly driven by an unusual blend of right-wing believers in conspiracy theories, left-wing anarchists, and adherents of pretty libertarian attitudes toward the physicality of bodily life—is still waiting for proper conceptualization.

Anyway, anatomo-politics starts with the individualization of our bodies. It might be otherwise called embodiment: practices of sport, yoga and meditation, dancing, or, for example, naturism are pretty liberal in their cultural background. For instance, the German FKK (“culture of free body”) was one of the liberal spaces within the largely totalitarian East Germany. In all kind of regimes, there are anatomo-political “islands” of embodied practices that reclaim our bodies from the totalizing universe of biopower.

In the meantime, biopolitics should not always and necessarily be qualified along ideological lines. It can transcend ideological divides and merge with governmentality, or techniques and mechanisms of governance. This might be true, for instance, of using managerial and administrative resources in times of crises: the important things are the sustainability of health care systems and the professionalism of medical staff. In this sense, biopower can operate at a certain distance from state institutions and maintain some autonomy from them.

**You have also been working on Russia’s relations with its neighbors, especially but not exclusively the Baltic states. How do you articulate the link between biopolitics at home and the geopolitical order? Is Russia in particular projecting mechanisms of power abroad that you would describe as biopolitical?**

There is definitely a correlation between domestic and foreign policy biopolitics, as well as between bio- and geopolitics. Usually, regimes that are grounded in the biopolitical understanding of power relations tend to project it beyond their national borders, seeing it as explaining the operation of international politics more generally. Belarus and Russia are good examples of this trend. For their elites, both internal and world politics are spheres for physical survival, leaving very little space for norms and rules. Seen from this perspective, biopolitics might feed *Realpolitik* thinking of the type encapsulated in the well-known metaphor “war of all against all.”

*Regimes that are grounded in the biopolitical understanding of power relations tend to project it beyond their national borders, seeing it as explaining the operation of international politics more generally.*

The concept of the Russian world, as promoted by the Kremlin, is an inherently biopolitical construct. It is based on the imagined global community of Russophones, who allegedly require care and protection on the part of Moscow. At the same time, this external biopolitics has geopolitical repercussions insofar as parts of some territories belonging to Russia’s neighbors fall within Moscow’s self-assigned “sphere of interests.” Thus, biopolitics can directly impact geopolitical issues, including the biopolitical construction of spaces and borders, as well relations of centrality and peripherality.

Another form of external projection of biopower is the Kremlin’s contacts with a plethora of Western right-wing parties and groups that very much adhere to a biopolitical agenda, including pro-family and anti-LGBTQ policies, a strong nexus between church and state (in line with the Foucauldian idea of “pastoral power”), and anti-migration and often Islamophobic narratives. This partnership has some

reverberations for Russia's geopolitical construction of Europe as a civilization in a state of moral decay, a source of sexual deviance and sinful pleasures.

It does not seem that Russia has achieved much in this direction. Donald Trump is no longer in the White House, Matteo Salvini is out of the Italian government, and Marine Le Pen is not French president. Moreover, those biopolitically conservative regimes that persist—the Polish one, for instance—are definitely not among Russia's geopolitical allies.

In the Baltic states, the linkage between biopolitics and geopolitics has its own specificity. For example, the predominantly Russophone Estonian city of Narva, located on the border with Russia, is often discussed in Estonian media from an implicitly biopolitical perspective. This geopolitically important city is largely perceived in mainstream Estonian discourse as being populated by a different “type” of people—people who are more inert and socially conservative, more state-centric, and more culturally attached to Russian patterns of information consumption. This argument popped up during debates this summer in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, again corroborating the interconnection between geopolitical and biopolitical frames of reference.

Russia's vaccine race serves as another example of a geo-/biopolitical weaponization of the pandemic. Sputnik V was introduced as the first vaccine for COVID-19 in August 2020, even before the required third stage of tests was completed. The Kremlin's fast-track approach to vaccine development clearly revealed its desire to exploit the extraordinary global situation to improve Russia's position in the international arena, which was particularly damaged by the poisoning of Navalny.

**Last year, you published *Critical Biopolitics of the Post-Soviet: From Populations to Nations*. Are there specific features of biopolitics in the post-Soviet realm—due to the Soviet experience or to post-Soviet transformations—that you see as different from biopolitics in Europe?**

The surge in Western biopolitics is to a very large extent rooted in the experiences of mass-scale terrorism, the influx of refugees, and the prominence of deep racial divides. In most post-Soviet countries, these issues are not at the top of political agendas. What fuels biopolitics in the post-Soviet space is the ongoing process of nation (re)building/(re)emerging and the corresponding national self-assertion. This makes the idea of the collective national body attractive and pronounced. But it is exactly at this juncture that major biopolitical issues start to crop up: How is the nation conceptualized, imagined, and represented? Are all people (“population,” in Foucauldian terms) consensually considered to belong to the national self?

*The surge in Western biopolitics is to a very large extent rooted in the experiences of mass-scale terrorism, the influx of refugees, and the prominence of deep racial divides. In most post-Soviet countries, these issues are not at the top of political agendas. What fuels biopolitics in the post-Soviet space is the ongoing process of nation (re)building/(re)emerging and the corresponding national self-assertion.*

In our book, we found that this is not the case in Donbas, for instance. Our field research in eastern Ukraine revealed that there are voices in Ukraine who do not see the residents of eastern regions as fully belonging to the Ukrainian nation. In Georgia, some local Muslims feel ostracized as “internal others” by

religious fundamentalists who claim that full-fledged and authentic Georgian identity exists only on the basis of Christian faith. In Latvia and Estonia, a significant proportion of local Russophones build their identity on linguistic and cultural borders with mainstream nationhood.

Another specificity of the so-called post-Soviet space is its liminal position at the intersection of Russia's neo-imperial biopolitics and the EU's biopolitical project. The former is explicitly conservative, the latter is ostensibly liberal (although, of course, the liberal/conservative divide is a major driving force for political battles within some member states, such as Poland). This collision of dissimilar biopolitical projects contributes to the politicization of the issues of sexual identity, family policies, educational practices, and religion in most of the post-Soviet countries.

**The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have been a case *par excellence* for the exertion of some forms of biopolitics regardless of a state's political practices and ideology. In the long term, how do you think this rise in biopolitics in daily state-society interactions will impact liberalism as a political project?**

European left-wing public intellectuals (such as Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, and Michel Houellebecq) and social activists (such as the *Gilets Jaunes* in France) have long claimed that biopolitics gradually erases distinctions between liberal and illiberal regimes, as well as between democracy and autocracy, freedom and unfreedom. Some of these thinkers have employed stark metaphors, such as the camp that, in their view, represents the future of the West. These voices see the pandemic as powerful confirmation of their views. In their logic, since the major function of the state is to provide physical safety and secure a healthy life as the undeniable top value and priority, the price for fulfilling this function is quite high: growing authoritarianism regardless of the nature of political systems and institutions.

However, we remain skeptical about the idea of equating liberal and illiberal regimes on the grounds that all of them need to take exceptional measures and limit the normal structure of daily life. Undeniably, nation-states have reasserted themselves as major forces shaping responses to the crisis, yet by and large, their sovereignties in no way follow the Schmittian model of will-based and unaccountable decisionism or the friend/enemy distinction. The newly retrieved sovereignties are precarious (to paraphrase Judith Butler's biopolitical idea of "precarious lives") in the sense of exposing governments' indecisiveness rather than strategic resolve, and their policies controversially oscillate between many positions. Under these circumstances, the Foucauldian idea of responsabilization becomes more important for anti-pandemic response than concentration and usurpation of power.

*We remain skeptical about the idea of equating liberal and illiberal regimes on the grounds that all of them need to take exceptional measures and limit the normal structure of daily life.*

The fact is that the COVID-19 emergency did not annul democratic decision-making, whatever we may think about the quality of these decisions. In countries with a strong background of liberal norms and experiences, checks and balances and free media are still in place. And in many respects decision-making is not monopolized by the state authorities: medical professionals, startup communities, and transportation companies, to name just a few, are important contributors to the collective search for solutions. In the meantime, countries with strong illiberal traditions (such as Russia or Belarus) have become even more authoritarian during the pandemic, as their ruling elites instrumentalize public



health requirements to prevent people from engaging in protest actions. In this sense, the divide between liberal and illiberal governments persists, and we do not see how the two might eventually converge.

Yet there are spheres of international politics that have been hit badly by the pandemic. One of these is regionalism, one of the core pillars of liberal international society. In fact, COVID-19 has polarized world politics between global actors (World Health Organization, global vaccine producers, etc.) and national governments, with very little in-between. Regional organizations have largely failed to address the challenge of the pandemic and have proven incapable of operating in exceptional times. We cannot think of a single anti-coronavirus initiative that has emerged from the most successful regional bodies, those that have for decades been described as success stories of regional integration: the Council of Baltic Sea States, the Nordic Council, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation, the Visegrad Group... In this respect, we might need a thorough debate on the role of regional organizations in a post-pandemic world.

**Our Program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. Do you think the concept of illiberal(ism) has purchase for describing the current changes in values that you study, perhaps as compared to the concepts of populism and authoritarianism? What are the gaps and overlaps between the three notions?**

Populism is the least useful notion, in our view. It is excessively broad and imprecise, and therefore can be applied to the whole spectrum of political forces looking for public support and offering simplified explanations of political issues. The only basis for classification of populism is the distinction between appeals to “the people” and appeals to objective knowledge. Yet even technocracy—which should, logically, be the opposite of populism—can be populist.

In this sense, illiberalism has some cognitive advantages. The concept itself is multifarious and has more than one reading, depending on the context. From a biopolitical perspective, what seems to be the most relevant is the tendency of some illiberal regimes (particularly in the post-Soviet world) to substitute for politico-ideological arguments with the explicit and mass use of brutal force against their opponents and dissenters. Again, Russia and Belarus are two perfect illustrations of this trend, as their governing elites are more violent than conservative. [Lukashenko's spectacular public appearance](#) armed with a gun in August 2020 or Navalny's poisoning and subsequent imprisonment are quite illustrative in this regard. These revealing episodes are important additions to the biopolitical debate, since the alleged conservatism of these regimes is reduced to flexing physical muscles, beating demonstrators and protestors, and harming their physical bodies.

*From a biopolitical perspective, what seems to be the most relevant is the tendency of some illiberal regimes (particularly in the post-Soviet world) to substitute for politico-ideological arguments with the explicit and mass use of brutal force against their opponents and dissenters.*

This can be described by the concept of “carceral state,” a state that is devoid of clear ideological features and grounded in a corporeal understanding of politics as a battleground between “strong” and well-armed bodies of the police, on the one hand, and “weak” and unarmed bodies of the opposition, on the other. The dominance of this vision reduces political struggles to the issues of survival, escape, incarceration, or release from jail. In this space of violence, there is very little—if any—room for political debates on matters of substance, which fully suits the power holders.

## Filippo Costa Buranelli on Illiberal Solidarity and Authoritarian Cooperation in Central Asia

*Originally published February 25, 2021*

**Filippo, you have been working in the framework of the English School on the transformation of the world order and the structuring of authoritarian and/or illiberal regimes, looking at the case of Central Asia. Can you describe the mechanisms of authoritarian or illiberal socialization that you have observed in the post-Soviet region?**

First of all, let me thank you very much for the kind invitation and for giving me the chance to present my work and my research in a more conversational yet still scholarly way. It is a great privilege to be interviewed on this prestigious platform, and I think the whole Illiberalism Studies Program is a fascinating and timely endeavor.

In my [article](#) for *International Studies Quarterly* entitled “Authoritarianism as an Institution? The Case of Central Asia,” I attempted to theorize illiberal solidarity as a framework to illustrate what I believe is a shared understanding of a given set of rules, discourses, and practices (i.e., an institution) that inform how governance and power should be exercised in the region. This shared understanding, which comes about through the process of socialization, rests on two specific sets of mechanisms, which in the paper are analytically separated but in practice are very much intertwined: *mimicry/emulation* and *praise/blame*.

The first refers to a behavior that is adopted and internalized by a social actor by virtue of its legitimacy and appropriateness in the social context in question. When, on top of these considerations, there is also an element of prestige—that is, the behavior we seek to imitate and mimic is that of an actor that enjoys an excellent reputation, is powerful, has great standing, and is seen as a model—then mimicry becomes emulation. The second is about validation, encouragement, appreciation, and therefore incentives, often in moral and reputational terms, to not only adopt, but also—and more importantly—persist in adopting a specific behavior. Since this can also take a negative form, I consider both praise and its opposite, blame, as two sides of the same coin: reprimand, public shaming, humiliation, ridicule, and stigmatization are powerful social acts that convey a strong sense of right and wrong in a given social context.

Given my preference for socio-structural theorization, I emphasize both the individual and the structural levels of analysis, in line with what Anthony Giddens termed “co-structuration.” And here is where I see the value of an English School approach to studying authoritarianism in the region. Through this prism, we can see how authoritarian rule in Central Asia does not operate in a vacuum, nor does an incumbent ruler stay in power merely as a result of cost-benefit analysis. Rather, authoritarianism has a *social* nature and is a *social* phenomenon.

*The key to understanding this is, paradoxically, to see authoritarian leaders for what they truly are: social beings, like all other leaders. Autocrats observe, talk, copy, praise, look for models, comment, take notes, inquire, and scout out solutions that best serve their interests while conforming to their values (or, at least, not compromising them too much).*

Methodologically, this has led me to study the two aforementioned mechanisms through the following four proxies: direct references to other experiences in the region, so as to get a sense for the “social context;” evidence of meetings where the discourses and practices under consideration are dealt with, so as to get the “dialogical” element of institutionalization; considerations about the standing of regional peers, so as to uncover elements of emulation; and specific judgments on the (un)desirability, (il) legitimacy, and (de)merit of specific practices, in order to grasp the normativity that ultimately informs what an institution is.

The latter, in fact, is crucial if authoritarianism is to be accounted for as an institution, for institutions have a fundamental normative, deontic component. Importantly, like the two mechanisms of socialization, these four proxies are separated for analytical purposes, but may well operate simultaneously. In sum, these two mechanisms rest on a series of both discourses and practices that reveal the progressive adoption and acceptance of specific principles and values that are at the heart of authoritarian politics’ creation of a specific structure of rewards and permissibility that emboldens existing autocrats and signals to them the legitimacy of strong rule.

What I should emphasize at this point is that mimicry/emulation and praise/blame are not necessarily the only sets of mechanisms operating in Central Asia when it comes to authoritarian socialization. But they are the ones that I found operating most frequently and most intensely, both in conversations with active and retired diplomats in the region in the period 2013-2019 and in research material analyzed for the paper, which stretches from 1991 to 2020. Others may be in operation and might be uncovered by further research.

**Why do you see “illiberal solidarism” as a conceptual framework for explaining Central Asian states’ regional cooperation, as well as Russia- and China-led regional institutions?**

I think the most straightforward answer to this question is that this sense of solidarism, which in the paper I call “illiberal,” is something that has often been mentioned by those interviewees who happen to be (or have been) in a position of power within the diplomatic and official structures of the Central Asian states. In this context, solidarism is meant as the propensity and commitment of political communities to share values and principles in a process of convergence. This has been interesting to see, since you might expect that, in an authoritarian context, elites would do whatever they could to “sell out” democratic credentials and “reformist” agendas.

Conversely, I have heard narratives that quite openly emphasize the legitimacy, appropriateness, and validity of strong rule and authoritarianism, often through the two prisms of *avtoritet* (authority) and *stabil'nost'* (stability). This solidarity, this convergence, this “togetherness” has been found not only in contemporary narratives during fieldwork interviews or declarations of Central Asia elites, but also in archival documents dating back to the early 1990s which I was able to consult, thus corroborating the idea that institutionalization requires a certain amount of time for norms and practices to become institutionalized (akin to what international lawyers would call *diuturnitas*, or “continuation”).

What I would specify, as it is very important to the argument I advance in my paper and indeed to my research more broadly, is that this does not necessarily amount to *cooperation*. Rather, this illiberal solidarism speaks to something more pervasive, less ambitious, and more ideational. In direct contrast with realist thinking, which emphasizes self-help, egoism, and national interest (the so-called *raison d'état*), illiberal solidarism in Central Asia is an example of what I call the systemic interest, or *raison de système*, of the regional order. Leaders may not like each other (and in Central Asia we have seen examples of this), they may have different and clashing policies, they may well disagree and compete over several issues, but they all know that it is in their interest to ensure that there is as much continuity as possible in the leadership of neighboring countries so as to guarantee predictability and stability.

To come back to your question, I believe “illiberal solidarism” is a valuable conceptual framework for looking at the region’s international relations, for it allows us to look at Central Asia as an *order* in which specific norms, shared understandings, rules of behavior, and principles are in play. This contradicts, for example, the strand of *literature* that claims that Central Asia is a “non-region” due to the absence of a common market, shared sovereignty, or an all-encompassing regional organization. This literature has focused heavily on what Central Asia is not, without necessarily defining what it is. Through the prism of illiberal solidarism, I am able to see it as an order premised and centered on the two ideas of *avtoritet* and *stabil'nost'*, which have the status of values underpinning a community of states and leaders interested in preserving their power while maintaining peaceful coexistence and relatively low inter-state conflict so as to pursue regime enhancement. This idea of Central Asia as an order is explored in my forthcoming article for *Central Asian Affairs*.

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Now, whether this order is something morally justifiable, or legitimate, or desirable, is an important question—authority, stability, and predictability for whom? Order benefitting whom? Whose legitimacy? But this is not the focus of my analysis. Instead, I wanted to make the argument that solidarism does not necessarily have to be nice; whether we like it or not, there is normative convergence around principles that contradict liberal understandings of politics. This is something that within the English School is visible in the way in which solidarism has been studied so far (i.e., mostly through the lens of human rights and democratization), but is also present in the wider *literature* on autocracy diffusion, which has not seriously engaged with the idea that, survival considerations aside, there may be a component of normativity at play.

Looking, for example, at how neighboring states have reacted to Sadyr Japarov’s recent plans to reinstate strong presidentialism in Kyrgyzstan, it is apparent that there are cost-benefit considerations

as well as normative preferences in play. Conversely, one can look at how Japarov himself has used the regional environment and the stability of political power in the other Central Asian countries as an argument to legitimize presidentialism in the eyes of the population. Normative considerations, shared understandings, and ideational factors are often marginalized in analyses of Central Asian regional politics, although this is slowly changing.

Finally, I think it is also important to stress that while my work does acknowledge the undeniable (and already thoroughly researched) role that both Russia and China play in enhancing and entrenching authoritarianism in the region—I am thinking here, for example, about the *literature* on the so-called “Shanghai spirit”—what I found missing was an account of how the Central Asian states have themselves contributed to this structuring process over the years, including which mechanisms and processes they have used.

**How can authoritarianism, which is a *domestic* trait of states, be considered an institution of *international* society, and what does this tell us about the current normative transformations of the world order?**

This is an excellent question, and I am not sure I found the answer in my paper! Within the English School literature, there is, in fact, a lot of disagreement with respect to the ontology of institutions. I respect this diversity of positions and certainly cannot claim to have found the definitive answer to this vexing issue. Yet in my view, when a specific trait of domestic governance becomes a standard of conduct, an appropriate behavior, a benchmark, and a pervasive element of the management of “regional life,” then it also becomes an institution between states.

It is important to remember that institutions are sets of principles and associated practices that not only *regulate* interactions between states, but also *create* a sense of identity and confer social positionality, assigning and ascribing roles and functions. That is, institutions are both *relational* and *constitutive*. In other words, an institution creates an inside and an outside, a membership, a sense of appropriateness that demarcates those who “belong” and those who “do not belong.”

For example, it was interesting to hear in the fieldwork interviews I conducted for this paper that Kyrgyzstan was almost always an outlier in the region on account of its “unstable politics”—and not, for example, Turkmenistan, which is seldom involved in regional dialogue and is even less present in formalized Eurasian multilateralism. You can really see this social exclusionary logic in operation at the linguistic level (remember I consider “blame” a mechanism for the institutionalization of authoritarianism, too) when you hear officials and diplomats referring to Kyrgyzstan as a *belaia vorona* (white crow), for example.

In thinking of a mode of governance, of a way of doing politics as an institution, I implicitly build parallels with, for example, how constitutional monarchism played a role in splitting Europe into “enlightened” and “absolutist” regimes in the nineteenth century; in the way fascist nations managed to come together in the interwar period and during the Second World War; in how “democracy” has become a membership criterion for acceding to the EU; in the way that monarchy still defines membership of the Gulf order; in how the developmental state has gained traction in East Asia; and, more recently, in the way the “league of authoritarian gentlemen” *described* by Alexander Cooley has been on the rise.



I believe this means that we are increasingly moving toward what has been **called** *embedded pluralism*, which refers to a condition in which differences between states and societies are not just present, but protected and enhanced. It is more than multipolarity, for multipolarity can involve different great powers sharing the same political ideals and values. Here, not only there is a return of multipolarity in terms of “raw power” such as military and economic indicators, but there are also profound ideological differences and political cultures that will have to find a peaceful way to coexist.

Importantly, these dynamics are not simply inter-state, but also transnational. Regional orders are an important part of the story, but they are not the only story. Transnational links between elites and far-right activists who rely on normative signaling across constituencies, pointing to the need to curb and reduce the reach of liberal narratives and policies, are important components of the complex and fundamental shifts that have been occurring for at least a decade, if not longer. This has profound implications for IR theory, too: until **recently**, much of the constructivist work on norms, institutions, and socialization focused on liberal, “good” values and principles, neglecting the fact that illiberal and authoritarian contexts, however contrary to our liberal views and convictions, are also social contexts in which processes of socialization, learning, sharing, norm-taking, norm-resistance, norm-creation, and legitimization are very much present.

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And these processes bridge the domestic-international divide. In my article, I show, for example, how Central Asian leaders create spaces for authoritarian practices by congratulating each other after every landslide victory in presidential elections, as well as how, in the 1990s, they established a truly concerted dialogue on how to prolong presidential rule in the countries of the region through referenda. IR scholars need to start paying sustained attention to this, especially if we are to come up with sharp analyses and accounts of how world order is evolving in terms of its social and normative fabric in an era in which all available indicators are telling us that democracy is under attack.

**In studying Central Asian regimes and the articulation of their domestic and foreign policy, how do you determine what is illiberal and what is authoritarian? How and where do the two terms overlap and diverge?**

This is a question that is as interesting as it is thorny. You are right that there is a lot of overlap in how these two terms are used in the current IR and Political Science literature, and I myself use them almost interchangeably. This is a limitation of my work that I acknowledge, and which I will address in my future research. In fact, only recently has there been systematic analysis that aims to distinguish the two. I am thinking, in particular, of the **work** of scholars such as Marlies Glasius, who, through the prism of practices, differentiates between illiberalism (which pertains to the encroachment on—or the limitation of—individual liberties and human dignity) and authoritarianism (which is linked to the sabotaging of accountability of those in power within a political community).

In my work, I define authoritarianism in the broadest possible sense, i.e., as a hierarchical form of political order that emphasizes strong rule, stability, and the importance of the leader's personality while not adhering to the "procedural minimum" definition of democracy, such as free and fair elections, universal suffrage, and effective guarantees of civil and political freedoms. I do this primarily to account for the very different types of authoritarianism one finds in Central Asia, and you can see how this broad definition combines the two components of illiberalism and authoritarianism as Glasius would understand them.

Going back to definitions, one may argue that illiberalism has an in-built, endogenous link to liberalism, and therefore it is often defined *ex-negativo*, i.e., as what it is not liberal. So it ultimately becomes a matter of defining what liberalism is, and one can claim that liberalism is a philosophy that believes in the fundamental freedom and right of the individual to pursue prosperity, development, rationality, and emancipation from governing structures and what Halmai has **called** "the public power of the majority." But by doing this, we somehow put the concept in a subaltern position to liberalism, preventing us from exploring its deeper ideological and philosophical ramifications as well as its multifaceted manifestations.

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Authoritarianism, conversely, is a concept that stands on its own, with its own set of fundamental values and principles centered around hierarchy, authority, obedience, and conformity. One should also acknowledge that the distinction between illiberalism and authoritarianism is, analytically, a welcome one, for it makes it possible to identify illiberal practices and discourses within established democracies, as well as elements of liberalism in consolidated autocracies. At the international level, democracies may advocate for illiberal provisions such as closing borders and restricting the individual freedoms of certain segments of society, while authoritarian states may embrace liberal policies such as those at the heart of free markets.

The very interesting—and, some might say, dangerous—outcome of this trend is that we reach a point where the very meaning and constitutive nature of democracy are called question. And far from being merely a semantic and semiotic question, this will have huge repercussions across the globe, as states will strive to ascribe their own meaning to it, thereby challenging the very authority of those who claim to be its "real" representatives. Poland and Hungary are doing exactly **this** within the EU and, as I have argued **elsewhere**, the Trump presidency has potentially paved the way for a more widespread dilution of democracy with illiberal and authoritarian practices. This discussion points to the power of illiberal ideas, values, and worldviews, which need to become a more prominent part of political and IR theorizing.

## Mitchell A. Orenstein and Maria Snegovaya on the Political Economy of Populism in Central Europe

*Originally published March 4, 2021*

**Mitchell and Maria, you have been working, both together and individually, on the political economy of populism. Could you tell us why you think this understudied aspect of populism is key to understanding the rise of populist movements?**

Thanks for inviting us to Agora. We have both been working separately on the issue of why voters in Central and Eastern Europe support populist parties and we have both been skeptical of the usual reasons given. The great scholars Inglehart and Norris developed a “cultural backlash” argument that says that populists have benefited from widespread cultural backlash against globalization. While that is surely true, we believe that the cultural arguments play down some of the political economy factors.

First, neoliberal economic policies have dominated policymaking in most countries worldwide since about 1980, leading to major shifts in the global income distribution and rising inequality in many countries. No region has been more affected by this trend than Central and Eastern Europe, which emerged from communism in 1989, quickly adopted a wide range of liberalizing reforms, and (in many countries) suffered a massive transitional recession—the largest in modern history, dwarfing the Great Depression of the 1930s. We can draw a direct line from the rejection of neoliberal globalization to electoral support for populist right parties.

In particular, we show that populist right parties in Central and Eastern Europe boost social spending in an effort to get votes. And it works. We are currently writing a paper together that uses some new data and approaches to demonstrate that the pro-social economic policies of some populist right parties can be an effective electoral approach.

One additional reason why the focus on the economy is important is that one popular explanation for the rise of populism—the refugee crisis—is less salient in post-communist Europe. Many populist parties—like Fidesz and Jobbik in Hungary, and the Law and Justice Party in Poland—became electorally successful in the region long before the immigration crisis erupted in Europe. However, a significant share of scholarship on the region focuses primarily on cultural explanations and does not explore the economic dimension of the story.

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**In that case, can we articulate the rise of rightist populist movements with the global decline of the left? If so, do you think the new emerging left (SYRIZA in Greece, Five Star in Italy, Podemos in Spain, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the US, etc.) could recapture its traditional audience and deprive the populist right of its electoral support?**

Maria's previous work linked the decline of the social democratic left to the rise of right populist movements. The key argument, in an [article written with Sheri Berman](#), was that many left parties in Europe went along with neoliberalism. They bought into the idea that globalization was inevitable and that increasing competitive pressures meant they would have to relinquish large parts of the welfare state and fight for national competitiveness using neoliberal policies. In essence, the left abandoned a large part of its working-class constituency. Populist right parties saw an opportunity to pick up working-class voters by supporting more generous social policy, often with a pro-family or nationalist slant.

In the post-communist context, the effect of left rebranding was **more pronounced** because the working-class groups that were primarily hurt by neoliberal policies constituted a significantly larger share of the electorates of postcommunist countries than they did of the electorates of Western Europe. Thus, this move opened up a larger share of electorates to mobilization by the populist right. This drift to the right was reinforced by the lower institutionalization of postcommunist systems and the weaker party attachments of voters in such polities.

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We do think that left parties can regain traditional working-class support, but they will need to break from their previous policy stances and embrace a dynamic new vision of what a socialist or social democratic policy regime might look like. Populists have shaken up the right-left binary, and liberal and left parties need to take note. In our view, while it will be impossible for the left to out-xenophobe the right, it should be possible to regain a comparative advantage on welfare-state issues.

**What are the differences and similarities in populist economic policies in Western and Central/Eastern Europe, especially in terms of redistributive programs?**

Central and Eastern Europe has proven to be an innovator in populist economic policies. The generous welfare measures of Law and Justice in Poland have convinced many people to vote for the party even if they dislike the conservative policies that come with it: abortion restrictions, attacks on the rule of law, Euroscepticism, and attempts to control the media space. These policies are widely unpopular and yet Law and Justice rules. Why? Because Polish voters see the need for the social policies Law and Justice

started, most notably the generous family benefit program (Family 500+), but also many others. Orbán's Hungary inherited a more generous welfare state but has likewise pioneered an aggressively nationalist and authoritarian form of populism that includes social care as a core element. He advocates family formation and larger families as a way of fighting immigration.

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While Poland and Hungary seem the leaders in Europe, the same sorts of trends are also visible in Western Europe. Many Western European welfare states have adopted “welfare chauvinism,” increasingly restricting welfare benefits to nationals rather than foreigners—even EU foreigners. Far-right parties like FPÖ in Austria, which previously supported neoliberalism, have sought to recast themselves as the defender of the common man, including by supporting the welfare state.

**How would you compare Central/Eastern European populism and the Putin regime in Russia? Is there a similar “strong state/redistribution mechanisms” pattern in place in Russia?**

Similarities definitely exist. Putin was in many ways the model for the rebirth of a conservative European authoritarianism and nationalism. He showed that liberal democracy was not the only way and that the economy could do quite well under stronger state control. Formulated in 2004 by Vladislav Surkov, a close aide to Russian president Vladimir Putin, the concept of “sovereign democracy” was designed to provide democratic window-dressing for a political system that did not meet democratic standards. In Poland, the PiS government and its defenders invoked a Russian-style narrative of “sovereign democracy” to defend the dismantling of democratic institutions. The concept of “illiberal democracy” suggested by Viktor Orbán in Hungary can also largely be interpreted as a variant of Surkov’s sovereign democracy.

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Much like in Hungary and Poland, the conservative backlash against liberalism started to emerge in Russia as social groups that found themselves on the losing side of the transition throughout the 1990s consolidated and strengthened. In Russia, dissatisfaction with the transition and post-Soviet nostalgia accelerated dramatically after the 1998 financial crisis. Putin built an electoral coalition that to a significant degree relied on social groups that missed out in the 1990s and suffered the most from the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This dynamic echoes patterns of incorporation of transition losers in coalitions of populist right parties in postcommunist Europe.

However, the sanctions Russia has labored under due to the invasion of Ukraine, combined with lower energy prices and the economic inefficiencies of the system Putin has built in Russia, have undermined Putin’s economic performance at home and reduced his ability to spread the wealth. This poor economic

performance has limited the extent to which the Russian president is seen as a model. Hungary maintains close relations with Russia, but the Polish populists seem quite concerned.

**Let's move now toward some discussion of concepts. The existing literature has been particularly creative in trying to name the phenomenon you are studying. Should we call this trend a form of economic nationalism, a conservative developmentalist statism, an authoritarian neoliberalism?**

Labels in social science are always problematic. We study social phenomena and therefore we cannot control how these labels and concepts are used in everyday political discourse. This puts pressure on the categories we work with. In our joint work, we use the term “populist radical right parties.” That is an accurate reflection of the parties we are studying. But several of the terms you mention might work. These populist right parties are certainly economic nationalists. They are also very similar to traditional European conservatives (think Bismarck) in that they are anti-democratic, traditionalist, and nationalist. We see these as reactions to neoliberalism, whether it was imposed in a democratic or authoritarian manner. Neoliberalism was certainly enforced in Central and Eastern Europe by the international financial institutions, which policed and sanctioned any deviations.

*These populist right parties are certainly economic nationalists. They are also very similar to traditional European conservatives (think Bismarck) in that they are anti-democratic, traditionalist, and nationalist.*

**Our Program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. Do you think the term “illiberalism” adds heuristic value compared to “populism” or do you see it as too limited or biased?**

We do think that the term “illiberalism” works. Some say that it underplays the danger of right populism. But descriptively, it points very effectively to three important aspects: the right populists' opposition to political liberalism (democracy, rule of law), economic liberalism (neoliberalism), and cultural liberalism (gay, women's, and minority rights). So we do think it is fair to say that Europe's new authoritarian conservatives are illiberal—and that populists are illiberal.



## Tímea Drinóczi and Agnieszka Bień-Kacała on Illiberal Constitutionalism in Hungary and Poland

Originally published March 24, 2021

**Tímea and Agnieszka, you will soon be publishing *Illiberal Constitutionalism in Poland and Hungary: The Deterioration of Democracy, Misuse of Human Rights and Abuse of the Rule of Law* (Routledge). Reading your title makes one wonder: how can constitutionalism be illiberal when the idea of constitutionalism originates in liberalism?**

Tímea: You are absolutely right to ask this question. We are quite aware of the resistance to acknowledging any type of constitutionalism that is not liberal constitutionalism. As you said, constitutionalism has traditionally been bound up with liberalism, and one of its main concerns is to prevent the arbitrary use of power. This concept of constitutionalism was not questioned in Western constitutional theory until Fidesz and the PiS came to power in Hungary and Poland, respectively, in 2010 and 2015. The remodeling exercise—including a gradual hollowing-out of democracy, abuse and misuse of the rule of law, and disrespect for individual human rights from the very beginning—has worried many.

Scholars have not, however, been able to reach a consensus as to what to call these new regimes. A plethora of labels and expressions have emerged due to the many perspectives scholars have taken to understand the reasons for and methods of Hungarian and Polish democratic erosion. From the beginning, constitutional scholars tended to see the remodeled Hungarian and Polish constitutional systems as authoritarian. When you think about the last 11 and 6 years, though, you realize that the illiberalization process has been gradual and continuous, and comparably less severe than in those states (Turkey and Russia) with which scholars compare the Hungarian and Polish cases. Nor can you avoid considering the regional context—i.e., the European Union and the Council of Europe—in which Hungary and Poland exist.

This contradiction sparked our interest. We felt that we could consider these factors and improve our understanding of the changes only by disentangling liberalism and constitutionalism. This is not an unprecedented scholarly endeavor either in theory or in practice. Just think about the idea of nonliberal constitutionalism and how scholars describe Israel (semi-liberal constitutionalism), Singapore (authoritarian constitutionalism), and Hong Kong (mixed constitutionalism).

**Indeed, we have been witnessing a proliferation of qualifiers of constitutionalism. But what is illiberal constitutionalism, exactly?**

Agnieszka: We developed the concept of illiberal constitutionalism by reflecting on the regional context; gradualness, methods and content of changes; and tangible differences between Hungary and Poland and the “real” authoritarian states, as well as by taking a holistic view of different indices. We conceptualize illiberal constitutionalism as the functioning of a public power that upholds the main constitutional structure but somehow lacks a normative domestic commitment to constraints on public power, even while remaining, to a certain extent, within the boundaries set by EU law and politics, as well as international minimum requirements.

You see, illiberal constitutionalism is not the opposite of liberal constitutionalism and does not equate to authoritarianism. Compared to other types of (nonliberal) constitutionalism, it departs from the former and tends toward the latter. Thus, constitutional democracy still exists, but its formal implementation outweighs its substantive realization. All elements of constitutional democracy, such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, are still observable but only in a continuously diminishing, hollowed-out manner. Consequently, illiberal constitutionalism encompasses illiberal democracy, illiberal legality (the illiberalized and abused rule of law), and illiberalized human rights protection. This is how the term constitutionalism is “enriched” by its illiberal modifier, even if it means a constitutionalism that is qualitatively less or worse than its liberal counterpart.

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**Well, you have used another expression, illiberal democracy. Can you elaborate on how a democracy can be illiberal? Do you use the conceptual framework of Fareed Zakaria? I think that you cannot really compare the situation that made Zakaria talk about illiberal democracy with the regimes of Kaczynski and Orbán, given that you seem to use these expressions to describe different era and events.**

Agnieszka: Indeed. We use the term illiberal democracy differently than did Fareed Zakaria in the nineties. Zakaria perceived democracy and liberalism as two separate ideals that are independent of one another but have developed close to each other. Thus, states that first became liberal could easily become democratic. In contrast, states that absorbed democracy first could disregard liberal rights and turn to be illiberal and democratic at the same time. Our point is different. As a result of the democratic transition in 1989-1990, Poland and Hungary created full-fledged constitutional democracies and became liberal and democratic at the same time. After 20 and 25 years, both degraded to something else, becoming less liberal and less democratic at the same time. We maintain the term democracy because democracy has not disappeared—there is still an electoral democracy and the elected parliament participates in the lawmaking process and exercises its oversight functions—but simply become illiberal due to increasing exclusion and inequality.

Tímea: Illiberal democracy is yet another term that usually meets with disapproval in the literature. Let us give you a short definition of illiberal democracy as we see it: it is conceptualized as a formal, manipulated, profoundly majoritarian, and non-inclusive democracy in which constitutional institutions are, to a certain extent, misused, abused, or neglected.

*...a formal, manipulated, profoundly majoritarian, and non-inclusive democracy in which constitutional institutions are, to a certain extent, misused, abused, or neglected.*

**The term illiberal democracy might be rejected because, if I understand you correctly, you detach liberalism and democracy, as well as overemphasizing the illiberal nature of the regimes. At the same time, you say little about its undemocratic nature.**

Tímea: We have been reluctant to call Hungarian and Polish democracy straightforwardly undemocratic. They are indeed in much worse shape than before, but they are still supported by people in increasingly unbalanced electoral systems that still facilitate change in ruling parties. Plus, and this was one of the reasons we wanted to do this research, voters did vote for illiberal leaders after 2010, even if they knew what they had done, especially in Hungary between 2010-2014, when electoral rules and media freedom were in better shape.

And we should not blame the propaganda and reforms for the 2018 victory as much as the people. In 2014, without the electoral reform, Fidesz could have achieved only a majority and not a supermajority. But by that time the framework of the system had been completed: the new constitution and the Fourth Amendment had already been adopted, the constitutional court was packed, etc. It was already an arrangement that did not conform entirely to liberal constitutionalism. What they gained with the supermajority after 2014 was a tool for accelerating reforms in an already corrupt system and making them almost impossible to reverse.

Agnieszka: Yes, we could also compare it with Poland: PiS does not have a constitutional majority, but it is attacking the judicial system even more aggressively than Fidesz. The Polish electoral regime and media law have not been changed to the same extent as in Hungary; PiS manipulated the institutional system. In both states, leading parties lost power in the last local elections, and PiS lost Senate in 2019. The opposition parties are “real” political parties, not puppy parties of Fidesz and PiS. We would say that during the time frame of our research, which we started in 2015 and finished in early 2021, illiberal constitutionalism is not undemocratic in the minimalist sense of the word, especially because people feel comfortable with changes and accept or at least do not oppose them.

*Illiberal constitutionalism is not undemocratic in the minimalist sense of the word, especially because people feel comfortable with changes and accept or at least do not oppose them.*

We might want to reconsider this statement if the Hungarian national elections in 2022 are held according to new electoral rules—or even before then, depending on how the government handles the pandemic and completely unrelated matters in 2021. And let us not forget that V-Dem just a few weeks ago labeled Hungary as an electoral autocracy. Yet we would advise a combined or holistic approach to indexes measuring the rule of law, democracy and human rights around the world. This is what we did in our book: the continuous deterioration in indexes, for us, means that illiberalization is still an ongoing

process, and strengthens our argument that, from the perspectives of both qualitative and quantitative analyses and in the regional context informed by their membership in the EU and the Council of Europe, Hungary and Poland have been nurturing illiberal constitutionalism.

**So you mean that people in both countries support the rulers?**

Tímea: Yes, exactly. People still seem to support—or at least do not oppose—populist autocrats and their policies. But this does not mean that the population, as a whole, is content with the politics of Fidesz and the PiS or that the opposition could not achieve some measure of victory (as indeed it did in the 2019 mayoral elections in Hungary and the 2018 local elections in Poland) or that discontent cannot be expressed. But what is true is that the space for expressing dissent is constantly being reduced. The Hungarian and Polish polities seem susceptible to transformative changes into a less liberal (illiberal) direction (e.g., people are willing to trade off their liberties) by manipulative and populist-nationalist rhetoric expressed by a charismatic leader.

Thus, people accept illiberal practices connected to human rights, such as a communitarian vision, a less egalitarian perspective, the prioritization of the rights of the community (majority) over minority rights, and the conditioning of human rights on the fulfillment of civic duties. Even if the Hungarian and Polish remodeling has not made them into polities where, as Thio describes, “the community plays a role in forming personal identity and moral choice,” this is what populist autocratic leaders intend to introduce in a top-down manner. Or, rather, they intend to appeal to, enlarge, and trigger an existing orientation toward illiberal values. It seems, therefore, that the conceptualization of illiberal constitutionalism is supported by the population’s value preferences for hierarchical structures and autocratic leadership.

*Illiberal constitutionalism is supported by the population’s value preferences for hierarchical structures and autocratic leadership.*

Agnieszka: You can express opposing views and considerations, but they are not welcome: the will of the majority—representing the “sovereign” state and the “sovereign people (nation),” which includes only “real Poles” or “real Hungarians”—prevails. In the political narrative, “the nation” comprises those who represent the traditional vision of family and are Christian (in Hungary) and Catholic (in Poland). Such a narrative cuts against the constitutional perception that the nation consists of all citizens, regardless of their nationality, and values human dignity and equality.

**It seems that in both countries, though at different levels, the Catholic Church supports and legitimates the illiberal governments. What insights do you have into this?**

Agnieszka: The Church is traditionally more influential in Polish life. Nevertheless, its role in assisting the development of illiberal constitutionalism seems to be overstated. The fact is that the Catholic Church in Poland is not as united in its support for the PiS Government as it might seem at first sight. There are pro-government and pro-opposition voices, as well as voices demanding neutrality. After the 2020 presidential election, analyses linked support for PiS to the religiosity of voters: PiS voters are recruited from villages and from among people in their 50s and above; these people are said to be more religious than others. The narratives of both the Catholic Church and the PiS are directed toward these people. One of the most influential radio and television broadcasters is led by the powerful clergyman Tadeusz Rydzyk, who supports the PiS and has a strong connection to the government, including financial ties.

It is, however, questionable if this connection has anything to do with the remodeling of the constitutional system, as the support and political engagement of some clergy does not translate into a (constitutional) majority in Poland, where about 90% of the people declare themselves to be Roman Catholic. What might do more to bolster government endeavors are those politically active priests who use their masses to call for support for the government (mobilization by clergy). This is not a uniquely Polish phenomenon; it has been done in Hungary too.

Tímea: Indeed. Lately, the Government has embraced Christianity as a constitutional identity, and it fights against migration, sexual minorities, and non-traditional families in its name. However, just over half the population of Hungary profess to be Christians, the majority of whom are Catholic. Most of them acknowledge that their religious identity is largely a matter of national culture or family tradition; only around one in ten attend the obligatory weekly mass. So it might be safe to assume that, in Hungary, there are likely to be factors other than religion behind political support for rulers. Like PiS supporters in Poland, the typical Fidesz voter is a conservative right-winger who does not live in the big cities or the capital.

**You took a contextual approach when assessing the constitutionalist state of Hungary and Poland. What does the current situation tell us about the EU and its enforcement mechanisms when there seems to be a fundamental disagreement among states about the core values of European integration? Considering the legal opportunities, there do not seem to be many possibilities. What do you think the EU can do with these states?**

Agnieszka: You are absolutely right. Without a doubt, the existing legal environment cannot really address the illiberalization process that brings these states closer and closer to undemocratic and authoritarian regimes. We need to realize that as far as certain values—such as, for instance, the European Rule of Law—are concerned, both Poland and Hungary have distanced themselves from other EU members; they have positioned themselves outside the “group.” The only withdrawal force is the weak constraint that the remnants of European Rule of Law can exert on Hungarian and Polish public power. The question is when the European legal community—the EU, and Hungary and Poland themselves—will realize this and what measures they will take.

Wielders of the political power of Hungary and Poland cannot be disciplined by the usual “in-group” measures because these are the resolution methods of another “reality.” The sooner the European political community and leaders realize this, the better they will be able to promote the universality of the principle of the Rule of Law within the European Union, as a European Rule of Law, and productively advance the European project. Unfortunately, this would be detrimental to Hungarian and Polish citizens, who are more pro-EU than not, and a legal background that would make it possible does not seem to exist.

Tímea: As a more realistically appealing assessment, we could project the formation of a longer-term game between the EU and Hungary and Poland that will last until either illiberal constitutionalism is overturned or Hungary and Poland’s EU membership becomes politically, economically, and emotionally undesirable for the other Member States and the EU. The synergy of the three-factor is, however, unlikely to occur at the same time. Neither the overturning of Kaczynsky’s nor Orbán’s regime seems feasible.

*We could project the formation of a longer-term game between the EU and Hungary and Poland that will last until either illiberal*

*constitutionalism is overturned or Hungary and Poland's EU membership becomes politically, economically, and emotionally undesirable for the other Member States and the EU.*

We actually already summarized this in our other book, *Rule of Law, Common Values, and Illiberal Constitutionalism*, also published by Routledge. In this edited volume, we asked whether the Rule of Law is still a common value in the EU. At the end of the book, we concluded that there are two alternative implications of a situation in which a legal and cultural community is not able to maintain and enforce its legal regime. The first is that the universality of its legal values and principles can justifiably be questioned, even if there is no common understanding of the definition of the Rule of Law. Alternatively, the country whose actions challenge the universality of a principle and value has already ceased to be part of that community. It is an “either/or” issue; there should be no in-between. If there is, we call it illiberal constitutionalism and, in the field of the Rule of Law, illiberal legality.

**How nice it is that we could circle back to the definition of illiberal constitutionalism. I really hope that, as Rosalind Dixon writes in the Foreword, this book will indeed encourage the ongoing debate about both the terminology it uses and the causal explanatory variables to which it points. Debate makes sense if it emerges from methodologically sound research and can rely on some permanence. Yet you focus on only two EU Member States—Poland and Hungary—despite the differences between them.**

Tímea: Indeed, we hope that despite their initial hesitance to use our terms, scholars will engage in dialogue with us so that we can further enrich the debate and our understanding of detrimental constitutional changes. It is what moves us, scholars, forward and could help others to recognize the first steps in the illiberalization process in time to prevent the total dismantling of their constitutionalist state or build in new protection mechanisms. Fortunately for others, unfortunately for us, illiberal constitutionalism is found today only in Hungary and Poland. Its seeds have, however, been noted from time to time in other Member States, including Romania and the Czech Republic.

Agnieszka: Of course, we are aware that there is a difference between Hungary and Poland. Just think about the constitutional system of government, the role of presidents, the characteristics of the opposition, and civil society. Yes, at first glance one might think that these differences in starting point render the comparison unbalanced. When, however, we take a deeper look at the essence of these differences and how they are present in the current regimes, we reach another conclusion. These differences have not in fact had a significant impact either on the emergence of the current political and legal situation or on its apparent stability in either country. That is, these differences do not really matter when it comes to illiberal constitutional remodeling, making Hungary and Poland comparable.

May we welcome and encourage you to read about it more in our book.



## Aliaksei Kazharski on Far-Right Populism in Central and Eastern Europe and Russia

*Originally published March 26, 2021*

**Aliaksei, you have been working for several years on Slovak populist parties. Can you briefly tell us about their similarities to—and differences from—those in the other Central European countries?**

Slovakia is an extremely interesting case that has a tradition of being a regional outlier. Overall, the country has performed very impressively in the three decades since 1989. In the '90s it used to be called the “**black hole of Europe**” because of its democratic backsliding. However, it caught up with regional standards and, in some respects, even surpassed former “star pupils” of transition like Hungary and the Czech Republic.

In 2015 Slovakia participated in the Visegrád Four rebellion against the EU system of refugee quotas. The government and most political parties could not avoid the temptation of tapping into the anti-migrant agenda. This could be explained in part by the parallel rise of the radical right and overall public sentiment. Mainstream parties probably felt that the fringe could easily steal votes from them here, which had the cumulative effect of shifting political discourse to the right.

However, much of the Slovak political establishment has traditionally had pro-EU attitudes. This is due in no small part to the experience of the '90s, when Slovakia was almost left behind because of its democratic backsliding. Soon after the Visegrád Four's anti-migration démarche, Robert Fico's government tried to distance itself somewhat from “illiberal” Hungary and Poland, declaring that the Visegrád Group was not an alternative to the EU and that Slovakia wanted to be at the “**core**” of European integration—whatever that means.

Generally speaking, Slovakia is not free from right-wing populism, some of which looks **quite dangerous**. However, it seems that there is somewhat less space for national identity-driven politics here. Poland and Hungary, for instance, both have powerful traditions of combining messianism with self-victimization, an unsavory cocktail that sometimes tastes very Russian. This allows politicians to tap into nationalist grievance narratives, often centered on memory politics or so-called “beached diasporas”—that is,

ethnic kin separated by new state borders. Slovak history is complicated and sometimes tragic, but one political advantage it probably has is not having such legacies of messianism/self-victimization.

### **How is the anti-Muslim agenda of the Slovak far right constructed?**

In this sense, the country is no outlier at all. All Central European voters *live in the shadow of the so-called imaginary migrant*, the Muslim they have never met but whom they know for sure is very dangerous. At the start of the election cycle, the far right begins feeding the voter images of “no-go zones” in Western cities, spicing them with vague memories of the Ottoman Turk that date back to the 1526 Battle of Mohács or the Siege of Vienna. Then everybody just forgets about it, because, as Hungary’s Two-Tailed Dog Party once put it, the chances of meeting an actual migrant from the Middle East here are comparable to the odds of *meeting a UFO*.

In Slovakia, the very tiny Muslim community (around 5,000) is very well integrated and practically invisible. These are people with college degrees or successful entrepreneurs whose intellectual and social capital is probably much higher than that of the average far-right voter. The integration problems that Muslim communities suffer in post-colonial Western countries are very serious and should not be overlooked, but they simply do not exist here.

There are two parallel realities that practically do not intersect: the life of the tiny Slovak Muslim community and political and media discourse on Islam. In our recent study, we argued that, while actual Muslims are a non-issue in Slovakia, images of Islam become proxies or focal points for a much broader “culture war” between the more diversity-oriented liberals and progressives and those who favor a more culturally protectionist approach. The far right plugs into this. Sometimes it happens in very comical ways, as when they try to securitize consumption habits like the eating of kebab, which is a popular student snack in Slovakia. This is why we named *our study* “*The Slovakebab*.”

*While actual Muslims are a non-issue in Slovakia, images of Islam become proxies or focal points for a much broader “culture war” between the more diversity-oriented liberals and progressives and those who favor a more culturally protectionist approach.*

### **How is the rise of the Slovak far right connected to broader geopolitical questions such as Visegrád regionalism and perceptions of the EU and Russia?**

One important thing to remember about the Visegrád Four is that they do not and cannot have a unified stance on Russia. You could argue that the diversity in the V4 reflects the broader diversity in the EU. By the way, this also pushes the Kremlin to adapt its influence strategies to local cultural and political contexts.

In general, Slovakia is divided. Younger and more educated people tend to be more skeptical toward Putin’s Russia. Unlike in Poland, this does not stem from history and identity, but rather from being better informed about the fact that it is a corrupt and authoritarian regime.

At the same time, many Slovaks *remain vulnerable* to the Kremlin’s hybrid operations due to a cultural legacy of Russophile pan-Slavism, which easily translates into political sympathies toward today’s Russia. As far as *the extreme right in particular* is concerned, the geopolitics is pretty clear. NATO is

a “criminal organization” and the EU is a “prison of the peoples” that is responsible for bringing into white Christian Europe Muslims, gays, multiculturalists, Zionists, Sorosists, Banderites, globalists, and countless other enemies of the nation that in far-right party manifestos tend to be mentioned in the same paragraph.

Fear of the proverbial “Homosharia” marks the discursive strategy of populism, which constructs a radical frontier between the good “people” and the sinister globalist elites who want to destroy it through the hydra of multiple enemies. On the other hand, the traditional adversaries, which have always been the neighboring nations, are conspicuously absent from this discourse. This is a phenomenon that researchers, for better or for worse, have dubbed **ethnopolulism**. At least for the time being, the far right groups in the region can stop seeing each other as the main threat and focus on the migrant Other that unites them.

*Fear of the proverbial “Homosharia” marks the discursive strategy of populism*

In this context, Russia is typically presented as a benign player, a white Christian Slavic power that is supposed to offer some sort of alternative to the corrupt and decadent West. This view has a long tradition in Slovakia. Its nineteenth-century national revivalists, who were at the origins of Slovak national identity-building, looked up to Russia even though they had personally never visited it, only dreamed of it. Something similar is happening to Slovak Russophiles in the twenty-first century. They are dreaming of a country they have very poor knowledge of.

**You have been working on Russia, too, especially on the rise of the notion of civilization in Russian political discourse and on the Eurasian construction. How would you articulate both? Is Eurasian regionalism a securitization of Russian identity?**

I think it is. That is, if by “**securitization**” we mean not being able to part with its previous identity as an empire and trying to preserve some sort of an empire at all costs. The term “Eurasian” has a very long and complex pedigree. As we know, connections between different people who call themselves “**Eurasianist**” are sometimes constructed artificially. **Eurasian regionalism** as announced by Putin in 2011 pretended to be a purely economic project that even claimed to draw inspiration from the experience of the European Communities. However, this turned out to be little more than a façade. The real meaning of the so-called “Eurasian Union” was not economic cooperation or reconciliation between nations, as it was in the case of European integration. It was Russia’s quest for status and recognition. Moscow wanted the West to recognize it as a hegemon in the post-Soviet space, which it saw as its natural and legitimate sphere of influence.

In the meantime, **Russian nationalism** and revisionism were gaining momentum. Note that post-Soviet Russia started out in 1991 with the formation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This was an obvious allusion to the British Commonwealth and the general idea of saying goodbye to your empire. A quarter of a century later, imperial irredentism triumphed, with the “Crimea is ours” slogan warming the hearts of millions of Russians. Russia was unable to part with its old identity as an empire, and this is where the notion of *civilization* came in. The Russians fell back on the very old **narrative** of being a unique civilization to which Western norms and rules did not apply. Human rights would not apply fully here—so, for example, people with a different sexual orientation would not be treated equally. Standards for democracy would not apply, because Russia had its own unique version of “sovereign”

democracy. International norms, particularly those that require respecting the sovereignty of smaller states, would also not apply.

The EU, for example, is built on the principles of democratic multilateralism. It renounces traditional great power politics and *great power management*, as we call it in IR. European institutions are designed to allow even the smallest members to have a say in the decision-making process. For instance, last year Cyprus was blocking EU sanctions on Belarus. The EU's so-called "illiberal axis," Poland and Hungary, can cooperate and block Brussels' sanctions against one or the other. This understanding of "international democracy," which empowers smaller players, is completely alien to Russia, which is convinced that only great powers or "civilizations" can have real sovereignty. Practically, this is a revolt against the liberal democratic international order embodied by the EU and its rules. I think this is where studies of civilizationism as an ideology of national exceptionalism overlap with studies of populism, because populism is also a revolt against the existing political order and its established norms.

*This understanding of "international democracy," which empowers smaller players, is completely alien to Russia, which is convinced that only great powers or "civilizations" can have real sovereignty.*

**The pandemic has changed our collective vision of our bodies' safety and accelerated the biopoliticization of our societies. How do you think this transformative event will impact populist narratives in Central Europe?**

Right now, this is one of the most interesting questions in political science, to which unfortunately I have no ready-made answer! Overall, I would say that, so far, the pandemic has had a very paradoxical, non-linear effect on politics in the broadest sense of the word.

Some very interesting trends have surfaced in terms of how the value of human life was reframed—the so-called *grievability of life*. Sometimes the reactions were quite shocking. In Belarus, for example, some regime representatives adopted a social Darwinist rhetoric, arguing that the virus was simply "nature's way of regulating the human population." At the same time, the pandemic became a moment of truth for Belarus' regime. Apparently, its COVID-19 denial and crisis mismanagement were one of the triggers of the 2020 Belarus protests. Overall, authoritarian and "hybrid" regimes reacted in a variety of ways, ranging from blunt denial of the pandemic to strategic use thereof through what researchers have described as "selective securitization" or "selective voluntarism."

In terms of political discourse, one interesting trend I noticed in Central Europe was the framing of the pandemic as a vindication of earlier anti-globalist theses. Some Polish and Czech Euroskeptics did not spare words in explaining how the virus had finally exposed the weakness and hypocrisy of the liberal-globalist model, the implausibility of the "Europe of open borders," and the dangers of disregarding national identity and "traditional values." This new outrage at liberal globalization was linked to traditional *Others* of which the right had always been suspicious, such as multiculturalism, migration, and secularism. Now it was all the fault of liberal-progressivist hubris, which pushed humanity too far away from the time-tested structures of social life. I call this pandemic-inspired narrative *anti-Promethean*.

*One interesting trend I noticed in Central Europe was the framing of the pandemic as a vindication of earlier anti-globalist theses.*

**Our program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. How do you position yourself on the concept of illiberalism? Do you see it as bringing new conceptual elements into the discussion compared to national-populism, populism, or authoritarianism?**

The term has had a very exciting career: it has migrated from academia into political discourse and back again, but now with a somewhat different meaning.

I first came across the term “illiberal democracy” as a student, while reading Fareed Zakaria’s **famous 2003 book**. This was long before Viktor Orbán gave his seminal Tusnádfürdő speech (2014) and snatched the term from political scientists. I think it is important to understand that, in the original analysis, “illiberal” did not necessarily mean subversion of the democratic process. There have been societies where the ruling elite espoused more liberal views than the broader public, and this *could* result in a hybrid or dictatorial regime.

For Orbán “illiberal democracy” became an ideologeme that he used to legitimize what some researchers call the **“post-Communist mafia state.”** I think there is a key difference we should keep in mind. Espousing “non-liberal” (e.g., socially conservative) views is one thing. Subverting democracy as a framework for competitive politics, where different political ideologies contend with each other, is quite another. This is a quintessential distinction, and I am very happy to see that **experts** have been pointing this out.

*Espousing “non-liberal” (e.g., socially conservative) views is one thing. Subverting democracy as a framework for competitive politics, where different political ideologies contend with each other, is quite another.*

I did a comprehensive study of Orbán’s speeches at some point and came to the conclusion that he had managed to formulate a populist ideology. I use the term *populist* because this ideology is built by drawing a radical frontier between the “people” (or the nation) and its multiple “enemies.” This is the same discursive strategy that I described above in relation to the Slovak far right. Orbán’s political rhetoric uses the label of “liberalism” to discursively construct a generalized negative Other. As students of Hungary have **pointed out**, the label is used to lump together very different and potentially conflicting ideologies, such as social liberalism and economic neoliberalism. This may look paradoxical when viewed from an American campus, where neoliberals and social progressivists are likely to be natural enemies. However, Orbán’s rhetoric lumps them together and this works somehow.

On the other hand, as we argued **in our recent comparative study**, much of this looks very similar to the ideology of Putin’s Russia. National self-victimization, a revolt against the Western “liberals,” and a yearning for “genuine” sovereignty are clearly ideologemes that Moscow and Budapest share. So perhaps it is not fair to give Orbán all the credit for this ideological entrepreneurship. Many of the things that Central European “illiberals” are trying to say have already been said by their Russian friends.

*National self-victimization, a revolt against the Western “liberals,” and a yearning for “genuine” sovereignty are clearly ideologemes that Moscow and Budapest share.*

## Zsolt Körtvélyesi on Illiberalism in Hungary

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**Zsolt, you recently co-authored a significant article, “[The ‘Insecurity Toolbox’ of the Illiberal Regime: Rule by Law and Rule by Exclusion](#),” that explains the three key securitization mechanisms used by illiberal regimes. This insecurity toolbox has been used by Hungary, particularly on the question of refugees and/or asylum-seekers, since the migration crisis of 2015. Can you give us your perspective as a legal scholar on how the Orbán government built its response to European demands?**

The norms of the European Union—with regard to asylum, but also more broadly—were not built with bad-faith actors in mind. For example, many governments apply asylum quotas; the EU–Turkey deal has been criticized for similar restrictions. What the Hungarian government did, however, was to reduce the quota to one person per day. If you add to this the fact that food was often denied to those in the transit zones, it is easy to see that the Hungarian practice was closer to non-compliance (or fake compliance) than compliance with international refugee obligations. The government narrative, however, was able to sell the policy as formally in line with EU requirements. When the highest court of the European Union ultimately ruled that the practice violated EU law, the government responded by completely closing the transit zones, effectively bringing the number of asylees down to zero. We may have to wait for years to get a ruling that declares the new practice to be a blatant violation of refugee law.

It has proved to be a fatal flaw of the EU framework that it lacks adequate institutional and procedural safeguards against willful violations by EU Member States. Staying with the asylum law example, under the Dublin regulation, the country of first entry is responsible for processing asylum applications even if asylum-seekers move to other countries in the meantime. However, if this country fails to maintain a compliant asylum regime, the transfer cannot take place. This is a logical rule that seeks to ensure compliance with refugee law requirements. Yet without further elements that are currently missing, this creates perverse incentives. Non-compliant Member States like Hungary see a decrease in asylum cases because other Member States cease to send asylum cases and asylum-seekers back to these countries. For a government that has adopted the rhetoric of a “zero-immigration” policy, this is a clear win.

What the EU needs, and many have recognized as much, is to build checks and procedures attached to what the Treaties call the principle of sincere cooperation, and not only in the field of asylum law. To describe the current situation in a simplified form that is nevertheless not far from the truth, the



responses of the European Union are enough to put it in the role of the Enemy to be fought to defend national interests, while these responses fall short of meaningful checks on authoritarian backsliding.

**Can we say that in Orbán's Hungary, the political nation has been replaced with the ethnocultural nation? What does that mean in relation to defining minorities? Have you observed an evolution in discussions of who is part of the nation and who is external to it?**

As is often the case with nationalist statements, there is some ambiguity in the terminology, but one thing is clear: there has been a **clear shift** towards more ethnicized understandings of the nation. As I argued back in 2012, the ethnic concept **supplanted** the political one, as embodied in the Fundamental Law that the Orbán regime adopted shortly after coming to power. The new vision of the nation rests on the vision of a heteronormative, white, **homogenous** citizenry that follows a Christian culture (if not necessarily the religion) and supports the true embodiment of the nation, in the form of Orbán and affiliated forces.

As most ethnic-national minorities in Hungary are assimilated, the ethnicizing rhetoric is mainly aimed at the Roma community. Most recently, the government **acted to undermine** the payment of damages in a school segregation case, with a parallel narrative of similarly undeserving prisoners who got compensation for jail conditions in violation of European standards. The attacks also targeted the lawyers and NGOs who defended these clients and the norms and international obligations that made these suits possible. The attacks on the enemies of the nation included critical parts of civil society (with a Russian-style foreign agent law) and **academia**.

*The new vision of the nation rests on the vision of a heteronormative, white, **homogenous** citizenry that follows a Christian culture (if not necessarily the religion) and supports the true embodiment of the nation, in the form of Orbán and affiliated forces.*

This means that various groups of citizens have found themselves outside this concept of the nation, starting with the left: Orbán declared after the 2002 electoral loss that the homeland cannot be in opposition, and there has been a campaign against all forces labelled liberal and “mercenaries of George Soros,” who are considered part of an international conspiracy to undermine this imaginary homogeneous nation. Also under attack is the European Union, called “Brussels” in official rhetoric and **likened** to Soviet-era “Moscow,” which sent its “diktats” to Hungary. The strategy of designating the enemy of the day serves to maintain support for the government among its loyal base; this, together with constant tinkering with election rules, has so far been enough to secure the necessary votes. When support started to shrink in 2015, the refugee crisis came to the rescue, and the new enemy—in the form of the threatening image of migrants—has since dominated official discourse in a country that is anything but a target for immigration. Hundreds of thousands of Hungarians have emigrated, mostly for economic reasons, while asylum-seekers in Hungary have been trying to relocate to countries like Germany and Sweden.

The reimagined nation also includes new citizens: ethnic Hungarians in neighboring countries. Many of these co-ethnics do not naturalize and many of those who naturalize do not vote. This self-selection, combined with their sense of gratitude to Orbán personally, means that virtually all of those who vote give their votes to Orbán. Even if one were to think (unlike most people in Hungary, including many

in the targeted communities) that these votes are legitimate, this selectivity makes the expansion of the nation yet another tool for undermining a democratic change of government. Compounding the problem, the new rules allow these citizens to vote by mail, an option denied to emigrés who live in European countries and elsewhere in great numbers and who are assumed to be more critical of the regime.

**Hungary finds itself under threat of more EU sanctions for not respecting Art. 2 of the Treaty of the EU. How should the EU react to what you call the anti-constitutional challenge? Should all deviations from Art. 2 values automatically trigger responses from EU institutions? Do you consider Hungary and Central Europe more globally to have certain post-colonial sensitivities that the EU needs to take into consideration?**

I take great interest in thinking about where to draw the line: where recognition for pluralism in the form of Member State deviation should give way to enforcing a universal vision of Article 2 values. It is clear, however, that the current illiberal challenge coming from Hungary does not raise these questions. The violations are so basic and so obviously at odds with the very functioning of the EU that they hardly present an intellectual dilemma. In many other cases where the Hungarian government raises the issue of illegitimate imposition, like some areas of asylum law, it goes against not the Treaties or some legalistic values, but political decisions by elected representatives, including other Member State governments with democratic legitimacy. This raises the fundamental question of membership, akin to Brexit: there is one obvious solution when a government regularly finds itself at odds with the majority in the EU (since it lacks veto rights under the supranational setup). Luckily, for the time being, despite government campaigns, there is still strong commitment to EU membership in Hungary. One can only wonder to what extent this is the shallow commitment of the 1990s and could dissipate with a considerable decline in EU money transfers.

As for European responses to illiberalism, ceasing to fund the regime without meaningful oversight would be a good start. This would simply mean making good on the promises of the Treaties. The procedure should be clear, transparent, and impartial. While responses to anti-constitutionalist tendencies are naturally motivated by Hungarian and Polish developments, the EU should pay particular attention to making the principles and related procedures fair—and also to making them look fair. When constraints on minority protection in the interwar period were applied to countries like Poland but not to countries like France, that undermined the legitimacy of the entire setup, and we all know how that ended.

*As for European responses to illiberalism, ceasing to fund the regime without meaningful oversight would be a good start. This would simply mean making good on the promises of the Treaties.*

To be principled in action is also good strategically. Illiberal governments are quick to label any criticism as ideologically driven or even as a form of post-colonial imperialism. This plays on a resentment fueled by disillusionment with the process and promise of “catching up to the West.” The latter had been securing domestic support for liberal democratic reforms instead of a principled democratic consensus. Once the appeal of Europeanization collapsed, this problem resurfaced. It is only logical that this includes renewed support for the rejection of the West, going back to at least Oswald Spengler, and a sense of Western colonization in forms ranging from imposed norms to favors to multinational corporations. The government’s political slogan that “we won’t be a colony” could resonate with many supporters of the Orbán regime.

The past decade was not favorable to critical thinking and the idea that democratic guarantees are not simply bureaucratic nuisances. The process teaches what we knew from the start: that a critical mass of democratically minded citizens are needed for a functioning democracy (as prominently **stated** by Hungarian thinker István Bibó) and constitutional, institutional transplants are not genuine alternatives. In designing responses, we should aim to support domestic democratic processes, acknowledging the role of education broadly understood, including the role of the media, instead of shortcuts by easy and easy-to-revert changes. Domestic institutional factors can also be important, including remedying the disproportionate electoral system and the lack of meaningful checks on the resulting two-third majority in the Hungarian case. Here, domestic political opposition will play a key role. At the same time, parallel developments show that this is a global phenomenon and that any action, including by the EU or the current U.S. administration, should keep in mind the danger of the dissemination of illiberal practices.

*In designing responses, we should aim to support domestic democratic processes, acknowledging the role of education broadly understood, including the role of the media, instead of shortcuts by easy and easy-to-revert changes.*

**On a more political note, how do you think liberalism should engage with illiberalism? What room should be given to those who do not share liberal commitments to pluralism?**

This points to a liberal dilemma, the limits of toleration, that has been with us for centuries and one that Jacob T. Levy **argues** cannot be solved: we either err on the side of universal values or on the side of pluralism. I take **a more optimistic approach** and explore, building on Will Kymlicka's liberal multiculturalist theory, when liberal interference can be justified.

In the case of an entity like the EU, it is possible to make a relatively straightforward functionalist justification: the system rests on mutual recognition that assumes a functioning democracy with human rights and the rule of law. An authoritarian turn can, and in fact does, undermine the independence of domestic courts that play a preeminent role in enforcing EU law. Such a turn also undermines the democratic credentials of those representatives who make the most important decisions in the EU, including the Council and the Parliament. Let me mention here one other practical criticism: the EU has been effectively financing authoritarian regime-building with sums **comparable to the Marshall Plan**. On this reading, constitutional democratic conditions attached to EU funds are not only a possible addition but a necessity to make up for the disadvantages that domestic challengers of the regime suffer as a result.

I agree with accounts that see the key as being to address the root causes of antiliberal dissatisfaction, including rising inequality and a sense of powerlessness due to a complex set of factors. Here, a lot depends on national contexts. In Central and Eastern Europe, the great danger is that “Europeanization,” which includes democratic guarantees, human rights, and the rule of law, is seen by a growing share of the population as something external and imposed by foreign (or “foreign-minded”) liberal elites. In Hungary, other elements—like the impoverished **media landscape** and the increasingly domesticated academic sphere—make it hard to counterbalance the constant blame game. Democratic commitment could play an important role, boosting not only civic political activism (which has been low since well before 2010), but also commitment to basic constitutionalist values.

*I agree with accounts that see the key as being to address the root causes of antiliberal dissatisfaction, including rising inequality and a sense of powerlessness due to a complex set of factors.*

Let me offer a short fable from the Hungarian context to show that there is hope. The strongest post-2010 challenger to the regime was not the left but Jobbik, another right-wing party. They played not only on nationalist sentiments, but also on anti-Semitic views, and in fact became the strongest opposition party by pursuing a racist agenda centered on “gypsy criminality.” The party started out as a loyal opposition but soon realized that the government’s adoption of the Jobbik program would pose an existential threat to them, combined with government attacks in the form of smear campaigns and politically motivated investigations and sanctions.

The party has since switched places with Fidesz and moved toward the center, apologizing for its extreme views and starting to talk about the importance of constitutional checks on power, at odds with its earlier anti-institutionalist positions. While one may doubt the sincerity of these changes and to what extent this trickles down to voters, their very rejection of anti-democratic views and practices may be a great service to Hungarian democracy in the longer run. The fate of Jobbik may make the practical importance of democracy, political freedoms, and the rule of law tangible to right-wing voters. I think this is the ultimate idea of constitutionalism: do not unto others while in power what you would not want to be done to you when in opposition. The great advantage of older democracies is that there are relatable stories with exactly this moral.

**And last but not least, a terminological question, as our program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. Could you define your use of illiberalism? Do you see the new concept as bringing something new to our understanding or do you use it as a kind of synonym for national or right-wing populism?**

My research focuses on the transformation of public law in Hungary and European responses. In this context, illiberalism means a fundamental opposition to the idea of liberal or constitutional democracy, with human rights guarantees and the rule of law. I like to call it anti-constitutionalism for the same reason. **Abusive constitutionalism** sounds like a good candidate, especially because government rhetoric and action often feel like they came from an abusive head of the family, but what this really amounts to is going against the idea of constitutionalism, so it can simply be labelled anti-constitutionalist.

*Illiberalism means a fundamental opposition to the idea of liberal or constitutional democracy, with human rights guarantees and the rule of law. I like to call it anti-constitutionalism for the same reason.*

Illiberalism—which is, we should note, the self-description of the regime—captures this idea more broadly: the view that any constraints on the elected government are illegitimate. We are well aware, however, that this approach goes from undermining the rule of law to dismantling democratic guarantees. That is why I find alternative notions like populism or illiberal democracy misleading: they often fail to capture the authoritarian tendency that is essential to understanding the functioning of a regime like the Hungarian one. Here, democratic credentials are undermined by rules that tilt the playing field. Opposition referendum initiatives are thwarted, at times by physical force, while an **unconstitutional** government initiative (even according to their own standards) is let through by a

Constitutional Court that is one only in name. This makes it misleading to talk about a regime defined by democratic and popular or populist elements, especially when contrasted to liberal democracies.

Populism, to my mind, has nothing to do with the inherent power grab that logically undermines democracy. On the contrary, it should invoke ideas to reinvigorate democracies and renew efforts to make good on democratic promises: that power serves the people and people can participate in the shaping of politics. As a public lawyer, I see a sustained role for constitutionalism in that endeavor.

## **Paweł Surowiec on Media, Public Diplomacy, and Illiberalism**

*Originally published April 28, 2021*

**Paweł, the literature on democratic backsliding tends to underplay the role of media as structurally altering political dynamics. You have been researching the articulation between media and the rise of illiberal politics in Central Europe. Can you share with us your main findings in the cases of Poland and Hungary? How should we revisit the role that media politicization and commercialization play in our democracies?**

Yes, you are absolutely right to say that media as a structural puzzle of democracies has been underplayed in academic debates that seek to explain the underpinnings of the illiberal turn in politics internationally and in Central and Eastern Europe as a region. This pattern is, however, changing; analyses of the role of media and communicative practices—e.g., political public relations, political campaigning, and various forms of media activism—that rely on hybrid media landscapes are shedding increasing light on the mediated features of illiberal turn in politics.

There is still more academic research and professional work to be done to better understand the ways in which media landscapes shape and are shaped by illiberal trends in politics, as research on various media systems is at different stages of advancement. This is, for example, visible in scholarship on Poland, which has an entire tradition of normative scholarship pointing to the links between media and democratization but almost nothing on deviations from this direction, or anti-democratic anomalies. As such, it appears that we have been sleep-walking into illiberal trends emerging in relation to—or with the involvement of—media landscapes.

First, we already know that those committed defenders of traditional media who advocate that citizens should (uncritically?) put their trust in “reputable” news sources reporting on political and other stories hardly take into consideration audiences’ existing and deepening mistrust in the news. Illiberal politics thrives on the weakness of democracy, including ongoing issues within media systems. For example, over the last two decades, news media have been facing a crisis of confidence in Central Europe, the sources of which are not exclusively political, but also commercial and involve professional pressures on journalists. There is a documented perception among audiences that news media are often involved in



spreading misinformation. This perception has been readily exploited by actors driving illiberal politics and launching public attacks against traditional news organizations and particular journalists.

*Illiberal politics thrives on the weakness of democracy, including ongoing issues within media systems.*

Second, in Central Europe there are local and systemic manifestations of changes to media landscapes driven by illiberal politics. The “Hungarian case” can be predominantly explained through *client-patron* dynamics, while the “Polish case” can be made sense of through the retro-utopian notion of *statism*. For the latter, the subjection of the media system to greater state control is historically grounded in a paranoid fear of losing statehood and cultural elements which perpetuate the Polish nation. The [research](#) with which I was involved shows those trends in [Hungary](#), finding that advertising revenues are channeled to companies close to the Fidesz government, thereby distorting market mechanisms. In [Poland](#), statism was exhibited in abrupt systemic changes to the public media policy in 2018 that brought public service media closer to state structures.

Third, there is more research to be done to find patterns of differences and similarities in the interplay between illiberal politics and media landscapes. This is particularly important because the changes to media landscapes driven by illiberal politics are not only politically and financially beneficial, but also aim to redefine citizenship, identities, and public memories, making them a central piece of the illiberal socialization of the individual citizens subjected to the direct or indirect effects of these systemic changes.

*Changes to media landscapes driven by illiberal politics are not only politically and financially beneficial, but also aim to redefine citizenship, identities, and public memories.*

**You have also been working on the transformations of another field: public diplomacy. Here, too, media and especially social media have deeply transformed the way classic public diplomacy functions—as epitomized by the Trump presidency. Can you expand on the notion of uncertainty that you advance as key to understanding the current evolutions of public diplomacy?**

In theory, the practice of public diplomacy is supposed to aid societal dialogue between different state and non-state actors of international relations, and can be metaphorically thought of as a barometer of international politics. Currently, as illustrated in “[Public Diplomacy and the Politics of Uncertainty](#),” the barometer appears to be demonstrating heightened tensions and pressures in intra-state societal relations. This is driven by what I term “the politics of uncertainty.” Although uncertainty is inherent in international relations, it is the simultaneity of political shifts amplified by digital media that brings transnational illiberal trends to the forefront of the politics of uncertainty. In the conduct of foreign policy, uncertainty affects decision-making and resonates with policymakers, businesses, consumers, and citizens, all of whom are stakeholders of public diplomacy. Driven by the simultaneity of overlapping political trends, the latest wave of uncertainty is exemplified by political events such as the annexation of Crimea, Brexit, and the COVID-19 global pandemic.

*Although uncertainty is inherent in international relations, it is the simultaneity of political shifts amplified by digital media that*

*brings transnational illiberal trends to the forefront of the politics of uncertainty.*

In addition, public diplomacy is shaped by the paradoxical promise of certainty: it claims that the instrumental power of digital media technology giants is “the certain solution to uncertain societal conditions.” Indeed, hierarchical state power is “disrupted” by the logic of digital networks and big data. In their interactions with diplomacy and statecraft, digital media reconfigure “soft power” as collaborative but increasingly formless, unstable, and disruptive. Herein lies the paradox: as the promise of certainty and opportunities for global diplomatic conversations became the mantra of the study of public diplomacy, fragmented news stories—exposure to which is altered by algorithms—began to fracture users’ media diets and political realities.

Therefore, in my work, I underscore how the hyperrealities of events that have been unfolding along multiple communicative trajectories, including grassroots campaigning on foreign policy issues, are mediated by public diplomacy and reported by news media. Mirrored by hybrid media landscapes, these hyperrealities amplify uncertainty, creating waves that increase international social anxieties. The evidence for the disruptive impact of digital media and/or social media on the practice of public diplomacy has been emerging gradually: segments of the U.S. population were targeted by external campaigns that sowed societal discord; the United States’ global leadership has been severely undermined by Donald Trump’s simulation of public diplomacy; and populist political actors destabilize diplomatic relations, disrupting diplomatic agreements or entire foreign policy regimes and launching disinformation campaigns overseas.

**We tend to systematically mention Russia when discussing hybrid media campaigns. But this is part of a broader trend of illiberal regimes influencing international diplomatic culture. Can you tell us more about that aspect of your ongoing research?**

Hybridity is not a notion that is inherent to illiberal politics—it is a myth. The clash of illiberal politics with the diplomatic cultures, values, and media strategies exhibited in interactions with democracies makes these illiberal trends more visible and potent, and makes it easier to tease out hybrid political forms. But we could speak of “hybridity” in public diplomacy before—for example, mergers of diplomatic culture underpinning “high culture” in international politics and the adoption of popular culture into the practice of diplomacy and statecraft, particularly public diplomacy. This resulted in a unique institutional and diplomatic practice: channeling and leveraging “low culture” in international relations.

The focus on Russia in the context of debates about hybrid warfare is a separate phenomenon that stems, I would argue, from certain scholars’ uneasiness about categorizing Russia as striving to exercise soft power, as well as from the fact that its model of public diplomacy does not mesh with Anglo-American normative expectations. Russia has, however, recently received increased attention from scholars of political communication, with some research emphasizing the “hybrid” interplays between traditional soft power statecraft, military capabilities, and cyber-interference, or simply mixing traditional soft power statecraft with information warfare.

But my **research** and own attempt to theorize soft power statecraft recognizes that in the field of diplomacy, democratic states, too, exhibit hybridization in relation to the governance of soft power sources and resources (e.g., through the interplay of external corporate practices with innated diplomatic routines); in relation to the media landscapes in which soft power statecraft operates—that is, landscapes in

which “older” (broadcast) and “newer” (digital) media interact and determine the dynamics of the cycle of diplomatic news; and in relation to the hybridization of communicative practices and culture, i.e., ways in which popular culture, mediated by unique trans-spaces, enters diplomatic routines, becoming an informal but highly visible space for the discussion of diplomatic affairs, attracting foreign news attention, and yet exhibiting a style far from the official repertoire and institutional norms of the practice of public diplomacy (as with Donald Trump’s Twitter account).

Indeed, Trump’s populist style on Twitter was the focus of one my studies, which **revealed** that the way Trump used Twitter led to the implosion of public diplomacy as U.S. soft power statecraft was undermined by his carnivalesque and keyfabian style (that is inspired by the culture of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) franchise), which primarily targeted his voting base at home. In that sense, public diplomacy became a populist mirror, providing feedback about how tough Trump was on matters of foreign policy. Yet the delivery of his public diplomacy required an ongoing effort on the part of recipient publics to make sense of his messaging, as he kept breaking the norms of public diplomacy.

*The way Trump used Twitter led to the implosion of public diplomacy.*

**Memory studies have been adding a lot to our understanding of Central and Eastern European politics. How would you assess Poland’s recent “Holocaust Law” and the PiS’ positioning on the international memory scene? Is the securitization of the past a new tool that illiberal regimes can use to promote themselves to foreign audiences?**

The policymakers of the governing PiS (Law and Justice) party have attempted to turn Poland into the second state in the region, behind Russia, to introduce law underpinned by criminal provisions with a view to serve the politics of memory. Poland’s public diplomacy had previously attempted to make a mark on European collective memory by employing the international advocacy approach to challenge the distortion of memory of the Holocaust, which is considered by public diplomats, citizens, and the Polish diaspora to be culturally sensitive. The focus was the issue of so-called Holocaust misinformation, specifically the misnomer **“Polish death camp”** and similar phrases that often appear in foreign news media. This issue has since been hijacked by a non-public diplomacy actor, namely policymakers at the Ministry of Justice.

PiS policymakers introduced the so-called **“Holocaust Law”** as an amendment to the 2018 Act on the Institute of National Remembrance. Following an international outcry from Israel, the US, and other states, they altered the law to remove the provision about criminal prosecution of any entity that attributes responsibility for the Holocaust to the “Polish state” and/or the “Polish nation.” The proposed PiS-sponsored politics of memory rested on the interplay of the legal notion of a “defamation of history” with the narrative arc of the “Polocaust” as a signifier of Poland’s distinct suffering.

*PiS-sponsored politics of memory rested on the interplay of the legal notion of a “defamation of history” with the narrative arc of the “Polocaust” as a signifier of Poland’s distinct suffering.*

While the law was changed in June of that year, the international dispute over the amendment represents an astute case of how illiberal practices—that is, a set of governance solutions and networked action within the structures of the state—aim to shift the dynamics of diplomacy and statecraft toward

monophonic narrativization of the politics of memory. The law is likely to have major consequences, although that remains to be seen.

**Our program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. How do you position yourself on the concept of illiberalism? Do you see it as bringing new conceptual elements into the discussion compared to populism? Do you see the “liberalism-centrism” of the notion as a strength or a weakness?**

Yes, I think that “illiberalism” as a term is useful if it is used responsibly and in a way that advances political theory and societal understanding of what the latest trends in politics actually entail in empirical terms. I am most certainly against using it in a totalizing way—“illiberal democracy” is an excellent example of such usage, as it labels entire polities in a particular manner. In such a context, the term is more likely to end up as pseudo-intellectual academic propaganda rather than a concept that has nuanced explanatory value. I subscribe to the use of the terms “illiberal trends,” “transnational illiberal trends,” and “illiberal practices,” as these can be identified, captured in a context-dependent manner, and measured empirically; they are actually useful for making sense of the underlying processes.

The liberalism-centrism of illiberalism is due to the time of its emergence and its negation of a world order built on liberal values. It is particularly useful in a context in which liberalism is a starting point for political analysis. I am not sure how helpful it would be in other contexts—for example, foreign policy analysis of North Korea. I do hope, however, that the intensification of the debate about the effects of illiberalism on more recently democratized states will become a source of reflection about political regimes and societies such as Poland, in which liberalism has always been a minority project.

*The liberalism-centrism of illiberalism is due to the time of its emergence and its negation of a world order built on liberal values. It is particularly useful in a context in which liberalism is a starting point for political analysis.*

As far as states with a strong liberal tradition that have recently succumbed to illiberal trends are concerned, I hope it will become a source of reflection about the underpinnings of historically unresolved systemic issues—for example, the colonial past of the United Kingdom as a source of delusions of grandeur on the British right and of unchecked privilege and entitlement among the British left.

## Jose Javier Olivas Osuna on the Populist Radical-Right in Spain

*Originally published May 10, 2021*

**Jose Javier, you have been *working* on Spain and Portugal and on their *military culture*. I would like to begin our discussion with a broad question on that legacy. Do you see any relationship between Spain's and Portugal's authoritarian regimes and their collapse in the 1970s, on the one hand, and the way in which the far right is re-emerging (or not) in the two countries today, on the other hand?**

This is a very relevant question with a not-so-simple answer. Franco and Salazar were right-wing authoritarian leaders, and it is no secret that far-right sympathizers in both countries have idealized these regimes. Moreover, foreign media have historically been fascinated with the authoritarian past of these two countries and to this day often associate Franco or Salazar with current political or social processes, as though the legacies of these dictators still shaped Iberian politics. In addition, Spanish and Portuguese left-wing parties accuse Vox and *Chega* of being the heirs of Francoism and Salazarism, respectively. Empirically speaking, however, it is very difficult to prove a direct connection between these new far-right parties and the authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century. Similar populist radical-right parties have emerged in other European countries that did not experience dictatorships, such as the Nordic countries, France, and the Netherlands, or in countries with a socialist past, such as Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

In fact, Portugal and Spain were until recently considered exceptions to the rise of the far right, and several studies tried to understand how countries hit so hard by the Great Recession had managed to escape this phenomenon. Although Vox and *Chega* use nationalist and nativist discourses, oppose decentralization, and hold very conservative views about society, they are still far from the single parties that ruled Spain and Portugal from the 1930s to the mid-1970s. The exclusivist logic and some of the controversial policy proposals they champion are to a great extent incompatible with a liberal conception of democracy. Yet these parties do not oppose free elections or a multi-party system, nor do they seek to impose a militaristic organization of society. Vox and *Chega* are not fascist parties inspired by past dictators but radical-right ones mostly influenced by the latest wave of right-wing populism in Europe and the US.

*Although Vox and Chega use nationalist and nativist discourses, oppose decentralization, and hold very conservative views about society, they are still far from the single parties that ruled Spain and Portugal from the 1930s to the mid-1970s.*

**Let's move to the fascinating case of Vox in Spain. What is the winning combination of narratives and context that explains such rapid electoral success? Who are the grassroots actors that paved the way for this success? Is the current pandemic situation consolidating Vox's presence on the Spanish political landscape?**

Vox was founded in 2013, but it was not until December 2018 that it achieved its first major electoral success, which came in the Andalusian regional elections. Although anti-immigration discourses play an important role in Vox's strategy, most of the party's growth must be attributed to the discontent and fears triggered by the secessionist conflict in Catalonia, especially after the illegal 2017 referendum. Vox's leaders continuously offer a fierce defense of the unity of Spain against separatist movements and propose the suppression of all regional parliaments and governments. Much of their support has come from citizens who feel that the conservative People's Party is not doing enough to safeguard the unity of Spain.

*Although anti-immigration discourses play an important role in Vox's strategy, most of the party's growth must be attributed to the discontent and fears triggered by the secessionist conflict in Catalonia, especially after the illegal 2017 referendum.*

Moreover, like other populist radical-right parties, Vox promotes a traditionalist Christian conception of Spain, opposing multiculturalism and feminism. It follows a significant proportion of the populist playbook. The party claims the high moral ground and demonizes its political adversaries, whom it accuses of being criminals, terrorists, or traitors to Spain. Vox has tried to **utilize the COVID-19 pandemic** to the party's political advantage. Its leaders have adopted a coarse style and spectacularized the health crisis, turning it into a political crisis as well. This is a common strategy among populist parties, which seek to fuel negative sentiments—such as fear, indignation, and hatred—toward the government and its allies. Vox has blamed the government in hyperbolic fashion, even accusing it of “euthanizing” thousands of Spaniards.

The party's exaggerated interpretation of the crisis can be considered a means of legitimizing its radical and illiberal agenda, as well as an opportunity to bring back into the public debate such issues as border control, immigration, and coordination failures at the regional and European levels. Although it is still not clear whether the pandemic has provided Vox with a significant boost, the results of the recent regional elections in Catalonia and Madrid seem to confirm that Vox is here to stay.

**You have also studied the **Indignados movement** in Spain and Greece. How do you parallel the revival of a leftist populism with a right-wing one? Do they share common constituencies or traditions of social actions, or should we see their existence as a sign that the liberal centrist consensus is weakening?**

While the emergence of left-leaning movements such as Syriza and Podemos can be linked to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, many right-wing populist parties took advantage of the 2015 refugee crisis in



Europe and growing anti-migration sentiment. Despite the obvious ideological differences between left- and right-wing populists, we can also observe many common traits in the way they articulate their discourses. For instance, they all adopt an antagonistic approach to politics based on a moral distinction between different players. They pit “the people” or “the nation” against the “other,” whom they consider to pose a threat to society. This “other” may be the “corrupt elites,” including international and supranational organizations, but this is not exclusively the case.

Radical-right populism is often also antagonistic toward immigrants, minorities, and liberals, who are considered to be betraying the people. For its part, left-wing populism often demonizes conservative parties, which are associated with fascism. Moreover, both types of populists continuously claim that popular or national sovereignty has been lost and that the people should take back control. They romanticize society, minimizing the differences between those who belong to their ideal people while artificially emphasizing the former’s differences from the “other” whom they want to exclude.

There is no strong evidence to suggest that left- and right-wing populism share a common constituency. In my research, I did not find a clear socio-demographic profile of the populist voter. One of the characteristics of populism is its capacity to adapt to different contexts. Theirs is considered a “thin ideology,” which implies that their discourses can be adapted depending on the context. They try to opportunistically capitalize on different sources of discontent and therefore appeal to slightly different constituencies. Thus, we may find that in some cases support for populist parties is correlated with a higher level of income or education, while in others the reverse is true.

In general, populism emerges as a reaction against an economic crisis or a crisis of representation. Both left- and right-wing populisms usually try to redefine “the people” by adopting a counter-hegemonic discourse and challenging the status quo at institutional and ideational level. It is therefore not surprising that many analysts depict populism as a consequence or symptom of the weakening of the liberal capitalist consensus. In my view, however, the relationship is more complex: populism is not only a consequence, but also a cause of the process of erosion of consensus and trust.

*Populism is not only a consequence, but also a cause of the process of erosion of consensus and trust.*

**You did impressive research on the *Brexit narratives* at local level in several British regions. Could you tell us more about the importance of this local perspective in capturing the political and social *Zeitgeist* and how this approach should be replicated in other countries?**

Thank you, we are very pleased with this research project, as the results seem to fill quite well some of the gaps in the literature that tries to explain the *success of Brexit*, as well as the asymmetric strength of protest parties elsewhere. Moreover, our reports and academic papers have been very positively received by practitioners and colleagues alike. Our approach was innovative not only because we focused *our analysis* on five local level comparative cases, but also because we engaged with local stakeholders, adopting an iterative participative approach. We contacted many of our interviewees on multiple occasions and discussed the preliminary results with them in order to validate our findings. Based on the feedback received, these stakeholders—local politicians, business owners, civil society activists, journalists, etc.—felt empowered by the reflective nature of our research approach.

One of our main contributions is showing that macro-level variables such as income, age, gender, professional status, or education fail to accurately predict whether someone will vote for anti-status quo options. Geography matters. Citizens with similar socio-demographic profiles adopted very different attitudes toward Brexit depending on the local context in which they lived. We show that top-down discourses spread by the Leave campaign and tabloids succeeded particularly well in some areas that were suffering relative economic decline and a widespread sense of collective disempowerment. For instance, in areas far from the major economic and political hubs that were experiencing “brain drain,” the idea of being “left behind” became very prominent.

*Geography matters. Citizens with similar socio-demographic profiles adopted very different attitudes toward Brexit depending on the local context in which they lived.*

Local grievances were articulated and reinforced by discourses that selectively overemphasized and underplayed problems and policy solutions and directed blame toward global elites and the EU. These narratives—which played on feelings like mistrust, anger, and nostalgia—became very dominant in many local areas and, through a process of informational coercion, ended up shaping the preferences of many, including those who in theory, according to their socio-demographic profiles, would have been expected to vote differently.

Our research resonates with an emerging trend of research that focuses on the “geography of discontent” and characterizes the emergence of populism and protest voting as a sort of reaction or “revenge of the places that don’t matter,” as my colleague Professor Andres Rodríguez Pose [suggests](#). I strongly believe that the geographic dimension cannot be ignored when studying these political phenomena and would invite other comparative scholars to combine their macro-level data with a more micro-level approach to data collection. I would also encourage them to pay attention not only to the material plane, but also to the ideational and discursive planes, which in the case of Brexit help explain the surprisingly asymmetric results of the referendum and the later partial political realignment in some areas, such as historically Labour bastions turning Conservative.

*The emergence of populism and protest voting as a sort of reaction or “revenge of the places that don’t matter,”*

**That brings me to a more conceptual question to conclude. You have been proposing a new multidimensional approach to understanding and comparing populism. What are your main arguments in favor of that multidimensionality? What have we missed so far in our study of populism? And do you see the term “illiberal” that we use in our Program as an interesting venue for research compared to populism?**

Indeed, I have developed a new multidimensional framework, which I present and justify theoretically in my recent article [“From Chasing Populists to Deconstructing Populism.”](#) This framework dissects populism into five dimensions: antagonism, morality, idealization of society, popular sovereignty, and reliance on personalistic leadership. There are several reasons for this choice. Today, most comparative studies of populism, inspired by the work of Giovanni Sartori, adopt a minimal definition and a classical categorization approach—that is, they focus on a small set of attributes that they consider necessary to classify a party as populist.

However, I find this approach quite limiting. First of all, there are still many disagreements concerning not only the definition and specific attributes of populism, but also its *genus*: whether populism is a thin ideology, a strategy, a discourse, or a performative style. Existing minimal definitions of populism seem to be better fitted for some contexts than for others. For example, as Carlos de la Torre and Oscar Mazzoleni [suggest](#), Cas Mudde's definition captures very well European radical-right populism, but not so much Latin American populisms. If these minimal definitions guide our data collection processes, we may actually miss some other attributes that are normally associated with populism and that may help us to better understand this latent construct.

Minimal definitions are used largely because they facilitate the task of classifying parties as “populist” or “non-populist” by setting somewhat clear thresholds for who is and who is not populist. However, empirical evidence shows that populism is better approached as a matter of degree, rather than as a matter of nature. The discourses and strategies of political leaders change over time, for instance when they gain power. Thus, if we base our research efforts on a binary classification, we may end up considering some parties or leaders to be intermittently populist and may fail to understand the rise of populism in countries where populist attitudes are generally displayed by parties that do not completely fit the conditions established by minimal definitions. This is the case of the UK, where the Conservative Party—which, according to most definitions, should not be considered populist—has since the Brexit referendum frequently adopted the populist rhetoric that now permeates large segments of British society. Conversely, a more flexible, multidimensional approach makes it possible to identify varieties within populism that would otherwise remain hidden or understudied.

*Empirical evidence shows that populism is better approached as a matter of degree, rather than as a matter of nature.*

I consider that different research approaches are complementary and that if we want to bridge the existing gap between them, we should adopt a multidimensional approach. This is particularly important at the level of data collection to ensure that we generate datasets that can be used in a wide range of studies. As the title of my paper indicates, I propose devoting less attention to classifying parties and leaders, and instead focusing our efforts on better understanding the attributes associated with populism and how they are combined by different movements and in different contexts. My framework is quite flexible: I have used it, for example, to compare the manifestos of [populist radical-right](#) and [secessionist parties](#), [parliamentary debates during the COVID-19 crisis](#), and even the UN speeches of Mahmoud Abbas and Benjamin Netanyahu.

Finally, I do consider the term illiberalism to be very important when analyzing populism. Several prominent experts in this field, such as Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis Pappas, associate the concept of populism with an illiberal conception of democracy. Populists should not be equated with autocrats or fascists, as they normally do not seek to establish a dictatorship. Most of them do not propose to eliminate elections or party competition. Instead, their goal is to radically reform democracies to fit their Manichean and exclusionary conception of society. The usual way to recreate the idealized and somewhat homogeneous populist “heartland” is by extracting some people from within “the people.” They achieve this goal by suppressing or limiting the rights and liberties of those whom they consider the undeserving or corrupt “other.” Therefore, populism usually clashes with a pluralist or liberal understanding of democracy, and I believe that it should, as it is in your program, be compared with and studied alongside other forms of illiberalism.

## Seán Hanley on the Rise of Illiberalism in Czechia

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**Seán, in your research on Central Europe, you criticized the way in which scholars have assumed, based on rational and historical institutionalist arguments, that the region would democratize. Have we missed some cultural features that explain the current revival of a form of conservatism? How should we reframe our perceptions to capture the region's illiberal turn?**

In [the article](#) you mention, my co-author James Dawson and I set out with a strong sense that the increasingly clear patterns of democratic backsliding and democratic deterioration in Central Europe called for a rethinking of approaches to the region. Not only did democracy in Central Europe look a lot less successful than had been assumed in the early-mid 2000s, but it was the region's democratic frontrunners—like Hungary and Poland—that were leading the way in backsliding, and with parties once considered, [including by me](#), as mainstream center-right.

We felt that explanations stressing the fading-out of EU conditionality or the rise of populism as a response to economic crisis—which turned on the failure of liberal and democratic institutions to properly constrain or “lock in”—offered a rather threadbare explanation. So we wanted to push the debate by stepping back to ask some fundamental questions about institutions.

There was certainly a “cultural” element to our work. We drew on James’s very fine book, [Cultures of Democracy](#), which makes a powerful argument for a more fine-grained, bottom-up, and discursively rooted understanding of democratic development in the region.

But in the end, we were drawn to the framework of “discursive institutionalism” developed by Vivien Schmidt, whose efforts to understand how actors, institutions, and discourses are enmeshed we found attractive. We wanted a more nuanced approach than just retelling the old story of liberal institutions overwhelmed by illiberal cultures in new form or mapping a kaleidoscope of shifting discourses.

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But the main thing missing from the discussion was not cultural features, but the reflexivity and “discursive agency” of political actors—that is, their ability to think and rethink their identities and position within institutions, foregrounding illiberal ideas that were once just in the background, and in so doing to change the nature of institutions.

**You have particularly explored the case of Czechia. How do you see the interaction between some forms of cultural conservatism—to a smaller extent than in neighboring Poland—and the technocratic culture and new oligarchic structures that emerged in the country? Can we describe ANO as a combination of populism and technocracy?**

ANO has been quite widely analyzed as a “technocratic populist” party, and scholars such as [Chris Bickerton](#) and [Daniele Caramani](#) have noted the blend of technocratic and populist appeals made by some new anti-establishment parties elsewhere. Technocrats picked to head up caretaker governments but who then developed political ambitions, like [Jan Fischer in the Czech Republic](#) or Mario Monti in Italy, have made similar pitches.

Both populists and technocrats think in terms of a single clear public interest and are impatient with the normal processes of party-political competition, coalition-building, and deal-making that liberal-democratic politics can’t really do without.

When Babiš has tried to define himself and his vision, he has presented himself in the mold of the technocratic populist, a non-political doer who takes on the old establishment and offers practical solutions based on business acumen and managerial expertise.

But there are multiple readings of ANO and Babiš. Others want to cast him as a lighter, more pragmatic version of the illiberal national-populists seen in Hungary and Poland. Both have elements of truth. Babiš is a political shape shifter who can talk the language of the apolitical manager, pro-European liberal, or “Czech Trump” fending off EU interference and migration, as the occasion requires.

That said, I don’t think there’s a particularly strong or stable connection between cultural conservatism and ANO—or between cultural conservatism and the type of oligarchical milieu that Babiš hails from. As Andrew Roberts’ [pioneering investigation of Czech billionaires](#) found, the country’s super-rich are fiscally conservative, but otherwise have no distinct political leanings—beyond perhaps a concern to preserve their economic power.

And as I discovered in my [early work on Czech right-wing politics](#), in contrast to Hungary or Poland, conservative traditions in Czechia are diffuse, now ranging from, say, the small, moderate Christian Democratic party to more assertively anti-liberal nationalist groups and subcultures—reaching from groups which see themselves as right-wing and anti-communist to currents in the Social Democratic Party and in the hardline Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia.

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Babiš has been sympathetically regarded by illiberal populists, who see him as a kindred spirit. He is also allied with President Zeman, whose anti-migrant and anti-Islamic illiberalism are more rooted in a conservative form of Czech nationalism.

But perhaps his most important connection is with a small-c conservatism: that of the electorate that ANO now draws on. A catch-all anti-corruption movement appealing to varied social groups when it broke through in 2013, ANO has since acquired an electorate of older, less well-educated, less metropolitan voters who are not only more economically left-leaning but also more culturally conservative and receptive to illiberal populist messages. And if there is the potential for a more stable hybrid of oligarchical and national populism to emerge, it would be here.

**You have advocated looking at the Western Balkans as well as Bulgaria to better capture the transformations of Central Europe and maybe nuance pessimistic assessments focused on Hungary and Poland. What lessons can be learned from these other countries in studying the liberal/illiberal paradigm in the region?**

This was for slightly different, but related, reasons. In suggesting a focus on Bulgaria, [again writing with James Dawson](#), we wanted to draw attention to the possibility that democratic deterioration in Central Europe need not follow the Hungarian or Polish pattern of an illiberal populist party winning office in watershed elections and then concentrating power by stripping away checks and balances and capturing public institutions and civil society—an over-stretched and over-used template that Licia Cianetti and I subsequently termed [the “backsliding paradigm.”](#)

Instead, we wondered about another scenario: one of enduring, but very low-quality democracy where superficially liberal institutions—including lively electoral competition between outwardly mainstream parties and periodic eruptions of civic protest—mask a political system rooted in illiberalism. Both in the political-economy sense of the entrenchment of hollow, deeply corrupt markets and institutions captured by informal power structures. And also in the political-cultural sense, as we felt that liberal mainstream European parties had never been able to move beyond technocratic or economic forms of liberalism and had subtly—and sometimes not so subtly—accommodated conservative and illiberal discourses.

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We took Bulgaria, usually framed as a corrupt “laggard” trailing behind more successful Central European states, as a good point of reference for such a potentially different pattern of democratic deterioration.



The point about the Western Balkans, which crops up in [a short essay](#) I co-wrote introducing a special issue, was slightly different. Here, I wanted to argue that the unstated threefold division of the post-communist world into distinct sub-regions—a democratic, reforming Central Europe; a struggling and stagnating South-Eastern Europe marked by legacies of war and ethnic conflict; and a “post-Soviet space” of authoritarian or persistently hybrid regimes—that has informed much comparative scholarship could usefully be questioned.

We didn’t think that a “reconvergence” on some new general model of post-communist governance was under way. But we did feel that some of the theoretical and comparative frameworks developed by scholars studying the former USSR or the Balkans on issues such as oligarchy, informal practices, and state capture could usefully be adapted by researchers trying to get to grips with the new realities in Central Europe

**You are currently working on leftist populism in Czechia and Slovakia. Could you explain what you call “illiberal social democracy”? Do you think we need to study left- and right-wing populism in parallel to better comprehend each of them?**

This is a piece of work I’m doing as part of the [POPREBEL](#) Horizon 2020 project on populism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) led by my UCL colleagues Jan Kubik and Richard Mole. It was motivated by a concern that, especially in the CEE region, mainstream parties are not simply victims of populist challengers who emerge from the political fringe but could *themselves* become vehicles for illiberalism and populism. In both Western and Eastern Europe, this is most often seen as a phenomenon of the right. Both Hungary’s Fidesz and Poland’s Law and Justice (PiS) were once seen as mainstream regional variants of the conservative center-right, the Swiss People’s Party or the Finns were agrarian parties, the U.S. Republicans have radicalized to an extraordinary degree.

I would probably choose a slightly different term today, but by “illiberal social democracy” I mean currents within the center-left that identify as social democratic but seek to reconcile this identity with forms of social conservatism and traditional nationalism; extend the traditional social democratic critique of economic (neo-)liberalism to *social*liberalism; and share the perception of Central Europe’s newly conservative nationalists that Western Europe represents not a successful model to be emulated, but a salutary warning of what to avoid. The usual lesson, they argue, is that immigration, multiculturalism, and socially liberal identity politics are to be avoided.

Although far from typical of the whole of the Czech or Slovak social democratic left, these currents were certainly detectable in the two countries. The shift of Slovakia’s Smer-Social Democracy toward social conservatism and Slovak nationalism was held up by some analysts to be part of the formula that for a long period made the party one of Europe’s most electorally successful socialist or social democratic parties. The best-known intellectual popularizer of [the idea of a distinct and more conservative Slovak and Central European model of social democracy](#) is probably the Smer politician Ľuboš Blaha.

*By “illiberal social democracy” I mean currents within the center-left that identify as social democratic but seek to reconcile this identity with forms of social conservatism and traditional nationalism*

The Czech Social Democrats (ČSSD) have been more divided—and rather less electorally robust—but the party’s former leader, current Czech president Miloš Zeman, defines his politics very much in these terms. He’s capable of lauding the virtues of a supposedly Scandinavian-style, corporatist, high-wage

economy *and* warning against the supposed evils of Swedish-style multiculturalism and openness to newcomers *within the same few sentences*. Zeman aside, there's a rather more refined *debate about the possible attractions of a non-liberal "conservative socialism"* for the Czech left currently playing out under the auspices of the MDA thinktank, which is close to ČSSD.

I'd certainly suggest that scholars of populism study it in all its variety—and that they remain alive to new and emerging variants of populism and not reduce it to a generic set of "right-wing" positions. However, somewhat contrary to what I expected, the populist framing of politics as "Elite versus People" seems to be incidental to a new politics of anti-liberalism in these currents on the Czech and Slovak left.

**Our Program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. How do you define illiberal and what do you think this term brings to the debate? Do you think illiberalism is automatically associated with regime-type practices such as authoritarianism, rent-seeking, etc.?**

Like a lot of people, I've used the term illiberalism occasionally and inconsistently. But I think it's becoming clear that the concept of illiberalism needs to receive the same kind of intellectual energy and attention currently devoted to the notion of populism. I would make three points.

First, we should perhaps stop using the term simply as a synonym for democratic backsliding or democratic erosion—an "illiberal turn" as the first steps in a gradual process of autocratization, which starts by eating away at the fundamentals of constitutional liberalism, the rule of law, and the more informal accountability mechanisms of free media or civil society.

Second, we need to recognize that critiques of other forms of liberalism—whether economic, socio-cultural, or constitutional liberalism—are very often part and parcel of pluralistic democratic politics. The two key pillars of Western Europe's post-1945 democratic settlement, social democracy and Christian democracy, are qualified critiques of liberal economics and liberal societies. And in most democracies the balance and boundaries between the majoritarian popular sovereignty and liberal elements of liberal democracy are subject to ongoing contestation and debate. There's also a place, albeit a contested one, in democracy for technocratic, managerial forms of power.

What seems to be different about the forms of illiberal politics that concern us is the extent to which—and the intensity with which—they are assertively anti-liberal, as well as their ability to capture and subvert liberal institutions and ideas. There seems to be widespread agreement that a populist construction of politics "thickened"—to borrow *the term of Jan Kubik and Marta Kotwas*—with anti-liberal ideas centering on national identity, religious belief, morality, or community are most corrosive, polarizing, and potentially dangerous for democracy.

Third, this suggests to me that, paradoxically, defenders and promoters of liberal values in Central and Eastern Europe and elsewhere need to think not simply about sources of short-term civic resistance and democratic resilience, or the medium- and long-term prospects of a resurgence of political liberalism, but also about how—and in what political forms—non-liberal, illiberal, or anti-liberal small-c conservatism can be (re-)integrated into workable and safer democratic settlements.

*Defenders and promoters of liberal values [need] to think [about] how—and in what political forms—non-liberal, illiberal, or anti-liberal*

*small-c conservatisms can be (re-)integrated into workable and safer democratic settlements.*

## Phillip W. Gray on the Alt-Right Agenda and Intellectual Genealogy

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**Phillip, in “[Revealing the Alt-Right: Exploring Alt-Right History, Thinkers and Ideas for Public Officials](#),” you discuss how the slow death of “fusional” mainstream conservatism has resulted in the explosion of different forms of conservatism. Did this evolution intersect with the less top-down and more bottom-up conservatism that has shaken the Republican Party? How do Trump and “Trumpism” fit into these transformations of U.S. conservatism at both the elite and grassroots levels?**

It indeed intersects very strongly with the more bottom-up conservatism changes. While there were many elements of this change (the article you mention notes how the collapse of the Soviet Union removed the Communist “common enemy” that maintained the fusionist coalition), three factors come to mind as particularly important.

First, and perhaps most central, is the telecommunications revolution. Previously, journals like *National Review* and major organizations such as Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) could play a strong “gate-keeping” role simply because of the lack of other venues through which for different conservative/rightist views could spread; this gate-keeping could be circumvented only by massive individual wealth (as in the case of Ross Perot in the early 1990s). With the Internet, and especially the popularity of blogging, these barriers became significantly less daunting: being barred from writing in *National Review*, for instance, no longer meant an inevitable “excommunication” from conservative/rightist platforms.

A second part of this evolution involves the major economic changes arising from globalization and the “offshoring” of jobs to other countries. Here again, the candidacy of Perot is instructive: even at this early period, one can see a heightened division between the free-market and corporate factions and the more nationalist, small-business, and worker-oriented factions of conservatism. These divisions have only become more pronounced in the ensuing three decades. The term “Conservative, Inc.” (used by the Alt-Right as well as by other conservative/rightist tendencies) exemplifies this division: mainstream conservative organizations act more as mouthpieces for larger businesses, while issues of major importance to their supposed constituents are either merely paid lip-service or ignored entirely.

The third intersection involves the U.S. “culture wars.” Social policy was a contentious element within the fusionist coalition. Over this three-decade period, the political strength of the “Religious Right” waned compared to that of the free-market and the “neoconservative” factions (the latter focused particularly on foreign policy, but tended to side with the free-market factions on economic matters). The nationalist and socially conservative factions increasingly believed that mainstream conservatives, for the most part, really were not conserving anything of value. With the very rapid changes in policies regarding homosexuality, gay marriage, religious freedom, racial policies, and the like, they believed mainstream conservative institutions simply refused to fight. Or, even worse, that they were “progressives going the speed limit”—in other words, that these institutions would eventually simply take on the leftist policy changes as “true” conservatism. A combination of these factors provided the fuel for a “revolt from below.”

One could look at Trump as a symptom (or filling a heretofore unoccupied void) of this dissatisfaction. For these dissatisfied factions, Trump actually fought, rather than “growing in office” once gaining the presidency. He made moves on immigration, attempted to build the southern wall, attempted to curb funding to Planned Parenthood, cut back on foreign conflicts, and took what appears to be an “America-first” attitude to economic negotiations. For many of these factions, Trump actually did what “Conservative, Inc.” had promised (but failed) to do for decades. Trump himself, then, was more a cipher than anything else—and even if he should vanish tomorrow, the desire for someone like him will remain.

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**You define four key issues for the Alt-Right that may have a direct impact on policymaking: immigration, natalism, affirmative action, and national reorganization. Can you briefly discuss each of them, especially the last two, which are probably less obvious to readers?**

On all four of these points, there are definitely similarities between the Alt-Right and more general conservatism. But it is important to distinguish them (just as a progressive and a Marxist-Leninist can overlap on some points, but obviously are not the same). The biggest difference between the Alt-Right and other forms of conservatism (be it the “mainstream,” nationalistic, or traditionalist versions, and so forth) is its inherently biologicistic frame of analysis.

Immigration is the most obvious example, and one with which readers are no doubt familiar. For much of the Right (conservatives or otherwise), current levels of immigration are problematic. Concerns include the violation of the rule of law (through winking at illegal immigration), negative influences on wages and local economies, supposed increases in crime, and major demographic replacement. While the Alt-Right shares many of these views, it takes them in a more biologicistic direction, with three main results. First, it believes these policies will inevitably lead to greater social conflict, as they try to force disparate racial groups into close proximity. Second, the Alt-Right views these policies as attempting to replace not only voters, but the white populations of the United States: in effect, a massive social and demographic change aimed at removing the traditional populations. Third, the Alt-Right does not believe these results are accidental or merely the result of “well-intentioned but wrong” policymakers, but argues that they are very much intentional: in their view, this replacement benefits major corporations (by depressing wages and creating ethnic conflict between workers who might otherwise join together in collective

labor action) as well as those with institutional power (creating a tribalistic America easily manipulated by “divide-and-conquer” policies).

Especially with recent news on the comparatively low birth rate in the US, natalism has become a major concern for the Alt-Right. But in contrast to other Rightists, a key issue for the Alt-Right is *who* is reproducing. This usually results in strong advocacy for young white couples to marry early and to have multiple children. Without a larger population base, in their view, a shrinking white population will leave future generations at the mercy of so-called higher-reproducing races. Again, the focus is on the *correct* people (and races) reproducing: as such, the Alt-Right might be quite supportive of policies that are not typically considered conservative. Abortion provides a good example. For some Alt-Right writers, abortion policy should be based on consequentialist reasoning (with the good of white populations being the basis for measuring better or worse). Currently, African American populations disproportionately make use of abortion services, which is viewed as beneficial under this reasoning: White populations have been “spared” additional millions of African American in the U.S. population.

Obviously, affirmative action is not popular among conservatives. But much of the conservative view is based upon an individualistic worldview and a preference for colorblind policies. The Alt-Right takes a much more collectivist, group-identity notion of policy than do most conservatives: indeed, its view is in some ways rather more similar to group-based notions of thought found within some parts of progressivism. For the Alt-Right, there are two main problems with affirmative action. First, viewing politics as conflict between groups, they believe that affirmative action must necessarily harm white populations, and thus there is no reason for white populations to accept it. Second, the Alt-Right believes that affirmative action is fundamentally misconceived: based upon their belief that there are substantial genetic differences between racial groups (on average) in intelligence, time preference, and impulse control (among other things), the notion that affirmative action permits a “level” playing field is inherently flawed. The discrepancies between races, in their view, are not primarily the result of environmental differences (which can be resolved at the policy level), but instead genetic in nature (and thus generally impervious to the creation of a “level” field).

National reorganization is a topic that has become rather more important for conservatives in recent years. Usually, this issue can extend from greater demands for decentralization of power to the states all the way to a desire for a “national divorce” between increasingly polarized sections of the country. For the Alt-Right, again following its biologicistic forms of reasoning, national reorganization often takes the frame of “ethnostates.” In its view, biology and culture are not distinct, but rather blend into each other (or, more specifically, certain genetically determined traits within groups should epigenetically express themselves through cultural structures/artefacts, forms of governance, and the like).

For the Alt-Right, mixing various groups into a multiracial society necessarily creates conflicts, for two reasons. First, groups have a natural (evolutionary) preference to be among themselves, which increases social trust, while combining multiple groups in close proximity undermines social trust (sometimes pointing to the research of Samuel Huntington and Robert Putnam on this point). The close intermixing of groups, in this view, is in a sense “unnatural,” as evidenced by how, all things being equal, individuals from a specific ethnic/racial population tend to move to be close to their racial/ethnic fellows rather than others. Second, deriving from the biological/cultural mix, the types of laws and customs that are most favorable to one racial group must inherently be oppressive to other races. In this view, there is no “objectively” best political system: what is “best” depends heavily on the biocultural makeup of a specific population. Thus, many in the Alt-Right prefer “ethnostates,” i.e. homogeneous polities where these



discrete populations can arrange their governments and norms in the way that is best for them. Notably, many in the Alt-Right are quite supportive of the idea of ethnostates for all groups, not just whites. Unlike many earlier forms of white identitarianism, the Alt-Right is not imperialist but separatist: it does not wish to rule over other racial populations, but rather want to be separated from them.

**In one of your major pieces, “*The Fire Rises’: Identity, the Alt-Right and Intersectionality*,” you position the Alt-Right as a continuation of identitarianism and parallel it with the Intersectional Left. Can we say that the Intersectional Left and the Alt-Right are two sides of the same coin, one progressive and the other non-progressive? How can we comprehend this extreme focus on identity in two variants, biologism and social constructivism?**

I would say they very much are two sides of the same coin. Their main distinctions (beyond their intellectual genealogy) relate to which groups have priority and to methods. Otherwise, they are very much the same. Indeed, I sincerely doubt that the Alt-Right would have found much space to develop had the Intersectional Left not preceded it.

For both, the centrality of population identity is key, with the Intersectional Left focusing on BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) and sexual minorities, while the Alt-Right focuses on whites and some parts of the working class. Moreover, at a fundamental level, both tendencies derive their epistemologies from these preferred populations: in some fundamental ways, both consider that populations outside of the preferred populations are simply incapable of seeing “true” reality. Honestly, this is one of the most disturbing elements in both, insofar as this type of particularistic epistemology is a trait both share with earlier totalitarian movements.

Obviously, a glaring difference between the two sides is their respective methods of understanding social reality: as you note, biologism versus social constructivism. Much of the Alt-Right frames its views through the lenses of evolutionary psychology, genetics, population science, and the like. The Intersectional Left would seem to be directly opposite in its methods: social constructivism would appear to view social reality as constant change. To use more abstract philosophical language, one might say that biologism leans toward Being (essentialism) while social constructivism leans toward Becoming (flux). And at a purely abstract level, it would seem that the differences between them are fundamental.

But while both are based upon theory, they are primarily political/social movements. It is this activist focus that blurs the differences between biologism and social constructivism. Group identity fixation is the key point. As the French white nationalist theoretician Guillaume Faye wrote, “One does not fight for ‘ideas,’ one fights for a people—ideas are only the struggle’s instruments, not its goals.” This general idea would quite easily gain assent from both Intersectional Left and Alt-Right thinkers.

With this in mind, the identity fixation they share creates overlaps in two central ways: totalism and determinism. In their framing of biologism or social constructivism, they are totalistic in perspective: in effect, all aspects of life are explicable through their preferred “method” or “science.” This is most notable in places where their respective “sciences” seem to be silent: Alt-Right biologism sees genetic influences on (for instance) the formation of the rule of law, while Intersectional Left’s social constructivism sees knowledge/power dynamics as defining things like biological sex at its most concrete. They overlap, then, in the totalistic nature of their thinking, while also often presuming that only the “correct” kinds of populations (whites, the “marginalized,” or the like) can truly understand and accept this reality.

*Alt-Right biologism sees genetic influences on (for instance) the formation of the rule of law, while Intersectional Left's social constructivism sees knowledge/power dynamics as defining things like biological sex at its most concrete.*

Relatedly, both share a vicious level of determinism in their respective “methods.” For Alt-Right biologism, the determinism is obvious. But it also exists in the social constructivism of the Intersectional Left: as their view of the knowledge/power dynamic seems to go almost “all the way down” in determining reality, these social constructions are as determinative as genetics. It is a popularistic example, but the notion in much “antiracist” training that a white individual who is actively antiracist—indeed, does and thinks everything that is suggested to be antiracist—will still be racist (that the best one can aim to be is an “antiracist racist”) denotes a high level of determinism. No matter what one does—even what one thinks—one is still going to be determined by the social and cultural structures that reinforce and recapitulate oppression. Intersectional Left “constructivism,” in this sense, becomes as deterministic as the genetic biologism of the Alt-Right.

**How do you build the Alt-Right's intellectual genealogy? What belongs to U.S. classical conservatism and what has been borrowed from/inspired by European traditions, whether the German Conservative Revolution, the New Right, or today's Identitarians?**

The Alt-Right most certainly germinated on American soil, but its genealogy is complicated: some parts come from elements of conservatism, others from European thought, still others from earlier forms of American thought, and a fourth group from the contemporary context. Perhaps the best way to approach this question is by first addressing some of the immediate causes/influences.

At the most immediate level (that is, looking at the period around 2015 and 2016), the Alt-Right appears to have developed from various strands: southern advocates, portions of the “Atheism+” online community, previous white Identitarian communities, the Traditionalist school of thought represented by Julius Evola, and parts of “paleoconservatism.” But one needs to be cautious with various of these immediate influences: obviously, a large share of Atheism+ types would not align with the Alt-Right. The same is true with regard to paleoconservatism: while some paleoconservatives seem to hold biologicistic views, most would better be classed as nation-focused. In their view, America is not a “creedal” nation (and thus, membership is based on the individual accepting ideas/norms), but nor is it a purely biological entity (as a white nation would be for some of the Alt-Right). Rather, America is a nation in the traditional sense of a population connected intergenerationally through linked customs, cultures, language, tradition, and history. In this sense, the paleoconservatives could be compared, at least somewhat, to some types of *Völkisch* thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This leads to some affinities between paleoconservatives and the Alt-Right, but also some significant differences.

*The Alt-Right appears to have developed from various strands: southern advocates, portions of the “Atheism+” online community, previous white Identitarian communities, the Traditionalist school of thought represented by Julius Evola, and parts of “paleoconservatism.”*

We also see some divergences in the Alt-Right as we get to more recent influences. People like Jared Taylor, Michael Levin, and Kevin MacDonald tend to be much more influenced by evolutionary psychology and

genetics; other writers (such as Greg Johnson) tend to be heavily inspired by the French New Right; and still others seem more influenced by the perennialist notions of Evola and other Traditionalists of that type. This reveals another distinction between the Alt-Right and much of American conservatism (and other parts of the Right): the Alt-Right, for the most part, is indifferent to—or even hostile toward—Christianity. Some are basically atheistic based on their understanding of science—seeing religion as simply mythical—while others are more explicitly paganistic (often seeing monotheism as the origin of totalitarianism and Christianity as sapping the racial consciousness of white populations).

These affinities also point to some of the more distant, yet still relevant, influences on Alt-Right ideology. The German Conservative Revolution plays a notable role in their genealogy, especially Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger, and (to an extent) Oswald Spengler. In a sense, the German Conservative Revolution has similarities to the immediate causes noted earlier: it included *Völkisch* elements, some focused on action and strength for “the nation,” others more inclined toward fascistic (in contrast to Nazi) political organization. The ideas of the more important Alt-Right thinkers often derive rather substantially from their interpretations of, for instance, Schmitt’s notion of the exception or the failures of liberalism, Heidegger’s views of technology, Spengler’s diagnosis of decline (as well as his exhortations of duty even during the decline), and Jünger’s view of the life of struggle.

*The German Conservative Revolution plays a notable role in their genealogy, especially Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger, and (to an extent) Oswald Spengler.*

One of the most notable influences, who deserves some individual attention, is Nietzsche: here again, this indicates some of the overlaps between the Alt-Right and Intersectional Left, as both derive various elements from Nietzsche’s thought. The Alt-Right pulls from Nietzsche his preference for hierarchy, his praise of paganistic thinking, his critiques of Christianity and other forms of “slave morality,” his notions of resentment, and, most importantly, his ongoing criticism of equality as a notion.

**Last but not least, Philipp, you recently published a book entitled *Vanguardism: Ideology and Organization in Totalitarian Politics*. How is the term “totalitarianism” relevant in today’s politics and to which movements does it apply?**

Perhaps the most relevant element of totalitarianism today is totalism. As discussed earlier, many political tendencies today—the Intersectional Left and the Alt-Right being prime examples—are highly totalistic in their thinking. What is perhaps most concerning for me is that this type of totalistic thinking is becoming comparatively “mainstream.” Within the US particularly, and whether coming from Right or Left, this mainstreamed totalistic thinking is taking on an explicitly racist tone. One would be hard-pressed to find any topic in American discourse that is not being racialized in one way or another, and not merely by radicals.

*Many political tendencies today—the Intersectional Left and the Alt-Right being prime examples—are highly totalistic in their thinking.*

In my view, we are at somewhat of an early point in totalitarian development: specifically, a point where the ideas are seeping into general society and more totalistic organizations are beginning to form. If there is an area where the term seems most relevant today, it would be in “totalitarian polarization,” for lack of a better phrase. In my view, the Alt-Right (broadly understood) and the Intersectional Left are

the primary totalitarian movements in America today. Were these tendencies merely limited to these groups—and were they isolated—that would not be too much of a concern. But we are entering into an age of polarization: while most of the American population may want to have nothing to do with either of these tendencies, they are increasingly being forced to align with one or the other.

As totalistic intersectional thinking starts to dominate more parts of general education, popular entertainment, and corporate culture, one will likely see more responses from totalistic Alt-Right thinking. In such a dynamic, more people will find themselves being pushed into at least tactically supporting one or the other. And that, I admit, worries me. It echoes the types of polarization dynamics that occurred in places like Italy, Germany, and Spain in the interwar period. Naturally, these are not historical examples one would like to see repeated here.

## Takis S. Pappas on Conceptualizing Populism

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**Takis, in your book *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis* (Oxford, 2019), you speak of democratic illiberalism, thereby reversing the terms used in Zakaria’s famous text on illiberal democracies. Can you explain to our readers how you define democratic illiberalism?**

In my work, populism is conceptualized and defined minimally as “democratic illiberalism,” which points to modern political systems, political parties, or individual politicians combining adherence to electoral democracy and liberal democratic principles. I also use the term “populist democracy” with reference to political systems in which both the ruling party and major opposition forces are populist. I first used these terms in an article that compared Greece and Hungary as typical populist democracies and was published in 2013 in *Government and Opposition* (notice, by the way, that this Hungary-specific article preceded by at least a year Orbán’s now-famous 2014 speech in Transylvania, after which this term became common). Anyway, my definition of populism recalls Fareed Zakaria’s terminology but the puzzles that motivate my research, the empirical cases I focus on, and the theoretical propositions I put forward are entirely different than his. The contrast is very interesting from a sociology-of-knowledge point of view, so let me say a bit more about it.

Zakaria wrote his very insightful essay on the *rise of illiberal democracies* back in 1997, when the word “populism” was not in common usage, and if you go back to the text, you will find no mention of this word, nor will you find a proper definition of what he meant by “democratic illiberalism.” But everything else is quite clear. Recall, first, that Zakaria wrote his essay only a few years after the collapse of Soviet communism and, second, that he was a former student at Harvard of Samuel Huntington, who believed in the incessant expansion of democracy worldwide. It was within that historical and intellectual context that Zakaria noticed an apparent paradox, namely, that many of the recent converts to democracy were not essentially democratic, nor, most certainly, was there any trace of liberalism in them. Among the cases he observed, and which are mentioned in his essay, were formerly communist Romania and Slovakia, autocracies like Belarus and Kazakhstan, war-torn Sierra Leone and Ethiopia, the Islamic republics of Iran and Pakistan, and failed states like the Palestinian National Authority or Haiti.

Evidently, Zakaria's "democratic illiberalism" was not related to *modern* populism. If it had been, he should have both taken issue with the most obvious case of populism at the time, which was Berlusconi's Italy, and made plain use of the word "populism" in his essay. But Zakaria's main concern was not populism in today's sense. It was whether the recently democratized states would be able to consolidate pluralism and develop some semblance of Western-type liberal democracy in the future. Today, a quarter of a century later, and with the exceptions of Slovakia and Romania by reason of their membership of the EU, the countries mentioned above remain despairingly illiberal; some are not even democratic any longer. Add to that the Arab nations, in which incumbent presidents let opposition parties run in elections but with no hope of winning them, and you will see that Zakaria's notion of "illiberal democracy" is valid but useful only for describing premodern states with deficient institutions ruled by fraudulent autocrats. But that concept is entirely unrelated to modern-day populism.

My work addresses a different puzzle. I begin with Fukuyama and his famous—and famously erroneous—thesis about liberalism signifying the end of history. After 1945, it seemed that liberal democracy was the superior political system and that most states the world over would try to imitate it. And, in fact, many did, including the southern European nations after their democratic transitions in the 1970s, Latin American countries that became democratic around the same time, and Central and Eastern European states after the fall of communism in 1989. But what I observed was that many of those states were often doing away with their liberalism and, under the spell of charismatic leaders allegedly acting in the name of an oversoul people, turning to illiberal politics while remaining fully democratic. The combination of allegiance to democracy and illiberal practice struck me as a historical novelty and most of my work has been about unraveling this paradoxical situation.

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**In your research *in general* and your work on European political parties *in particular*, you dissociate populist parties from nativist and nationalist ones, which you classify as belonging to the liberal category. Can you explain the three categories, which are often mistakenly confused? What are the gaps and overlaps between them? Are we talking about ideal-typical categories or can we clearly identify movements that have one feature but not the others?**

Populist, nativist, and nationalist parties are often confused due to a lack of conceptual clarity, an inability to operationalize the cases, and, ultimately, a failure to provide fine conceptual distinctions. But those are entirely different types of parties—and if you focus on their core characteristics, you will be able to distinguish them effortlessly and clearly enough. Based on such core properties, I have produced a typology that, in simple *infographic* form, presents a hierarchical systematization of all parties into clearly defined types that are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. With such a typology at hand, it becomes easy to classify parties into distinct categories, each with its own specific characteristics. It is also easier to understand what is important about each party type and, therefore, to provide concise definitions of them.

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As already mentioned, I see populism as a postwar political phenomenon that retains democratic electoral rules while at the same time opposing modern liberal institutions. Accordingly, populist parties are those championing a polity that is at once democratic and illiberal. Parties that do not do *both* those two things cannot be populist.

I distinguish nativist parties on the basis of simple lexical definitions of the term such as, for instance, the one of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which defines “nativism” as “the policy of protecting the interests of native-born or established inhabitants against those of immigrants.” Nativist parties, then, are those that promote a nativist policy agenda. Importantly, no European nativist party can be said to be illiberal, at least with respect to the rights of native populations.

Finally, in the European political context, nationalist parties are those that either pursue national independence from a centralist state (for instance, the Scottish National Party) or want their nation to maintain sovereignty from supranational political entities (for instance, the UK Independence Party). These parties are on the whole liberal with an obvious nativist tint; it is their nationalism, however, that remains their distinguishing characteristic.

Having said all this, one should also not forget that parties are like moving targets. They evolve in historical time and often change their ideas, positions, and goals—which means that they may also transform from one party type into another, and then another.

**You have been comparing Europe, the United States, and Latin America. Can you briefly describe the specificities of populism in each of these regions and the political traditions that make them different? Or maybe you discern more similarities than differences?**

The greatest advantage of defining populism minimally as “democratic illiberalism” is that you can single out all the cases that fit the definition and study their ensemble in fine comparative perspective. This is precisely what I have been able to do in my work. So, from the universe of postwar states in Europe and the Americas with previous liberal experience, I selected all those in which a populist party had come to power. As analyzed and compared in my book, these countries include Greece, Italy, Hungary, and Poland in Europe; Argentina, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela in Latin America; and the more recent case of the United States under Trump. Two other cases of populist parties—which emerged in power after I had already begun research and so were not included in my book—are Poland and Mexico. In retrospect, I think that both cases validate my original findings.

Now, you may think that all these cases, which cover different geographical regions, span several postwar decades, and include both right-wing and left-wing populist parties, are more different than similar. My research suggests otherwise. I show how each and every one of these cases tells the same story—the story of societies with a certain experience of liberal democracy that nonetheless elected to turn populist. Once that realization was made, the task I posed for myself was to see under which conditions, and in which ways (or mechanisms), the transformation from liberalism to populism became possible. I examined each country at three successive stages of the process—populist ascendancy, populism in office, and populist aftermaths—and then put all those processes under a comparative lens. I found that, their differences notwithstanding, these countries followed remarkably similar pathways at all three stages. The rest is in the book.

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**What role does charismatic leadership play in populist success? Can a populist movement succeed without that leadership? I am thinking, for instance, of the PiS in Poland, where even if the Kaczyński brothers were/are key figures, we are still lacking the kind of archetypal charismatic leader that can be found in, say, Hungary.**

One of the main lessons I drew from my comparative analysis of the cases is that, in order for populism to succeed, a charismatic leader is required. I even presented it as an axiom: “No charisma, no populism.” Of course, the difficulty here is to conceptualize and define “charismatic leadership,” but this is a topic on which I have done plenty of **conceptual and theoretical work** in the past. It was therefore easy to identify empirically how extraordinary agency interacted with existing political structures and activated the micro- and meso-mechanisms that are necessary to produce, and sustain, populism.

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I understand, and have defined, political charisma as *a distinct type of legitimate leadership that is personal and aims at the radical transformation of an established institutional order*. Under this definition, charismatic leaders are not identified as such by their electoral success, which would make for a tautological analysis, nor by any physical or personal characteristics, such as physical height, oratorical skills, and the like. My definition of charisma requires leaders to combine two characteristics: full personal authority and radical political aims. Come to think of it, this type of authority is both extraordinary and rare. For, in the reality of ordinary politics, most parliamentary democracies are ruled by collective decision-making processes in the pursuit of moderate and piecemeal reforms, not radical change. But then, when I looked at my cases of populism, I realized that, with no exceptions, they had emerged out of extraordinary leadership action. Typically, charismatic populists had founded their own parties (or, as in the case of Trump, taken full control of existing ones) and, by exercising full control over the party organizations, used them as their means of radically changing liberal democratic systems into illiberal ones. By the way, all successful populist leaders are male.

Now, to Poland’s Jarosław Kaczyński. It is true, of course, that his personal characteristics do not fit what we have in mind when using in our everyday discourse the word “charismatic.” He is introverted and secretive, not particularly attractive or likely to arouse mass enthusiasm. But similar could be said about, to use two seemingly sharply different cases, Serbian Slobodan Milošević and British Margaret Thatcher. Only that here we are not talking simply about personal characteristics; what we are talking about and trying to understand is a certain type of authority and how it is achieved. In this sense, I classify the three previous leaders as “charismatic” because they meet my two core requirements, namely, full control over parties they have either founded (Kaczyński) or taken hold of (Thatcher and Milošević) and the successful implementation of a radical political program, be that Polish populism, Thatcherism, or the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

**You have devoted a good part of your work to Greece. Would you say Greece has been a pioneer in developing a new populism following the 2008 recession?**

Populism came to Greece decades before the recent Great Recession. Most people who study populism are unfortunately not cognizant of the fact that Greece was the first country in postwar Europe to see a powerful populist win state power. That was back in 1981 and that party was PASOK, founded and led by the charismatic Andreas Papandreou. PASOK stayed in power for many, many years and led the country in an illiberal direction that, in many ways, was a long preparatory stage for the Greek drama during the 2010s. On a more personal note, since I happened to experience several of the many episodes in the development of populism in situ while living in Greece, this gave me a better angle than those living and working in populism-free countries for understanding the logic, appeal, and causes that lead a country to transform from liberal to populist. Thankfully, I was lucky to also experience twice the opposite process—that is, the reversal from populism to liberalism.

*Greece was the first country in postwar Europe to see a powerful populist win state power. That was back in 1981 and that party was PASOK, founded and led by the charismatic Andreas Papandreou.*

**How should the presence in many Southern European countries (including Greece, Italy, and Spain) of both a leftist and a rightist populism be interpreted?**

The osmosis between left and right populisms is not unique to Southern Europe. In Argentina, Peronist populist began as a right-wing movement and then oscillated between neoliberal right (under Carlos Menem) and radical left (under both Néstor and Cristina Kirchner). The Peruvian Aprismo was also a synthesis of leftist and rightist populist groups. In Italy, the Five Star Movement, which was originally populist, moved progressively from rather leftist to more rightist positions; in the end, because it lacked charismatic leadership, it became a mainstream liberal party. In the US, it is not difficult to discern an, albeit fluid, populist movement on the left that could take a more concrete political shape in the future if a charismatic leader appears and is willing to take his or her chances. By far the most impressive case of osmosis between left and right populisms has been Greece, which thus achieved another first in the annals of world populism. In 2015, the left-populist Syriza and the right-populist Independent Greeks formed a coalition government that lasted, with almost no friction, for over four years!

Explaining the co-existence, let alone the occasional symbiotic relationship, of leftist and rightist populism is not that difficult if one considers that populism, far from being an ideology, is a novel type of democracy that opposes established political liberalism, an illiberal democracy. Which means that, once populism grows strong in a polity, the old left-right political cleavage is replaced by a new one between liberal- and illiberal-minded voters. In such a political configuration, as Timothy Garton Ash has nicely put it, the crucial difference is between liberals of right or left and illiberals of right or left.

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**And a last question on terminologies and concepts. The major concept you work on is populism. Our Program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. What does illiberalism bring to the discussion?**

Good question, especially given my *craving for clear concepts and robust definitions*! I think that the move of making democratic illiberalism a synonym of modern-day populism enables us to effectively distinguish populism from neighboring and often overlapping concepts, thus avoiding notional and terminological confusion. It also helps to distinguish populism *qua* democratic illiberalism from no less than four other kindred concepts: pre-liberal democratic illiberalism; liberal democracy; non-democracy; and undemocratic liberalism. Let me very briefly explain their differences.

*(Illiberalism) also helps to distinguish populism quademocratic illiberalism from no less than four other kindred concepts: pre-liberal democratic illiberalism*

*Pre-liberal democratic illiberalism*, first, refers to the cases observed by Fareed Zakaria but also extends to other contemporary cases such as Indonesia, Malaysia, or India, none of which have in their respective national histories a noteworthy liberal tradition. Those countries are designated by using adjectives such as “hybrid regimes,” “competitive authoritarian,” or “flawed democracies.” I would suggest settling for the term “Zakarialand”!

*Liberal democracy*, second, combines free and fair elections with rule of law and the protection of minority rights. Its beginnings coincide with the end of the Second World War and today many are concerned about its fatigue and possible decline. Here belong most of the countries in Europe, the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, among a few others. In the Economist Global Democracy Index, those countries are classified as “full democracies.”

*Non-democracy*, third, contains nations with no free and fair elections or social pluralism. Here, quite obviously, belong countries like China, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Libya, but also Russia, Belarus, Turkey, and Syria, among many others. Their individual differences notwithstanding, all these countries are ruled by nondemocratic, and therefore illiberal, parties.

*Undemocratic liberalism*, finally, sounds like a theoretical absurdity and would be a mere contradiction in terms were there not at least one country on earth that, to the best of my knowledge, meets most criteria of liberalism without offering free elections: Singapore.

## Paris Aslanidis on Populism as a Collective Action Frame

*Originally published June 23, 2021*

Paris, you have been working on the notion of populism for years, and in a major article, you **refute** the vision of populism as a (thin) ideology in favor of a discursive frame. Can you tell us more about your main arguments and why moving away from the ‘ideology’ interpretation offers more heuristic approaches to populism?

Ideologies are constructs that point to relatively coherent policy suggestions. This is not the case with populism. I cannot be convinced that populism is an ideologically consistent political worldview shared by the likes of both Hugo Chavez and Silvio Berlusconi, both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, both Evo Morales and Alberto Fujimori. The ideological conflict within these pairs is obviously irreconcilable. Looking back, the insistence of an *ideological* affinity among populists on either side of the political spectrum is based on a horseshoe theory with roots in the post-war consensus between Western liberals and conservatives. First, the shock of McCarthyism nudged Richard Hofstadter and Seymour Martin Lipset toward adopting the *status anxiety* thesis to equate populism with the radical right. Then, their disciples in Latin America applied the concept on left-wing radicalism to equate populism with economic profligacy (the *economic populism* thesis). The two strands have since come together, especially since the end of the Cold War, in the typical centrist denunciation of populism as a pathological political ideology. Academics should at least understand these dynamics prior to investing them with any legitimacy.

Influenced by symbolic interactionism and Laclauian post-structuralism, I believe that a discursive view of populism is preferable. Populism is a political language that diagnoses reality by sublimating sociopolitical grievances to a battle between people and elites. It is a type of *collective action frame*, to use more technical terminology. The activity of these actors, as well as the activity of a multitude of social movements out there, can be described as populist insofar as they discursively construct a popular collective identity to challenge the inordinate power of elite forces. A populist project can emerge from the left, the right, and anywhere in-between, but it is discursive behavior—not policy prerogatives—that should primarily inform our classificatory decisions. This is where I, perhaps modestly, draw the line.

*Populism is a political language that diagnoses reality by sublimating sociopolitical grievances to a battle between people and elites.*

As for recourse to Michael Freeden's notion of "thin-centred" ideologies, it's really an elaborate way to have your cake and eat it, too. This is the gist of my [2016 article](#) in *Political Studies*. Aren't thin-centred ideologies still *ideologies* anyway? If not, why should we retain the term to denote the genus of what we are trying to describe? Worse, if we faithfully adhere to Freeden's "morphological framework," what stops us from labeling everything a thin-centred ideology? Anti-communists, vegans, nativists, animal rights activists, anti-vaxxers, Eurosceptics, feminists and incels, racists and cosmopolitans: don't they all swear by values with "a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts" (as Freeden requires) compared to "full-fledged" ideologies such as liberalism or communism? So then, any idea out there with a modicum of politics in it could be deemed a "thin-centred ideology."

And yet, despite the definitional laxity that characterizes his work, Freeden has himself recently claimed that populism is *not* a thin-centred ideology. Now, isn't this awkward? Should we dispute the verdict of the theory's originator or should we keep working with the "thin-centred ideology" idea regardless? Personally, I am not eager to assign ultimate definitional powers to a single scholar, however wise he may be. I understand that it's only natural to quickly cite the most well-known definition of populism and swiftly move on to the actual argument in your paper, but I insist that it's better to leave ideology out of it, as it only complicates matters and leads to normative exaggerations.

*I insist that it's better to leave ideology out of (a definition of populism),  
as it only complicates matters and leads to normative exaggerations.*

**You also invite scholars to take distance from a top-down reading of populism limited to electoral and party representation and to move the cursor on grassroots social movements, i.e., to look at the 'demand' side and not only the 'supply' side. Why can grassroots populist movements help us understand the reasons for populist success? And is there sometimes a transnational dimension to grassroots populist mobilizations?**

Yes, I believe we spend too much time focusing on the exotic populist in the darkest nooks and corners of our legislatures, while we turn a blind eye to populism when it erupts in full force in our streets and squares due to non-institutional action pursued by thousands of citizens. Dozens of highly consequential populist social movements emerge around the world every year. The Tishreen Revolution (Iraq, 2019), the Sudanese Revolution (2018-19), the Umbrella Revolution (Hong Kong, 2014), the Bulgarian protests of 2013 and 2020, the October Revolution in Lebanon (2019-20), the Slipper Revolution (Belarus, 2020), and the Bosnian Babylution (2013) are only a few examples that have flown under the radar. The struggle over meaning-making among activists and the process of populist identity construction can be seen first-hand in grassroots agitation. The insight to be gained from studying them is invaluable for the scholar of populism. It is truly a *humbling* experience, I would dare say.

With some exaggeration, I see populism as the default language of politically contentious mobilization that attempts to unite citizens across partisan, racial, ethnic, religious, class, and other traditional divides. This points to the transnational dynamic of populist discourse. Speaking in the name of the people and upholding popular sovereignty, while accusing elites of having gained illegitimate privileges is a universal trope that can easily travel across national boundaries, adopting a local hue to address grievances of a different nature. The Arab Spring is such a case, as well as the so-called Movements of the Squares in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Of course, not all populist social movements are successful (they seldom are), but this does not rob them of their scientific and political value in any way.



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**I have always been struck by the lack of study on populism as a cultural production. You have just published an article inviting scholars to reintegrate culture—in a broad sense—into our study of the phenomenon, in order to give it some sociological ‘flesh’. What would be this new research agenda?**

By *culture* I definitely don’t mean nativist or racist attitudes in populist mobilization. Nativism is not populism, even though it may frequently accompany it, as do a number of other political attitudes. What I am talking about is music, folk art, constituent myths, cinema, literature, popular journalism, and all the other cultural sources that populist activists draw on to inform their rhetoric. This is an interactive relationship: populism produces cultural artifacts, and those artifacts inspire subsequent populist movements.

Every nation has a cultural toolkit that activists and politicians will utilize to frame their claims about what’s wrong with the world. Scholars of populism routinely observe this phenomenon, but we rarely dedicate adequate resources to study it in some detail. Some examples include the legacy of muckrakers such as Upton Sinclair and G. K. Chesterton, the populist literature of Hamlin Garland, L. Frank Baum, and John Steinbeck, the populist cinematography of Frank Capra (can one watch *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* without noticing the populist overtones?), the influence of Populist poetry on American folk music, the role of African populist freedom songs in anti-colonial struggle, or even the populist aspect in Vietnam era rock music (think *Fortunate Son* by *Creedence Clearwater Revival*). All of these great themes are pivotal to understanding the cultural element in populist mobilization, from the way they construct “the People,” to the chants they sing, the attire they don, and the slogans on their banners.

*This is an interactive relationship: populism produces cultural artifacts, and those artifacts inspire subsequent populist movements.*

**What are your favorite books on populism?**

Two books really come to mind: Richard Hofstadter’s (1955) *The Age of Reform* and Ernesto Laclau’s (2005) *On Populist Reason*. I resent the *Age of Reform* for the unwarranted anti-populist backlash that it spawned, but I still admire Hofstadter’s sophisticated prose, and I will always remain fascinated by his dramatic personal story as a politically-motivated intellectual and a one-time card-carrying member of the Communist Party who ended up flirting with—if not succumbing to—neoconservatism. Perhaps we forget how much the terror of the Second Red Scare influenced academic production in the United States, and I think it is telling that Hofstadter himself toned down his anti-populism toward the end of his life when the fear of being outed as “a Red” had subsided. I find it incomprehensible that there are scholars of populism who don’t care much about Hofstadter. Besides, much of today’s scholarly production on populism (particularly in Western European circles) is a reiteration of the general Hofstadterian thesis.

Laclau’s *On Populist Reason* is in many ways the antithesis of *The Age of Reform*. Dense, epistemologically quaint, radical, and taxing to the reader, right from the beginning it tends to alienate those without much patience for post-structural elaborations. And yet, once you manage to master the jargon, you enter a

new, enticing, even seducing world that is bound to influence you in one way or another. *On Populist Reason* is the closest we have come to a comprehensive theory of populism with a global application.

By the way, I am also a big fan of Margaret Canovan's work, particularly her 2005 book, *The People*.

**Last but not least and as in all our interviews, I would like to ask you a terminological question. Our program is called Illiberalism Studies Program. How do you position yourself toward the term of illiberalism? What are the gaps and overlaps with populism? Does it bring something new to be discussed?**

To discuss illiberalism, we first need to agree on what we mean by liberalism, which is already a difficult task. In any case, I think populism has mostly accompanied liberalism in history, going back at least to the revolutions of 1848. And it is difficult to avoid seeing the populist element in the early great revolutions such as those in the United States and France. Populism is not inherently illiberal. The challenge it represents against the so-called "rule of law" and "checks and balances" can indeed lead to dangerous outcomes, but it can also save liberalism from its own vices, particularly a clinical invocation of liberal values that functions as a veil for patently conservative powers out there. When liberalism becomes disconnected from the value of popular sovereignty and begins to stray toward a technocratic dystopia ruled by the powerful, then populist mobilization can help steer the boat back onto course. A populist bone should always be part of a liberal body.

*When liberalism becomes disconnected from the value of popular sovereignty and begins to stray toward a technocratic dystopia ruled by the powerful, then populist mobilization can help steer the boat back onto course.*

I therefore insist that it is foolish to delegitimize populism as a democratic force. Yes, it takes the form of a movement that may prove open-ended, bewildering, self-contradictory, at times unsavory, and ill-styled for liberal palates, but it is also a legitimate and appropriate form of action when a feeling that the deck is stacked against you begins to prevail among the population. You may ask: when *is* the deck really stacked against me? Well, this is in the eye of the beholder. Let us not dare depoliticize that, too. We keep talking, for instance, about the "democratic deficit" in the European Union, and yet we roll our eyes when people of (perhaps) lower political sophistication than ourselves claim the same message in coarser voices.

In this sense, studying the illiberal side of populism can be useful, as long as it does not devolve into an elitist denunciation of popular politics that rests on deliberately conflating populism with nativism or authoritarianism. Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, China's economic prowess and the increasing appeal of the Chinese authoritarian model in the global periphery have understandably taken liberals aback (hence the various "Death of Liberal Democracy" screeds). However, it is the twin specter of ethnic nationalism and social inequality that pose the real threat for core liberal values. Populism is a sideshow.

*It is the twin specter of ethnic nationalism and social inequality that pose the real threat for core liberal values. Populism is a sideshow.*

## Melani McAlister on Global Evangelicalism

*Originally published July 9, 2021*

**Melani, in *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals*, you invite the reader to move outside of the U.S. case to capture the incredible rise of evangelicals worldwide, especially in Africa. How has this global expansion changed evangelicalism in the United States?**

Yes, I was interested in thinking about how evangelicalism has become increasingly present around the globe and how the movement has been transformed. Especially with its rise in the Global South, evangelicalism is no longer a majority white, Northern European, and American religion; instead, in its many manifestations, there are more people of color—more Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans. They now make up the majority of the world's evangelicals.

I was interested in looking at how that affects Americans. American evangelicals still have far greater resources: they have more money, more television shows, more access to media generally. American evangelicals are still a massive global force, but a global force that increasingly recognizes that they are only one part of this larger community. This has had a number of different effects.

One is liberalizing. As more and more Americans do summers or short-term missions abroad, where they go and meet people outside of their own comfort zone, or read about the situations of fellow believers around the world, there emerges this realization that they are meeting global partners in the religion. This happens especially where those missions themselves are set up to help people understand that they are not Lady Bountiful coming in to help the poor. It doesn't always happen that way, for sure, but some of the global evangelical programs are designed to, and sometimes do, help shift participants' awareness of themselves as *part* of a community, not as dominant missionary "givers." There's still a lot of that missionizing or humanitarian condescension, but the alternative has shaped their awareness of the kind of issues that people face around the world: African debt, HIV-AIDS, global poverty, and environmental questions. All, I think, have been shaped by this increased international connection.

But internationalism also had a conservative effect in an interesting way. Many evangelicals in the Global South, while much more liberal around issues of economic justice, can be quite conservative around

issues of gender and sexuality. As such, the global force of evangelicalism has actually shored up the most anti-gay and gender-conservative pieces of the evangelical movement in the United States.

When those American who oppose LGBTQ rights or women in positions of power can say, “We have the support of African and Asian believers,” it offers a kind of moral authority that goes with having the support of people in the Global South. (If Americans had not come to admire their fellow believers, then the fact that Africans or Asian Christians took a certain position wouldn’t hold much weight. But those ties have been made in a positive way for many.) So the global growth of evangelicalism has had a liberalizing impact, but it has also had the impact of strengthening the conservative line, especially on gender and sexuality.

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### **Why has Africa, perhaps more than Latin America or Asia, become a key region for exporting evangelical thinking?**

I think evangelicals are certainly growing faster in Africa than anywhere else in the world, but they are also exploding in Latin America. Evangelicals have had a very large impact in places like Brazil, where they are part of the reason that conservative president Jair Bolsonaro has as much support as he has. They have played a role in Guatemala, where, as my colleague Lauren Turek [shows](#), there were evangelicals in power back in the 1980s who had strong connections with the right wing and in the United States. Latin Americans have also influenced the small but important U.S. evangelical left, as scholars such as [David Kirkpatrick](#) and [David Swartz](#) have argued.

In my book, I was particularly interested in the Middle East and Africa. Africa is probably the heart of the new global evangelicalism in terms of growth, but Latin America is also crucial. Moreover, parts of Asia—certainly South Korea and China—have significant communities. And of course, Russia is an important player.

The Middle East is important for different reasons: it is where the idea of a great global conflict between Christianity and Islam has played out and one of the sites where evangelicals have defined themselves as a persecuted minority. In my book, I discuss why that framing is a problem. Recently, [Jason Bruner](#) has also written beautifully about this issue. In fact, the reality that American evangelicals and other Conservative Christians define themselves as part of a globally persecuted group has had a major impact on how these believers see themselves in the world.

But U.S. evangelical engagements with Africa are interesting because of how they are reshaping old tropes. American evangelicals are having to pay attention to Africa as a leader and not just as a site of abject need. Some of the biggest churches in the world are now in Africa. Africans have also, like South Koreans, been great senders of missionaries. They send people around the world, including to the US; there are quite a few African missionaries or outposts of African churches in the United States right now. Winners’ Chapel, Intl., [in Maryland](#), for example, is affiliated with the Living Faith Church Worldwide, a megachurch headquartered in Nigeria and with churches around the world.

**Can we say that American Evangelicals have exported the U.S. cultural wars—especially to Africa—and contributed to the polarization around LGBTQ+ issues that we now observe in many African countries (I am thinking of Uganda, for instance)? Or is the storyline more complicated? What is the role of politics and of missionary work?**

Politics can be quite complicated. I wrote a chapter on apartheid in South Africa, showing that American evangelicals had relations with both the most conservative leaders of South Africa and with the anti-apartheid movement.

People like Jerry Falwell had close connections with the apartheid government. And when Falwell went to South Africa in 1985, he met with the Afrikaner leadership as well as a few of the most conservative black leaders, that small minority who were not really opposing apartheid.

But there were also American evangelicals who had connections with anti-apartheid black and white South Africans, some of whom were themselves evangelical. This was a smaller and less visible group in the US, but the vast majority of black evangelicals in South Africa were deeply opposed to apartheid, and, just like more liberal Christians such as Desmond Tutu and Allan Boesak, worked to make themselves heard internationally. So evangelicals in the United States had connections to South Africans, and whether they were genuinely opposed to apartheid or supported the apartheid government, they were shored up by these connections. However, the story of somebody like Jerry Falwell, who openly proclaimed, “Yes, we should support South Africa,” is much better known than the story of a small group of moderate Southern Baptists and others who were trying to get their fellow American evangelicals to take a principled stance.

And there were many who were (to use a technical term) mushy. This category includes, for example, Billy Graham, who demanded that audiences for his 1973 tour in South Africa be integrated but at the same time refused to overtly condemn apartheid.

But you asked about LGBTQ+ issues, which I talk about in a chapter on Uganda, focusing on the various iterations of an anti-homosexuality law that passed there which, in one version, proposed the death penalty for “aggravated homosexuality.” When I first started writing that chapter, I expected to tell the story that people have often told, which is that Americans go in and basically export their conservative views to the Ugandan population. It didn’t turn out to be quite like that. What I saw—and I also drew on the scholarship of people who are experts on Uganda specifically—was that there was a kind of synergy between conservative evangelicals in Uganda and conservative evangelicals in the United States.

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And by conservative evangelicals in the United States, I mean a range of different people. Some, such as Pentecostal evangelist Lou Engle, went to Uganda and essentially supported the anti-homosexuality law. Then there are others, such as Saddleback pastor Rick Warren, who also had very close ties with Uganda, including with one of the leading advocates of the anti-homosexuality law, Martin Ssempe. This law put Warren in a real bind. Martin Ssempe had come to HIV/AIDS events that Rick Warren hosted. He had been Rick Warren’s guy in Uganda. And when Ssempe started supporting Ugandan radical anti-queer activism, Rick Warren spoke out against it, albeit rather belatedly. As a result, they had a major falling-out.

There was a lot of overlap and intersection between both U.S. and Ugandan groups, but it wasn't as if the Ugandans had never had anti-homosexual attitudes or conservative views about sexuality before American showed up. One thing is for sure, PEPFAR (the President's Emergency Program for AIDS Relief) money—that is, U.S. government money that was a massive program under President George W. Bush—did go to very conservative Ugandan churches and NGOs. It was designed for aid, education, and prevention as well as treatment, and under U.S. law a certain percentage had to go to abstinence education, which Ugandan conservatives eagerly supported. So American money did shore up that end of the Ugandan political spectrum; not just evangelical money, but actual U.S. government money.

I think it's important to say it this way: local actors should be understood to have agency and autonomy. The Ugandans were not pawns of the Americans. We saw, for example, in the fights in the global Anglican communion starting in the 1990s that African and Asian members had been an important part of the rise of the Anglican right. They had very close working relationships with Americans who were also trying to move the Anglican Communion to the right. Yet the Africans didn't always vote with the Americans, and there were many tensions. Still, American money and transnational connections were very much part of the story of Uganda—just not in the way that some observers have imagined. It was not some simple ideological injection by U.S. evangelicals into Ugandans' politics.

I think we can see that Americans have been very involved in politics in other parts of the world, and American evangelicals have often made alliances with the most conservative wing. However, there is almost always a diversity of people on both sides.

**That leads me to my next question: the role of African Americans in this expansion in Africa, and how race and colonialism were discussed within the evangelical movement.**

Actually, it was controversial that my book even included many of the African American churches. Most people, even most scholars, have thought of evangelicals as almost entirely white; you can hold the same theological views as “white evangelicals,” but if you are Latinx, Asian, or especially Black, you are not considered evangelical. That's changing, but still, many African Americans do not consider themselves “evangelicals.” A few do—T.D. Jakes, who has a television show and a large global following, would often be counted as an evangelical, or any of the Pentecostal churches. But the ministers from the African Methodist Episcopal Church are often not considered evangelicals.

Yet, I decided to include these African American churches because there *are* so many intersections, not only theologically but also in terms of conferences, music, events, etc. I don't think talk of “white evangelicalism” does justice to the multitude of ways that evangelicals see politics. As much as 25%-35% of the U.S. evangelical community is Black, Latinx, Asian, or other people of color; it depends on how you count and who you ask.

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I wrote an [article](#) about evangelicals of color in the era of Trump, for which I interviewed a few people. In it, I talked about African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinx believers, most of whom had complicated positions vis-à-vis this white-dominated evangelicalism in the United States. I remember interviewing one woman who'd been involved in multiracial evangelical institutions her whole life, including one



of the largest for young people, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. She is an Asian-American woman, and she's now head of Evangelicals for Social Action, which is a pretty liberal evangelical group. She remembers how, the day after Trump was elected, she went to church and was thinking, "So for whom in this room was Trump's racism not a deal breaker?" Who thought, 'Yeah, I know he's said some racist things, but I'm going to vote for him anyway, because X or because Y'?" She thought she had found a home in the evangelical world, and she is still in that world. But the fact that so many people, who might not themselves express certain views but who would happily vote for someone who did, really left her and a lot of other people on edge.

As I show in my book, this is not new. It is an issue throughout the 20th century vis-à-vis the rest of the world. There has been racism against Africans and Latin Americans in terms of missionary work, and it is now also becoming an internal issue in the churches themselves.

**To follow up on this issue, evangelicals' support for Donald Trump has been covered quite extensively. Is this different from evangelicals' support for the Bush Administration—a topic you worked on—for instance? Did Trump's personality and style fracture the Evangelical movement or cause it to evolve on some issues?**

I think that Trump's election really disproved what a lot of people, including myself, thought was happening among evangelicals. We believed that the far right was, if not on the decline, certainly changing and having to become more sophisticated and more multiracial, even if retrograde around gender and issues of sexuality.

I would not have expected the rush to support Trump. Not to underestimate the deeply conservative trends among white evangelicals, but there were many reasons for religious believers not to go there. But they did, and not just people who were kind of notational evangelicals. Trump's evangelical advisory council included some major and influential people, including some people of color. And there were all sorts of ordinary church pastors who seemed to be willing to take themselves and their churches right along wherever Trump went.

A number of people did break with Trump. At first it seemed like it might be a fairly large number, and then, once he won, there was a lot of back-pedaling. At some point, *Christianity Today* **called for Trump to resign**. That magazine used to be the voice of the core evangelical leadership, but it seems to speak less and less to the base of the movement today.

*Trump's evangelical advisory council included some major and influential people, including some people of color.*

I think we see growing splits along race issues. We know that Trump has Latinx and Asian supporters, more than a lot of people want to talk about. And what we know about evangelicals and race is that evangelicals of every race are more conservative than non-evangelicals of that race. Latinx evangelicals are more conservative than Latinx people overall. African American evangelicals are more conservative than African Americans overall. But there is *no* group of evangelicals of color—Latinx, Asian, or black—who are as conservative as white people overall.

We thus have to think about race as a crucial category of analysis, and Trump's rise really made that extremely clear. It's not that he didn't have Black and Latinx evangelical supporters; he did, including

some ministers. But over time, Trump probably contributed to fracturing the evangelical movement along lines of race, in large part because he made it clear how willing his white supporters were to ignore his racism.

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Today, Trump is becoming less popular, as he has less of a platform. Maybe in a few years, that pro-Trump wing of the movement will be more embarrassed than not. But I definitely think Trump revealed a really ugly—and by no means small—strand of American evangelicalism that was willing to be quite overt, not just around topics they could claim had Biblical sanction, like homosexuality or abortion, but around racial politics, police violence, and nationalism. With Trump's rise, the most conservative impulses of white evangelicals were given a megaphone.

## Fabio de Sa e Silva on Illiberal Trends in Brazil

*Originally published August 4, 2021*

**Fabio, you work on the role of lawyers in building illiberalism. We tend to see lawyers as the victims of illiberal governance. Yet in one of your latest articles, “[From Car Wash to Bolsonaro: Law and Lawyers in Brazil’s Illiberal Turn \(2014–2018\)](#),” you show that lawyers in Brazil have produced a legal culture that is closer to illiberalism than we imagine and therefore played a role in the election of Bolsonaro. Could you tell us more about your findings?**

Sure. My study focused specifically on *lava jato*, an anticorruption initiative led by a prosecutorial taskforce and a lower-level judge that unveiled a large corruption scheme at the Brazilian oil company Petrobras and had deep impacts on Brazilian politics.

Many in the media and even in academia saw *lava jato* as a triumph of political liberalism and the rule of law, since it was “ending impunity” in the country. But what I have demonstrated in that article and in other forthcoming ones is that *lava jato* produced and disseminated a “political grammar” that is at fundamental odds with political liberalism and the “rule of law.” In particular, those prosecutors painted corruption as an existential threat to the nation, argued for the need to change law and concentrate power to fight that threat, and claimed that the legal rights of defendants could be bent or broken for the greater good of fighting the threat.

Bolsonaro adopted a remarkably similar discourse, though in his case the threat came not just from “the corrupt,” but also from young Black males from urban areas, LGBTQ people, and other minorities. Sergio Moro, the judge in *lava jato* who convicted and arrested former president Lula da Silva (the conviction was later overturned and Moro was deemed “partial” by the Supreme Court) represented the line of continuity between *lava jato* and Bolsonaro. He became Bolsonaro’s Justice Minister and was behind some of Bolsonaro’s illiberal initiatives in the government. An example is a draft bill Bolsonaro sent to Congress that would give police officers in the country the equivalent of “qualified immunity,” which many considered the “right to kill.”

These findings, as you said, cut against conventional wisdom in studies of law and political change—and, perhaps more importantly, in the “legal development industry” that took shape in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—which tend to see lawyers as promoters of political liberalism and victims of political

illiberalism. My ultimate argument is that this relationship needs to be investigated more deeply and is contingent upon the history of the profession in each country. If the profession does not share liberal values, it will not promote political liberalism, even if it employs instruments associated with political liberalism, like anticorruption campaigns. In other words, I argue that we need to be less idealistic about law and lawyers and avoid thinking that they will unequivocally serve as bulwarks against illiberalism.

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**I think the literature on populist/illiberal or autocratic leaders tends to forget about the role of mid-level institutions and civil society in building an illiberal culture. Could you tell us more about how the literature on legal culture(s) has handled the rise of populism/illiberalism/the far right? Do we see interesting synergies in terms of research approaches?**

First of all, let me both agree with and emphasize the importance of your premise. We usually think of illiberalism as a product of high-level institutions, namely the presidency, if not of an autocrat's individual will. As such, we tend to ignore how it can be generated and legitimized in other domains and, just as importantly, in everyday life. We tend to situate illiberalism in studies of political institutions and practices, rather than thinking of it as a manifestation of culture, which can grow outside of political institutions and practices and enable them. Maybe this is so because discussions of the "illiberal turn" began in political science and studies of regime change, and they took a while to reach other areas and traditions of inquiry like cultural sociology and anthropology.

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That being said, let me address your question: I may be exaggerating, but I think the literature on legal culture(s) has not yet offered a satisfactory response to the problematique of illiberalism.

I think this is due in part to the idealism I mentioned before. Among many, many academics, there is an assumption—though this is not always overt—that lawyers will be intrinsic agents of political liberalism. This is not completely unfounded; we can hypothesize, for example, that processes of professional socialization and even the profession's interest in a "rule of law" order turn lawyers into supporters of political liberalism. But there is also plenty of evidence that lawyers can, and do accommodate illiberal orders—think, for example, of the lawyers who supported the United States war on terror or who operationalized political repression in the Brazilian civil/military dictatorship. So, in general, I think there is a great need for us to study the structure and the forces behind illiberal legal culture—and to overcome these epistemological obstacles along the way.

Then there is popular culture as well. In Brazil, where I come from, there is a tradition of thinking about the role of an illiberal political culture in shaping political institutions and practices. This goes back to studies of authoritarianism and what scholars at the University of Sao Paulo, led by Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, called "socially implanted authoritarianism." I think we need to explore this issue in

contemporary studies of liberal/illiberal legality as well. We may want to think that people aspire to a political/legal order that ensures freedom and equality, but that may not always be the case—**either because they think the promises of freedom and equality are a façade for arbitrariness** or because they actually prefer a political/legal order based on domination, especially if they are on top.

**Are there legal activists who try to oppose Bolsonaro’s attack on the judiciary? How does this “resistance” work and how does it materialize in terms of legal practices and activism?**

Yes, although the story is more complicated. There is a tradition in Brazil of the opposition bringing claims to court. This continues under Bolsonaro, and—thankfully—litigants have had some success. The best example comes from the COVID-19 crisis, when Bolsonaro was trying to centralize the “response” to the pandemic. (“Response” should be placed in quotes; he just wanted to ensure that the country would continue “normal life”). The Supreme Court was called upon to act and frustrated his plans, recognizing the authority of state and local governments to adopt restrictive measures.

Yet as we know, there is only so much that courts can do to stop autocrats—judges have a limited amount of political capital to spend in these high-profile cases. Indeed, instead of bowing to the Court, what Bolsonaro has done is simply deepen his use of unconstitutional and illegal measures (during COVID-19 and beyond), making it costly for the Court to keep him in check.

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Besides the domain of judicial review, there are also important criminal investigations underway that pose threats to Bolsonaro. One of these investigations focuses on attacks carried out against the Supreme Court and Congress. These attacks were allegedly organized/paid for by Bolsonaro’s sons, his supporters in Congress, and his affiliates in the business sector. However, it is also true that, in this case, investigators sometimes use unorthodox methods and violate due process rights, which eventually weakens their position—here, again, you cannot speak in the name of law while violating the law.

In the meantime, Bolsonaro has managed to coopt sectors of the Federal Police and the Public Prosecutor’s Office and has recently appointed a loyal attorney to the Supreme Court. Through these measures, he has severely undermined the conditions for effective legal accountability of the presidency—just as autocrats do to rule unconstrained. And there is evidence that a conservative/libertarian subset of the bar is growing and providing Bolsonaro with technical support and symbolic legitimacy.

In sum, the picture is mixed. Those trying to resist Bolsonaro are seeking protection under the law, with some success, while Bolsonaro tries to both constrain and coopt courts and other legal institutions, sometimes drawing voluntary support from sectors of the bar that self-identify with his policy agenda.

**You now help run a collective project, the **Project of Autocratic Legalism (PAL)**, that looks at how law is affected by and affects autocrats. This is a fascinating topic, and calls to mind the research done by Tímea Drinóczi and Agnieszka Bień-Kacała on **Illiberal Constitutionalism** (in their case applied to Poland and Hungary). What are the main takeaways emerging from the comparison of Brazil, India, and South Africa?**

I like to see the PAL project as part of the larger camp of scholars who study the entanglements between law, democracy, and political liberalism—although I believe there are some original contributions we can offer as a diverse group that is looking at a unique set of countries (Brazil, India, and South Africa).

Our comparative studies are at a very early stage, but there is something that has caught my attention and that I believe can be shared as an insight. *Autocrats use law to consolidate power and sideline opponents*, but they build on opportunities that are unique to each context. For example, our team is showing that in South Africa, Zuma tapped into a system of tribal courts that has existed since pre-colonial times; he gave more power to these courts to avoid being held accountable in civil courts. In Brazil, Bolsonaro is using and abusing national security laws enacted during the civil/military dictatorship (1964-1985) to intimidate his critics. In India, Modi is using informal practices and ties, like post-retirement appointments for justices, to coopt courts. I hope we can deepen our conversation going forward and better elaborate what these findings mean theoretically for the study of law, democracy, and political liberalism.

*Autocrats use law to consolidate power and sideline opponents, but they build on opportunities that are unique to each context.*

I invite your readers to follow our website and *podcast* to keep up with the news!

**I do! Last question: Our program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. In your research, you use the term “autocrat/autocratic,” which is more about practices of power than about ideology. Could you tell us if and how the notion of illiberalism makes sense in the Brazilian context? Which liberalism is targeted as the enemy by Bolsonaro’s rhetoric and how does that ideological frame articulate with autocratic practices?**

First of all, I think it is important to address the relationship between illiberalism and autocratization. I see illiberalism as a building block of autocratization. Not all contestations over political liberalism result in autocratic rule (see, for example, how social democracy grew in the 20<sup>th</sup> century), but every instance of autocratic rule depends on the suppression of individual freedoms and accountability mechanisms—that is, of some sort of illiberal politics.

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There are at least two important ways in which Bolsonaro plays such politics. One of them involves his “reaction” to what he alleges to be the left’s turn to “cultural Marxism”—the role that progressive forces have given to race, gender, environmental concerns, etc., in policy and political debates. This leads him to attack minority groups (women, indigenous groups, Afro Brazilians, etc.) and minority rights, as well as media outlets and academic institutions, which he accuses of promoting “political correctness.” These attacks do not always translate into policy, but they often enable violence at the societal level—and that is sufficient to institute an illiberal political order.



Another expression of his illiberalism involves direct attacks on the opposition and accountability institutions, often based on fake news and conspiracy theories. For example, he likes to blame the Supreme Court and Congress for his incompetent, genocidal handling of the pandemic. Perhaps more seriously, he is now fiercely engaged in undermining popular confidence in the electoral system, alleging that elections have been defrauded and threatening that he will not allow elections to be held in 2022 if the system is not changed. We know very well where this leads, and it is not pretty!

## Cynthia Miller-Idriss on the Mainstreamization of Extremist Ideas

*Originally published August 9, 2021*

**Cynthia, you have been working on many different aspects of far-right culture, but I would like us to begin with your seminal *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right*. You offer an impressive mapping of the physical and virtual spaces of recruitment. Could you tell us about the main spaces you identified and which ones were the most surprising to you?**

First of all, thanks for the invitation. It's a pleasure to be in this conversation and I think it's a great thing to try to communicate some of the arguments put forward by academics in more ordinary language to students and academic communities. Sometimes we just talk among each other, and I don't think that's very good.

In this book, there are two different ways that space is approached. One is that it is becoming increasingly common, when considering the spread of disinformation and propaganda, that people just encounter extremism wherever they are. Extremism used to be a destination that you had to seek out—you had to find a space where extremist ideas were being propagated among a group that usually had initiation rites and membership lists and was part of a network of other groups with clear ideologies and manifestos.

Now, it is much more likely that extremist ideas come right to you in the spaces where you spend time ordinarily, especially online. This could be wherever you're doing your hobbies or if you are looking for information. They come to you even in physical space: since I wrote the book, the number of white supremacist propaganda flyers being spread in public spaces has doubled. Extremist groups used to target college campuses, but with the COVID-19 shutdown, they have been targeting dog parks, community parks, town halls, and anywhere else people might be.

One of the prime examples is YouTube. A woman once told me after a talk I gave that she had once gone online looking for strategies to prep things in Tupperware containers. The first hit took her to an extreme survivalist prepping site that had intersections with the prepping community and the survivalist extreme right. Another example that somebody shared with me is the story of a man who wanted to learn how to install drywall in his garage. He started a series of videos on YouTube, a 10-part video tutorial. At about video three, right when he's in the middle of the project, the guy starts introducing white supremacist

and anti-immigrant ideas. But now he's stuck, right? He has to decide: "Am I finishing this project?" Ultimately, he finished the series and by the end it was showcasing full-fledged, extremist, neo-Nazi, white supremacist ideas, which had been very gradually and carefully introduced in the beginning.

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So first, these far-right groups build a captive audience, and second, they take advantage of the parasocial relationship that people sometimes develop with YouTube and social media personalities or hosts. And you end up in an algorithm that recommends even more extreme content.

The reason why I had "Homeland" in the title was because I also wanted to talk about territory itself and this white supremacist obsession with the genetic link to the land and the way that that plays out in so many different pursuits of a white ethno-state—the "blood and soil" idea of a connection to the land. What was interesting was the use of Native American metaphors by the white supremacist fringe in the United States and Europe as a cautionary tale: natives were pushed onto reservations when immigrants arrived and that's going to happen to white people.

If I had to pick one space that surprised me, it was finding far-right ideas around food. I started exploring what was going on with food and ended up on these conspiracy sites that sell nuclear masks next to organic seed vaults. The more I dug into how food is used, the more I found. For instance, far-right groups in Europe will run soup kitchens, but they put pork in the product so that Jews or Muslims can't eat it. There are ways that food is used to recruit. It's tied to identity, but also used to exclude and to make people anxious. The idea of a seed vault, of needing to stock up in case of an apocalypse, is very closely tied to accelerationist thinking, the idea of end times, and then of rebirth and restoration. I realized I could write a whole book just about food and extremism, which was incredible.

**That's really fascinating! What does that tell us about the mainstreaming of extremism? And how do we articulate the conceptual relationship between the mainstream and extremism? Can we also see the reverse process—that is, extremism losing some of its extreme features and becoming "normalized" by its entry into the mainstream?**

Yeah, that's not an easy question. My previous book, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream*, tracked the mainstreaming of style and clothing in Europe—the erasure of that racist skinhead look and its replacement with a much more mainstream style. That phenomenon was accompanied by a blending-in of extremism and the way that people could pass in public. Your ideology didn't have to be reflected in a uniform appearance anymore. Before, when you shaved your head and wore a bomber jacket and combat boots, everybody knew who you were and what you stood for, no matter where you were in the world or what you were doing.

But as aesthetics became more mainstream, supporters of far-right ideas could go to work or to school without people necessarily knowing what ideas they held. In this way, they became a little bit more secret at the same time as they became more mainstream. That allowed a lot more people to hold those ideas because it was less commitment than before, when you immediately stood out on account of your clothes.

This literal mainstreaming of extremism has been reinforced by the increasingly widespread idea of an existential threat to the West, as advanced by populist leaders in Europe and the US. Being anti-elite has become blended with a nationalist, anti-immigrant stance, even though populism itself is a tactic that can be used by the left as well as the right.

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It made people at least perceive the legitimization of some far-right ideas, even if this was not intentional, allowing a normalization to happen. There has been so much going on since the book was published. Take this bogeyman of critical race theory, for instance: look at the backlash against the teaching of even racism and the idea that there's only one version of history to be told—at least in the United States. I think we need a lot more work on these issues because there's a growing defense of hate speech as free speech. For example, the U.S. government is very focused on the prevention of violence, but one also needs to prevent disinformation and conspiracy theories from spreading, even if they're not directly tied to violence.

The issue of where to draw the line between the mainstream and the extreme is complicated, and I don't think anybody really has a very good idea of how to do it, except maybe Germany, which actually has a legal definition of the difference between radicalism and extremism. Radicalism is troubling but allowable within the German constitution, whereas extremism is illegal and outside the bounds of the constitution. It would be helpful if someone tried to draw that line for the US, even if it were drawn in a different place than in a country like Germany.

For example, the U.S. has done a very bad job of recognizing male supremacy as part of the problem, even though we know that there have been repeated mass attacks against women—in a yoga studio, in a sorority, by van in Toronto, on a judge's home in New Jersey, on women in a massage parlor in Atlanta—that are all attributed in some form or another to male supremacists. But in the new Department of Justice and FBI classification, gender is listed at the end, under all “other” forms of extremism (animal rights, environmental issues, anti-abortion, seditionists, etc.) and isn't given the same attention or focus as white supremacist extremists and antigovernment militias. The UK recently officially declared misogyny a hate crime, which is a move in the right direction, but the US has not yet done so.

*The U.S. has done a very bad job of recognizing male supremacy as part of the problem.*

**You mentioned Germany, and you worked on youth clothes culture moving from neo-Nazi underground culture to mainstream. How would you compare the U.S. and German cases of mainstreaming of extremism? What are the similarities and differences?**

I think the main difference is that after World War II, Germany approached the issue with what they called “defensive democracy.” There's an acknowledgement there that you can't just address extremism by targeting extremist groups and ideas, but that actually the better way—or at least as important of a way—is to reinforce the ability of the mainstream to be resilient to the propaganda and disinformation, or tactics like fearmongering or scapegoating, that are propagated by extremist groups. The idea is that

these extremist groups are always going to be there; you have to monitor them and you can try to get rid of them, but you're never going to eradicate them entirely.

The United States has had the opposite strategy for most of its history of domestic terrorism and extremism, a strategy that focused on infiltrating, surveilling, and monitoring the groups to ultimately shut them down and try to interrupt violent plots before they occurred. Until very recently, the US was almost exclusively focused on Islamist terrorism, completely ignoring—as is now widely acknowledged across agencies—the rising threat from domestic violent extremism. But even though federal agencies have finally started to recognize that, they still have a very heavy focus on groups and associations, even though the vast majority of extremist violence does not come from people who are card-carrying members of any particular group.

The U.S. government struggles because it wants not to police ideology, but to prevent violence. Currently, the only way they really know of preventing violence is to stop it by infiltrating groups. In this way, law enforcement agencies have successfully thwarted dozens of attacks. But the vast majority of far-right violence happens outside associations. For example, many of the arrests on January 6 were of people who are not card-carrying members of any organization and are not members of any groups.

That's the major difference between Germany and the United States: a growing awareness. The Biden administration recently **released** a new national strategy for combatting domestic terrorism that says it's going to take a public health approach. It calls for partnerships, at least with schools, with parents, and with communities, but we don't know what the implementation is really going to look like.

There are other differences. Germany has its own dedicated independent agency charged with eradicating extremism from the military, showing how many investigations are going on across military units. You can't even imagine that kind of transparency here. We know it's a problem. We don't know how big of a problem.

*Germany has its own dedicated independent agency charged with eradicating extremism from the military, showing how many investigations are going on across military units. You can't even imagine that kind of transparency here.*

**Your book's title contains both the word "homeland" and the word "global." Can you tell us more about the articulation of domestic and transnational aspects? Are transnational links and borrowings mostly limited to intellectual circles or can we find them more broadly in far-right cultural products such as music, video games, MMA, etc.?**

There are so many ways that it's global!

First, the US has been a major exporter of far-right ideology for many years. Over the past five years, there has been a 250% increase in far-right terrorism in Western countries, according to the **Global Terrorism Index**, with over half of the incidents and about half of the deaths in the United States alone. We have a bigger problem than most European countries, and many of the original ideas are rooted in ideologies that were produced in the United States, as were the platforms, social media platforms, gaming platforms, and servers where they spread.

Second, white supremacy has a global audience. In the last two major attacks in Germany, in Halle and Hanau, both attackers—on a synagogue and a Turkish restaurant and then the shishi bars—either wrote their manifesto or livestreamed their attack in English. It was a national white supremacist attack against immigrants in their country, yet enacted with the global audience in mind. I think that captures the contradiction of what’s happening.

Many years ago in Germany, I saw a photograph of two young men wearing a T-shirt that had the number 168:1 on the back, and above it “McVeigh versus U.S. Government.” It’s set up like a soccer score, talking about how many victims McVeigh had versus the execution of Timothy McVeigh by the U.S. Government. The thing that really struck me was that these were German neo-Nazis wearing a T-shirt claiming an anti-government terrorist attack on another country’s soil as their own victory.

Along similar lines, there are gaming platforms that have a gaming console that shows the different terrorist actors and how many “kill score” points they have. The “high score list” features the Oslo shooter at the top, followed by the Christchurch shooter, the El Paso shooter, and so on.

***Hate in the Homeland* invites us to rehabilitate the role of culture in the study of the far right. Can we say that the far right is succeeding at penetrating the mainstream not so much through politics but through culture? Is that a Gramscian strategy or the result of the creativity of far-right groups in investing cultural scenes, which are more open and less formalized/institutionalized than political spheres?**

Yes, it’s really interesting because “metapolitics”—the idea that you create political change through cultural change—has been a strategy of the Nouvelle Droite since the late 1960s. Some people called them the Gramscis of the right, as Antonio Gramsci, a leftist, argued that one cannot have a revolution without gaining control over the ideas of a society. One can see the same strategy now among Identitarian groups. Andrew Breitbart once said that politics is downstream from culture, that pre-political ideas will seed political change. It’s a long game; it’s an exercise in patience; it takes decades—but that long game of the far right seems to be bearing fruit now.

Some of that is deliberate, some of it is organic, coming from the bottom up, and that’s what’s complicated. Take the whole meme world, for instance. That’s not being directed by anyone, but look at something like the Boogaloo meme or Pepe the frog—how Pepe the frog evolved into the flag of Kekistan, which signifies a white ethno-state, and then that flag was waving at the Capitol on January 6. It started as a joky meme created by teenagers, and then it showed up at the Capitol insurrection. Boogaloo, too, started as a joke among teenagers to signal a second civil war before being adopted as a code that motivated violent actors to kill people in the name of Boogaloo-type scenes.

Youth culture may become a real driver of offline violence and extremist protest in ways that I think we often dismiss. I often cite the second reviewer of a grant proposal that I wrote years ago when I was first researching the mainstreaming, who said, “Aren’t you being alarmist? Won’t they just grow out of it?” But this isn’t just about style, or about an aesthetic change or a cultural phenomenon; there are very clear connections with mobilization of violence.

*Youth culture may become a real driver of offline violence and extremist protest in ways that I think we often dismiss.*



**That brings me to my last question, which is more about “What do we do?” You are also an educator. In both books, you stress the importance of youth culture and the rebellious aspect of youth as a conduit for far-right penetration. Where do you see the solutions for our societies? How do we “inoculate” our youth against far-right ideas while protecting their search for rebellion and autonomy?**

For me, the most straightforward approach is the German one of equipping the mainstream—that is, pre-preventative work. Everybody, not just youth, should be able to recognize and be resilient to propaganda, disinformation, or persuasive extremist techniques like scapegoating or fearmongering. These intervention techniques can apply to anything. They should help people better recognize how not to be susceptible to Q-Anon, for instance. We call that inoculation and we’ve been testing a variety of video-based approaches in a partnership with Jigsaw. We try to basically prime and teach people how propaganda works.

*The most straightforward approach is the German one of equipping the mainstream—that is, pre-preventative work.*

In the same way that we teach kids in digital or communications classes how to be wary of potential predators and be careful about their privacy online, we should be teaching everybody how to recognize propaganda and disinformation. One can’t address the rise of far-right narratives properly by only focusing on the fringe; it has to be addressed by the mainstream’s ability to understand some basic issues about equity and racism. We need social inclusion, inclusive diversity, and attention to issues of equity in the mainstream as part of the long-term effort to combat the public’s vulnerability to extremist groups’ claims.

## Elżbieta Korolczuk on Gender and Politics

*Originally published August 18, 2021*

**Elżbieta, you have been working on the intersection of gender and politics in Poland. To begin with a broad question, do you see in the rise of right-wing populism—as embodied in the Law and Justice Party (PiS)—a sign of the decline of social citizenship and the result of neoliberal reforms?**

There is a strong tendency to think that right-wing populism is combined with neoliberalism, as was the case among neoconservatives in the United States in the 1990s. Today, both Poland and Hungary are examples of the ways in which right-wing populism can provide a version of welfare chauvinism rather than neoliberal politics. When we look at countries such as the United States or Bolsonaro's Brazil, we see right-wing politics—right-wing in cultural terms (anti-pluralist, anti-equality, anti-minority rights)—being combined with neoliberal social policies. Brazil, for example, is a clear example of the fact that right-wing populists and extreme right-wing politicians tend to implement austerity measures and cut social spending, with the result that money flows from minority groups to elite supporters of the power holders.

*Both Poland and Hungary are examples of the ways in which right-wing populism can provide a version of welfare chauvinism rather than neoliberal politics.*

Poland and Hungary are a very different type of regime. You have very extreme forms of homophobia, anti-feminist politics, and anti-refugee and migration positions on the part of the ruling party, *and* an increase in social spending, which is a huge difference from previous governments like the Civic Platform (PO) in Poland.

In 2011 the Civic Platform introduced a program called *Maluch* (“Little One”) that was oriented toward supporting childcare, especially broadening access to childcare for children of pre-school age. They spent around 120 million Polish złoty on this per year. The program that has been the main staple of Law and Justice politics, “500 Plus”—direct cash transfers of 500 złoty per child per month to families with children—costs around 26 billion złoty per year. And they have actually continued the *Maluch* program as well. If you look at Polish GDP, there has been a huge increase in the percentage of GDP spent on social policies, from 1.78 percent in 2015 to 3.11 percent in 2017.

It's the same in Hungary, where Minister for Families Katalin Novák has been boasting that in the past couple of years, spending on different types of social programs—especially for families with children—has been increased to levels unheard of before Viktor Orbán came to power. In 2021 government spending on family support will supposedly reach 7.1 billion Euro. Is this money well spent? That is debatable: many researchers argue that the funds should be directed toward improving the quality of social services rather than spent on direct cash transfers. Still, a substantial part of the electorate appreciates generous social policies of the kind offered by PiS or Fidesz.

It is, of course, nothing new for extreme right-wing parties to support some forms of welfare chauvinism or an exclusionary welfare state. By definition, some groups are excluded from this state support. In Hungary, for instance, the system is very much oriented toward excluding Roma women. In Poland, the government has cut financial support for the LGBTQ community, immigrants, and battered women.

**Could you elaborate on the articulation between Poland's relationship to the EU and moral conservatism? How does the defense of the so-called traditional family overlap with the narrative on Poland's sovereignty vis-à-vis "Brussels"?**

The Polish Law and Justice Party is very much a nationalistic party, in the sense that it imagines society as a nation that has power through the strength of its families. Family, rather than the individual, is seen as the basic unit of society. In that sense, PiS promotes the vision that only by strengthening so-called traditional families can Poland retain its sovereignty and its cultural integrity. The party portrays liberal values—emancipation, minority rights, and individual rights—as coming to Poland from abroad and foreign to the traditional Polish soul.

Nationalism or nativism is a very powerful, affective, and effective form of politics. As Ruth Wodak has pointed out, right-wing politics is often politics of fear. Today, it is often the fear of moral corruption, pedophilia, and disruption of the gender binary that are being evoked. In the propaganda materials promoted by the state and the Catholic Church on the visual and textual level, one can find constant references to the need to protect children from sexualization and moral degradation and to protect families from the outrageousness of genderists and promoters of so-called LGBT ideology. Such messages reflect the view that the West has basically lost its integrity or its moral orientation due to 1968 and the sexual revolution. So now the role of Poland and basically Central and Eastern Europe is to save the West from its own moral corruption.

This narrative marks a shift in the existing geopolitical perception of Poland and other post-communist countries as having to "catch up" with a more developed West. Now the idea is that actually, we can save the West because we have retained the values and moral compass that form the cornerstone of Western Christian civilization. This reversal is something about which Polish intellectuals representing the ultra-conservative anti-gender movement speak very openly. Of course, the ultimate danger to Europe's safety is Islam, which is why ultraconservative activists and right-wing politicians promote the view that there is an analogy between now and the moment when Polish King Sobieski rescued Europe in the battle against the Ottoman Empire. The idea is that Poland—thanks to its moral integrity and its Christian values—is able to protect the West from the dangers of migration, Islam, multiculturalism, and refugee influx. Finally, Poland has become the protector of Europe: it will save Europe rather than being saved by it. Thus, the anti-EU position of PiS and its coalition partners is ambiguous. Rather than expressing anti-European views, they claim that they want to save the EU from the clutches of liberal and leftist elites.

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**What are the intellectual roots of this antigenderism and how is it embedded in the social fabric of society? I am interested here in the question of illiberal civil society. Who are the grassroots actors who push for an anti-gender agenda, with or without the support of the state?**

I would say that the anti-gender movement is a part of a global civil society, which is often presented as a harbinger of liberal and progressive values even though in reality it is much more heterogeneous. There are basically three main sources of support for the ultraconservative “anti-gender” movement: religious (the Vatican leads the way, but the movement is now ecumenical), anti-communist, and anti-liberal.

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Some conservative groups—such as Tradition, Property and Family (TFP), which originated in the 1960s in Brazil—had from the very beginning a very strong anti-communist and neoliberal orientation; they also opposed the reforms of the Catholic Church that took place during this period. Since then, TFP has evolved into more of a global franchise. They are very active in Poland: originally TFP helped to launch the Piotr Skarga Association, which in turn played an important role in establishing the Ordo Iuris Institute, which is today a highly influential civil society actor in Poland and has a growing presence in the European Union because it cooperates with several European organizations, such as the European Center for Law and Justice. Due to its close cooperation with right-wing populists in power, in Poland the movement is becoming institutionalized within state structures. Many of those who established the Ordo Iuris Institute are now working in highly influential institutions such as the National Institute for Freedom, the key body that manages relations between the state and civil society in Poland. They have become the new cadres in the process of state-sponsored elite change.

Geographically, we can trace the lineage of the current anti-gender movement to its roots in Latin America, but also of course in the United States. The World Congress of Families (WCF) was established in the US in the 1990s and has cooperated with Russian actors for quite a long time. WCF is one of the key actors bringing together different groups: politicians, representatives of grassroots organizations, powerful NGOs, aristocrats, and people representing different denominations. I attended the World Congress of Families in Verona two years ago and could see people there who were evangelicals, Catholics, and Orthodox, representatives of many African ultra-conservative organizations, and members of the European aristocracy. Officially, the Vatican did not send any high-ranking representative, but the local bishop from Verona was present.

Ultraconservative organizations such as [CitizenGO](#), which was established in Spain, employ new technologies to mobilize people for petition drives around the world. And we have witnessed mass mobilization of people, such as the 2013 *La Manif Pour Tous* in France opposing the marriage equality law. *La Manif Pour Tous* managed to mobilize millions of people, who took to the streets of Paris and

Lyon because they felt threatened by the speed of cultural change, exemplified by a more inclusive definition of the family.

That brings me back to the question of family and social policy. While the left is really trying hard to reconnect the economic with the cultural, the right is doing it quite easily and quite effectively. What they're trying to project is the image of people who care about those in need, especially hard-working locally rooted traditional families, who have allegedly been abandoned and ridiculed by the liberals and leftists. The main slogan of the World Congress of Families was "Welcome Family Heroes." And even the American head of the organization, Brian Brown, who in the United States is known mostly for his attempts to first stop and now reverse the marriage equality laws, spoke about the fact that we need to support mothers, people with disabilities, and older people—that the state needs to provide a range of services to really meet the needs of local populations.

The public image that ultraconservative actors aim to project is that of "family heroes" devoted to traditional family values—that is, people who defend local cultural norms and innocent children against the twin dangers of "gender ideology" and the power of global markets, driven by what Pope Francis has described as the "idolatry of money."

This is something that I discuss in detail in my forthcoming book co-authored with Agnieszka Graff, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (to be published by Routledge in September 2021). We claim that the anti-gender ultra-conservative movement gained momentum because of its ability to present itself as a conservative response to neoliberalism. Of course, they don't use the word neoliberalism; rather, they talk about rampant individualism, alienation, the demise of family, and so on. But in reality they are tackling a lot of issues that have become really important to many people today, issues that have to do with the precarity of living and working conditions, with austerity measures, and with the neoliberal politics of economization. I think that the left tends to think it "owns" opposition to neoliberalism, but the field of struggle has shifted and the opposition to neoliberalism as a socio-cultural formation has been mobilized—maybe hijacked, maybe just constructed—very effectively by ultra-conservative forces.

*We claim that the anti-gender ultra-conservative movement gained momentum because of its ability to present itself as a conservative response to neoliberalism.*

**This brings me to the role of the Church. How does the Church mobilize the antigenderism narrative, sponsor pro-family lobbies, and organize actions such as the so-called "LGBT-free zones"? Does it play a leading role or a companion role to the PiS? Can we see dissenting voices rejecting the Church's reactionary positions?**

Poland is often misunderstood as a case illustrating the moral power of the Church to make the society more conservative. But I see it differently, and many studies confirm that Poles are not as conservative as the Church would have it. Indeed, the Church acts as a political institution, working closely with politicians on the local and national level. This is something that has been documented, for example, by Anna Grzymala-Busse in her 2015 book *Nations Under God*, which shows how the church in Poland has become the closest partner of those in power.

At the same time, Poland is witnessing rapid secularization. Comparative studies by Pew Research have shown that the speed of secularization in Poland is the highest of over 100 countries under study: only

16% of young adults declare that religion is very important to them. In that sense, the less power the church has in society, the more prone it is to weave strong ties with politicians to secure its economic and symbolic power and its privileges.

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The contemporary Polish Church does not really allow any dissenting voices within its ranks. The people who once dissented have either left the Church or died off due to generational change. The Polish episcopate is much more conservative than the Vatican today, or at least than Pope Francis, although he is also much more conservative than many people care to believe. In that sense, the Polish Catholic Church is an institution that really clings to politics because it is losing the people; the women's protests of October 2020, when young women protested in front of churches, illustrated this ongoing process. The Church is losing its authority, especially its moral authority. I wouldn't say that this process will bring major change in a year or two, but I think that it will become part of political change in the future. The scale of the pedophilia scandal within the Church is also motivating religious people to push for deep changes.

**I was also wondering about the role of memory in the Polish version of global wars? References to Nazism, to Communism, parallels between anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-Semitic legislation, between fighting against antigenderism and fighting against the communist regime... It seems memory(ies) play an important role in mobilizing and connecting citizens' actions. Could you tell us more?**

Yes, definitely. Already in 2014, Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard **documented** the explosion of a politics of memory triggered by the fall of state socialism in Eastern Europe and demonstrated growing polarization around the ways in which people remember the past. I would say that the anti-gender movement, along with right-wing populists, tries to use the memory of the anti-communist fight against the Soviet empire to oppose any progressive emancipatory projects today. This takes place on many levels.

*The anti-gender movement, along with right-wing populists, tries to use the memory of the anti-communist fight against the Soviet empire to oppose any progressive emancipatory projects today.*

The first level is to accuse, for example, feminists or LGBTQ+ activists of being communists at heart or being like the communists in the sense of planning social engineering, trying to steal people's souls, trying to indoctrinate children and educate them in ways that will make them alien to their parents, and so on.

The second level is the idea (verging on conspiracy) that there are always some hidden elites with communist leanings who want to bring down the nation. My colleague Agnieszka Graff has written very eloquently about the matrix of this narrative being basically anti-Semitism. The idea is that there is someone out there—the global elites, from George Soros to Bill and Melinda Gates—who controls global institutions such as the UN or EU with the aim of destroying traditional nations. This myth of a global elite is, of course, heavily modeled on the myth of a global Jewish elite allegedly ruling the world.



Depending on who the speakers are, these anti-Semitic undertones will be hidden or more visible, but the core idea is that there is someone out there who wants to rule the world and that imposing “gender ideology” on children is part of this plan.

The third level concerns the intellectual underpinnings of contemporary culture. People such as Gabriele Kuby or Marguerite Peeters talk about the ways in which the very basics of our knowledge—especially when it comes to sociology, psychology, and other social sciences—have been corrupted. They talk about how key intellectual figures, including Margaret Mead, Freud, and others, have been utterly corrupted and therefore we need to remake our social sciences and transform the educational system in line with “healthy Christian” values. The anti-gender movement claims to remember the ills of previous emancipatory projects, which makes it well suited to oppose the current ones.

As always, the past is used to project a specific vision of the present or the future. It is quite interesting that the anti-gender movement has been able to create a sense of retrotopia, a utopia based on Golden Age-type imagery that has turned out to be very attractive to some people at a moment when there is so much uncertainty about the present.

My last point concerns the notion of “cultural Marxism,” which is used by the far right and ultraconservatives to denounce progressive projects. This notion captures what they really want to project to the wider public, which is the idea that “gender ideology” exists and is as dangerous as Marxism and Nazism put together. It is imagined as a manipulative top-down project to remake sexuality, gender, the family, and reproduction—basically, a project of colonizing people. This idea of colonization is often brought up in anti-gender discourse, as it can then reactivate the idea that the nation needs to oppose it and be protected.

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This is exactly the victim/perpetrator reversal that many scholars looking at right-wing discourses warn against. Once you believe that “gender” or “LGBT ideology” exists, that there is this horrible disease, this “Ebola from Brussels” that aims to infect your children, then you can legitimately use violence against sexual minorities, as happened in the city of Białystok during a Pride march in 2019. At the end of this process is violence, and we have to say it plainly and firmly.

## **Emre Erdoğan and Tuğçe Erçetin on Populism in Turkey**

*Originally published August 31, 2021*

**Tuğçe and Emre, in your research on populism in Turkey, you insist on the construction of a “we-ness” in order to mobilize voters. In today’s Turkey, who is the “we,” the people in the name of which Erdoğan claims to be speaking, and who are the Others, those excluded from the “we”?**

Populist discourse produces antagonistic camps through positive and negative categorizations. Following the social identity perspective, we argue that the “we-ness” of populism underlines the in-group through the construction of a homogeneous group of the people and its identification with a leader. This category constructs victimization and superiority, appealing to commonalities and framing unification with an idealized entity and prototypical leader. In contrast to the bloc of the “good people,” the others” are seen as “evil” or “harmful” to the people’s values, lifestyle, and unity and include the political opposition, refugees, intellectuals, minorities, etc.

In today’s Turkey, articulating “we-ness” has various implications for constructing moral superiority and scapegoats. Appealing to commonalities, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader, Erdoğan, redefine conservative, native, and national images of the society by creating “reasonable” categories through Turkish and Muslim images. In general, this category represents the AKP bloc, although context matters to the definition of “we-ness.” One example: the constitutional referendum in 2017 bifurcated the country into two camps—the “no” vote and the “yes” vote. The AKP and its ally, the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), supported the “yes” vote; accordingly, the AKP added supporters of the “yes” vote to the “we-ness.” Likewise, the abortive coup of July 15, 2016 created the categories of “heroes” and “real people” from among those citizens who struggled against the coup plotters and responded to Erdoğan’s call.

The AKP’s construction of “we-ness” frames the common experiences, feelings, norms, beliefs, and lifestyle of a conservative and loyal segment of society. On the opposite side, the “other” bloc includes the opposition political parties (in particular the Republican People’s Party and the Peoples’ Democratic Party), media, academics, journalists, and civil society. The out-group is constructed using demonizing and securitizing language; this leads to the association of the “terrorist” label with this “other” bloc, appealing to the in-group’s uncertainty-induced fear and anger. For instance, the opposition is associated

with terrorist acts, bombings, propaganda, and clashes that make it possible to imagine “others” as a threat within society.

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In other words, we argue that Erdoğan homogenizes “others” through the use of this single category while defining the party as the “guardian of the people.” As a populist actor, he constructs “we-ness” by reference to common victimization and moral superiority; dissimilar “others” are understood as “dangerous” in this narrative of blame.

**What role do Syrian refugees play in Turkish populist rhetoric? Are they othered to construct them as the enemy or is this approach confined to Turkey’s more traditional Others, such as Kurds, Armenians, and Greeks?**

In Turkey, there is a traditional and ever-present anti-Kurdish hostility, and this has been deepened in recent years by the AKP-MHP coalition. The leaders of the pro-Kurdish political party, The Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), as well as its previous co-presidents, deputies, and mayors, are currently serving long jail sentences. A case has also been filed to get the party shut down. The AKP continues to see Kurds and other ethnic or religious minorities as the main “others” of the Turkish “people,” but does not include Syrian refugees in the enemy category. On the contrary, it employs a frame of moral superiority toward them and refers to them as part of “ensar culture” or using the descriptor of “brothers/sisters,” stating that Turkish people and Syrian refugees are united against the European policy of closing its borders—to Turkey as a potential member state and to Syrian refugees.

But Syrians have become the primary scapegoats of the opposition. The leader of the Republican People’s Party (CHP), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who could not receive votes from provinces predominantly inhabited by Kurdish people, stated that if the party came to power, they would send refugees back within two years. In one assembly meeting, he shared his experience: “I went to a traditional coffeehouse in Şanlıurfa, wanted to see how unemployed people find a job. People sit there, a truck comes, and a man calls for 10-15 workers, then people get on the truck and go. When I asked an older man why he didn’t go, he said, ‘My family is large, and I need at least 120 Turkish lira; Syrians work for a lesser amount.’ He told me that Syrians work for 50-60 Turkish lira, which is not enough to support his family.”

**You have been working at the intersection of place-based framings and populism. Has the AKP leveraged some geographical beliefs? How is that reflected in its campaigning?**

The AKP mobilizes voters using three narratives regarding place-based framing.

The first relies on the construction of geographical perceptions related to the glory days of the Ottoman and Seljuk empires: APK is claimed to be the “heir to the Ottoman legacy.” Hence, the campaigns include references to Ottoman lands or highlight collective identity through references to specific place names. This narrative stresses the continuity of historical achievements and homogeneous values, seeking to expand the scope of the Turkishness framework by conflating Islam and Turkishness. Furthermore, claiming to be the “continuity or legacy of the Ottomans” allows the AKP to build a superior and positive image through nostalgic reference to the glorious achievements of bygone days. It is therefore

unsurprising that the campaigns include manifestations of the Ottoman past, such as the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge or the Osman Gazi Bridge.

The construction of geographical perceptions also resonates with the spatial position and boundaries of the Middle East, determining the moral superiority of “we-ness.” The AKP frames its geographical position through superiority and victimization. It condemned the UN Security Council with the statement “the world is bigger than five,” which emphasized Turkey’s role as a challenger of the great powers. It also plays on the perception of discrimination against Muslim groups in the international arena, particularly within the European Union, which the AKP criticizes for its Islamophobia, xenophobia, and exclusionary approach.

The second narrative is about place satisfaction, i.e., the perceived quality of spatial meanings in relation to needs and services. Conditions and opportunities are constitutive of place attachment, strengthening ties between the leader and the audience. Articulation of the party’s achievements reflects ideal rule that fulfils the needs of the people. This narrative is overwhelmingly used during electoral campaigns. These messages highlight the services that the AKP has provided to the people: hospitals, educational opportunities, agricultural support, housing, improved railways, bridges, roads, airports, mosques, national garden tunnels, high-speed projects, etc. Place satisfaction frames a positive view of the “savior leader,” showing that the party is making progress for the people and the country by transforming the country’s physical space.

Lastly, AKP leaders construct idealized geography through a spatial imaginary that designates a “reasonable” in-group. Our [article](#) scrutinizes the Rabia sign; a black hand over a yellow background holding four fingers up. Meaning “four” in Arabic, the sign was used by supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt following the removal of Mohamed Morsi. In the Turkish context, it became representative of Islamic unity in framing moral superiority and criticizing Western values. The sign is said to symbolize a unitary spatial pattern: “one nation, one flag, one homeland, and one state.” Likewise, appealing to religious similarities constructs a homogeneous image that sidelines non-Muslim groups. In short, AKP leaders discursively construct a geographical legitimacy: Ottoman references, Ottoman territories, and institutional people-centric services frame the collective “we.” In a similar way, messages about international operations reinforce the party’s image as the “protector” of the place and its people.

*In short, AKP leaders discursively construct a geographical legitimacy: Ottoman references, Ottoman territories, and institutional people-centric services frame the collective “we.”*

**Populism is often described as focused on traditional masculinity, yet a growing number of female politicians claim to hold populist or nationalist positions. What is the place of populist female leaders in Turkey today? Do they occupy specific niches, with targeted audiences and narratives?**

Although the number of female politicians is increasing, opportunities for them remain limited. Turkish political history has not been favorable to female leaders, with the exception of actors in the Kurdish movement and the first female prime minister, Tansu Çiller. The scholarly literature shows that populist female leaders are characterized by features such as an aggressive tone, masculine attributes, stubbornness, and the use of family references. Comparative cases both within and beyond the European

context should be investigated to explore populist narratives and examine how female populist leaders frame the core content of populism.

In Turkey, Meral Akşener and her newly formed İYİ Party (the Good Party) provide a good example of a woman-led populist movement. Meral Akşener is on the center-right of the Turkish political spectrum and has made her nationalist sentiments known since the beginning of her political career. She is by no means a political outsider, having previously served as Turkey's first female Minister of the Interior. During the 2018 election campaign, the straight-talking presidential candidate was known as "Meral abla" (sister Meral).

*Meral Akşener is on the center-right of the Turkish political spectrum and has made her nationalist sentiments known since the beginning of her political career.*

Her narrative relies on people-centrist statements that appeal to the economic uncertainty that people are facing. As a presidential candidate, she proposed a "citizenship salary" for unemployed youth or a "solidarity fund of Turkey." Her focus on people's economic challenges and advocacy on behalf of "unemployed citizens" helped to distinguish her from the establishment. So too did her criticism of incumbent elites' corruption and luxury lifestyles, expressed through her discursive opposition between "children of ministers" and "children of the nation." Her populist narrative targets the ruling party with economic grievances, which overlap with nativism, producing exclusionary rhetoric toward Syrian refugees. She has promised voters that she will send refugees back, stating, "People become happy in their homelands. We will send them to their homeland."

**My last question is more conceptual. Our Program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. Is liberalism per se presented as the enemy by the AKP and other populist parties? Are they Turkish intellectuals who develop illiberal or post-liberal theories? Or would you say that populism or nationalism better describe the AKP?**

The party entered politics by presenting itself as a conservative democratic or Muslim democratic party and has never challenged economic liberalism, which is seen as necessary to negotiations with the European Union. Scholars have defined AKP rule using a variety of different terms: neoliberal, nationalist, electoral authoritarian, conservative democratic, Islamic, religious, populist... Of those concepts, populism seems to us to be the best fit. Since 2002, the AKP has been ruling the country by emphasizing the distance between elites and the people and criticizing the establishment for its assimilation policies, pressure on conservative beliefs and lifestyles, and corruption, as well as for widespread poverty in society. Voicing the grievances of "the ordinary people," AKP denounces both internal enemies—such as ethnic or religious minorities and Kemalist elites—as well as external enemies such as the European Union, so it employs the "us versus them" framework that is core to populism.

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## Jürgen Rüländ on Illiberalism in South East Asia

Originally published September 8, 2021

**Jürgen, a decade ago you co-authored *Give Jesus a Hand! Charismatic Christians: Populist Religion and Politics in the Philippines*. A decade later, how has charismatic Christianity evolved in the Philippines?**

Statistics about the rise of charismatic and evangelical Christianity in the Philippines are unreliable and vary widely. According to different sources, between 19 and 44 percent of the Philippine population practice charismatic or evangelical Christianity. Data released by the respective religious groups themselves appear inflated. They usually ignore that adherents often join religious groups temporarily and after some time become inactive or indifferent. Yet there is no question that charismatic and evangelical churches remain popular among Filipinos and that their numbers continue to grow. However, setting the country apart from other regions of the world, such as Latin America and Africa, the majority of “born again” Christians in the Philippines are charismatics who remain under the umbrella of the Catholic Church.

While a detailed analysis would reveal that these groups differ in their religious practices, what can generally be said about them is that they share highly conservative worldviews informed by strict Christian morals. While it would be misleading to characterize them *a priori* as “undemocratic” and supporters of right-wing politicians and movements, our survey suggested that many charismatic Christian groups’ members display a preference for “strong leaders,” hierarchical social relationships, and paternalistic orientations. Some of these groups practice bloc voting—that is, voting for the candidate their leader votes for—while in other cases the leader only endorses favored candidates. Eddie Villanueva, the leader of the “Jesus is Lord” church, even ran for the presidency, but lost twice. Nevertheless, charismatic Christians are a force to be reckoned with in Filipino politics, a fact that paid off favorably for the country’s current president, Rodrigo Duterte.

**Can we say that Duterte’s election and way of doing politics resulted from this charismatic Christian culture? Are charismatic Christians his main supporters?**

It would be reductionist to primarily link Duterte’s rise to power and his style of doing politics to charismatic Christian culture. Yet there are substantial overlaps between the worldviews of charismatic and evangelical Christians and Duterte’s political script that account for his popularity among these



religious groups. Both take a decidedly populist approach to addressing social problems. Key elements of this populism are anti-elitism, aversion to complexity and unconventional mobilization methods, including demagoguery.

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While religious populism opposes the perceived elitism of the Catholic Church hierarchy, Duterte relates the usually sluggish (except for the most recent years) and highly inequitable development of the Philippines to the decades-long domination of the country by a deeply entrenched crooked and hypocritical oligarchical elite. This elite is held responsible for unlawfully appropriating the lion's share of the country's wealth through criminal, fraudulent, and corrupt practices. With his foul-mouthed insults against the Pope and bishops, Duterte explicitly includes the Catholic hierarchy in this elite.

Both protagonists greatly simplify complex social realities. While for charismatics and evangelicals elite-driven moral decay and decadence corrupts society, for Duterte narcotics trafficking (in which elite elements are allegedly involved) and drug addiction are pivotal to the country's stagnation. Agreeing with Duterte that the eradication of social evils is a prerequisite for a better life and socioeconomic progress, many charismatic and evangelical Christians support Duterte's signature policy—his war on drugs—despite thousands of extrajudicial killings. Although killing people is definitely not sanctioned by Christian morals, many charismatics and evangelicals are convinced that for those unwilling to repent and change, severe punishment—including death—is “deserved” and thus legitimate. They regard Duterte, the self-styled “punisher,” as a tool in the hands of a punishing God who is ridding the Philippines of its social ills.

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Both populist religious groups and Duterte mobilize their followers by highly unconventional and demagogic means. While leaders of the former attract followers by their seeming power to elicit miracles, an emotional atmosphere during religious gatherings, a thorough spiritual renewal, and the prospect of prosperity, Duterte's political populism seeks to promise a brighter future with the help of drastic measures that instantly effect tangible change. The shrill and often vulgar language that Duterte uses to communicate his political agenda is as close to the everyday experience of ordinary Filipinos as the strongly worded messages with which charismatic leaders and evangelical pastors denounce worldly evils. Populist religious groups and Duterte also coincide in the effective spread of their message, which they disseminate through the skillful use of social media.

However, while some religious groups—such as the Kingdom of Jesus Christ group of the “Anointed Son of God,” Pastor Apollo Quiboloy, and Brother Mike Velarde's El Shaddai—continued to support candidates close to Duterte in the 2019 midterm elections, others, such as Eddie Villanueva, the leader of the “Jesus is Lord” church, and the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches, distanced themselves

from Duterte. The latter are increasingly disgusted by the unending extrajudicial killings in Duterte's "war on drugs" and his blasphemous outbursts.

Although there are significant overlaps between the worldviews of populist religious groups and those of Duterte, his persistently high approval rates—up to 80 percent—demonstrate that his support transcends charismatic and evangelical Christians. As a former local politician speaking street language, he cultivates the aura of an outsider beating the odds, earning him the sympathies of ordinary Filipinos. Duterte's pro-poor rhetoric has also given him appeal among the political left. Originating from the southern island of Mindanao, his commitment to implementing a peace agreement with the island's Muslim insurgents secured him many votes in the southern Philippines. However, still more significant for Duterte's political success is the fact that he embodies what many Filipinos want: a "strong leader" who delivers. This is precisely the role Duterte cultivates. While promoting social and constitutional initiatives that uphold the semblance of a democratic polity, Duterte is in fact transforming the country's political system into an illiberal democracy.

**More recently, you have been working on Southeast Asian regionalism. Do you see democratic backsliding within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)?**

Arguably, the concept of "democratic backsliding" is an inadequate description for regional policymaking in Southeast Asia. Although the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has often been celebrated as a model for regional cooperation in the Global South, throughout its existence it has struggled with a reputation for state-centeredness and elitism. In other words, regional policymaking has never met democratic standards. What we currently observe is thus not democratic backsliding but a regression from a very limited space for political participation to one that is even more restricted.

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That ASEAN is a regional organization providing few avenues for participation of non-state actors must be attributed in large part to the grouping's repository of cooperation norms. Known as the ASEAN Way, regional cooperation reflects that the political systems of the grouping's ten members—Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam—are highly diverse. They range from (new) democracies and hybrid political regimes combining electoral democracy with autocratic modes of governance to authoritarian governments of various shades. Democracy clauses elevating democracy to a prerequisite for membership—such as exist in the EU, Mercosur or ECOWAS—would thus be counter-productive for cooperation. Consequently, the ASEAN Way is strongly informed by sovereignty norms that prohibit interference in the internal affairs of other member countries.

Under these conditions, participatory channels for non-state actors have necessarily been narrow and tightly controlled by ASEAN member governments. Although ASEAN recognizes parliamentarians, business representatives, civil society organizations (CSOs), and think tanks as stakeholders in regional decision-making, such "entities associated with ASEAN" are not part of the grouping's official institutional set-up. Their access to decision-makers and scope of action are circumscribed by the authoritarian state corporatism that member states have transferred from the domestic to the regional level. This means that interest group activity is confined to one (peak) organization endorsed by ASEAN, which is expected

to support the grouping, but merely exerts consultative functions and by mobilizing its constituency for regional policies acts as a transmission belt.

In this vein, ASEAN's parliamentary body, the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Association (AIPA), has neither legislative nor oversight and budgetary functions. It is also not representative, as its delegates (except in the case of Indonesia) are MPs with close relations to the government of their country. AIPA endorses ASEAN policies and seeks to drum up support for these policies in national parliaments. The business sector is organized in the ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ASEAN-BAC), which consists of members handpicked by ASEAN leaders.

Representing in their majority large, outward-looking conglomerates, ASEAN-BAC occasionally exerts consultative functions, although its main role is to organize business support for ASEAN's market-opening policies (in spite of the fact that the latter may seriously hurt small-scale domestic firms). CSOs can seek registration with ASEAN, but such registration is highly conditional. CSO activities are tightly controlled and must be supportive of ASEAN, thus excluding CSOs critical of the grouping. Those currently registered represent only a tiny fraction of the rich panoply of Southeast Asian CSOs; they exclude labor and in their majority are socially irrelevant. Finally, think tanks are organized under the umbrella of the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS). Many of them, especially those in countries that acceded to ASEAN in the 1990s (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar), are close to governments and rarely represent positions critical of ASEAN.

The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997/1998 caused some rethinking. It triggered a reformist agenda, as the crisis also discredited the ASEAN Way. One of the reform's major objectives was to transform ASEAN into a "people-oriented" regional organization with democracy, respect for human rights, good governance, and rule of law, as new norms added to the traditional set of sovereignty-based cooperation norms. Yet people-orientedness, wholeheartedly supported only by Indonesia and to some extent the Philippines, Malaysia, and (until the 2006 military coup) Thailand, never transcended lip service.

The ASEAN Charter, enacted in 2008 as the grouping's quasi-constitutional document and the climax of the reform process, was only a diluted form of a much bolder blueprint submitted to ASEAN member governments by an Eminent Persons Group. The Charter neither provided for a full-fledged regional parliament nor created institutionalized channels for meaningful CSO participation. Organizing leader-CSO interfaces was left to the discretion of the government holding the ASEAN chair. When they took place, they were symbolic at best. They were short, often openly acrimonious exercises, with CSOs repeatedly boycotting meetings in protest against the practice of (some) government leaders selecting CSO participants. No additional leader-CSO interface has taken place since 2015. The more recent annual meetings with the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) composed of the member countries' ambassadors accredited to ASEAN remain a window-dressing exercise. The emergency legislation imposed by member governments—including Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines—to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic further narrowed the political space for regional civil society, markedly impeding its ability to communicate, mobilize, and organize protests.

*Yet people-orientedness, wholeheartedly supported only by Indonesia and to some extent the Philippines, Malaysia, and (until the 2006 military coup) Thailand, never transcended lip service.*

ASEAN thus successfully stifled the emergence of a “regionalism from below” driven by CSOs and other non-state actors. This raises the question why ASEAN established token participatory channels in the first place. One answer provided by comparative regionalism scholars is the desire to strengthen the grouping’s international recognition by formally appropriating the participatory mechanisms established by advanced regional cooperation schemes such as the EU. By fusing imported participatory norms with extant local norms, the latter are modernized and the former made compatible with political elite interests.

In Southeast Asia, where government legitimacy is strongly dependent on economic growth, international recognition is expected to translate into the attraction of foreign investment badly needed for development. That an increasing portion of investment and aid comes from China, a country that does not link cooperation to normative conditionalities, markedly relaxes the pressures on ASEAN members to implement a credible system of stakeholder participation. Yet these pressures do not completely disappear: economic cooperation with the West is still considered a counterbalance against excessive dependence on China.

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**In another Agora discussion, Filippo Costa Buranelli analyzed how an “illiberal solidarism” has emerged as a driver of regional cooperation in Central Asia. Do you notice the same trend in the case of ASEAN or has the association maintained greater ideational/ideological diversity?**

Irrespective of the fact that the ASEAN Charter added democracy, respect for human rights, good governance, and rule of law to ASEAN’s existing set of cooperation norms, in political practice, liberal democratic norms continue to play a subordinate role in Southeast Asian regionalism. Although during the reform process after the Asian Financial Crisis, the Indonesian government, media editorials, CSOs, and scholars pleaded for a recalibration of the non-interference norm, member governments still adhere to it, as the muted reactions to the military coups in Thailand in 2006 and 2014 and in Myanmar in 2021 illustrate.

This means that ASEAN governments continue to regard regional cooperation primarily as a mechanism for strengthening national sovereignty and regime resilience. Yet it would be going too far to suggest that ASEAN has the “regime-boosting” functions ascribed to regional organizations in Central Asia, the Eurasian space or parts of Africa. ASEAN’s polities are too diverse to allow for such a level of autocratic solidarity. Despite the continued prevalence of the non-interference norm in interactions among ASEAN members, there have also been repeated incidents where member governments have deviated from it and criticized developments in member states. Examples are the violent excesses of Myanmar’s military in the suppression of dissent, the handling of disasters such as Typhoon Nargis, and the expulsion of the Muslim-minority Rohingyas. Yet while “regime-boosting” is not a key property of ASEAN regionalism, nor does ASEAN promote the democratization of its member countries.

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*suggest that ASEAN has the “regime-boosting” functions ascribed to regional organizations in Central Asia, the Eurasian space or parts of Africa.*

**Indonesia has also been experiencing democratic backsliding, even if not at the level of the Philippines. How would you compare Indonesia’s and the Philippines’ foreign policies?**

In his two terms, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014) made democracy the hallmark of Indonesian foreign policy. However, even in the Indonesian context, democracy cannot necessarily be equated with liberal democracy. Nor is democracy promotion an intrinsic value of the country’s foreign policy, which follows much more strategic objectives. Democracy promotion has been instrumentalized to support Indonesia’s regional leadership ambitions. Democracy provided Indonesian leadership aspirations with a normative high ground. No longer did it have to base its leadership claims only on physical qualities such as population or geographical size. Moreover, despite widespread backsliding, democracy continues to be a globally powerful norm. Indonesia’s democratic foreign policy has thus also served to enhance the country’s international standing, especially among the industrialized nations of the West.

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However, despite Indonesia’s pro-democracy rhetoric, its contributions to democratizing international relations have remained ambiguous. While Indonesia supported the democratization of ASEAN, its proposals for the reform of the United Nations and other international organizations do not transcend demands for greater influence by Southern countries. While this can be regarded as democratizing “executive multilateralism,” more ambitious reforms—such as the parliamentarization of international organizations or strengthening non-state participation—have been absent.

Under Yudhoyono’s successor, Jokowi, democracy continues to be a pillar of Indonesian foreign policy, albeit a less prominent one than under Yudhoyono. Democracy is still a theme in foreign policy speeches and declarations. The Bali Democracy Forum (BDF), Yudhoyono’s flagship for democracy promotion, still convenes—though it has lost its status as a high-profile international event. Indonesia has also criticized the worldwide trend of democratic regression and in ASEAN it was at the forefront of seeking a face-saving exit to the dilemma created by the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar.

In the Philippines, democracy promotion has played a much smaller role and has persistently been subordinated to security concerns and realpolitik. In 1998, the Philippine government supported Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan’s overtures to relax the non-interference norm and in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) it repeatedly highlighted the country’s democratic identity and commitment to human rights. Yet it pursued democracy promotion much less than Indonesia, both at the operative and discursive levels. Only occasional statements by the foreign minister of the Aquino administration (2010-2016), Albert del Rosario, came close to what could be interpreted as commitment to a pro-democratic foreign policy.

The foreign policy of President Duterte has deviated sharply from the foreign policy of the preceding administration. It is totally devoid of normative objectives and confined to realpolitik characterized by a rapprochement with China in exchange for economic benefits. More than any other administration since the end of the authoritarian Marcos regime (1972-1986), the Duterte government has curtailed the space for CSOs in foreign policymaking. His main targets include critics of his deadly war on drugs, which has seen between 6,000 and 30,000 extrajudicial killings. Human rights advocates have been accused of weaponizing human rights and subjected to “red-tagging” (i.e., accusations of communist subversion). Duterte has also broken with the Philippines’ long-time partners, including the United States and the European Union, which criticized his administration’s deplorable human rights record. Unsurprisingly, the Duterte administration is not on record as endorsing the democratization of ASEAN and global multilateral organizations beyond strengthening executive multilateralism.

**Our program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. How do you interpret that term for the Southeast Asian context globally and the Philippines more specifically? Can we see a backlash against some forms of liberalism(s), and if so, which ones?**

The Third Wave of democratization starting in the mid-1970s has had only limited impact in Southeast Asia. Democratization has been periodic and characterized by repeated setbacks such as in Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, Myanmar, and even Indonesia. At the regional level, participatory channels have been narrow and lately—in line with COVID-19 emergency legislation—political space for non-state actors has been further curtailed. Moreover, even where democratization has advanced in recent decades, democracy should not be equated with liberal democracy without qualification. In several of the region’s countries, including Indonesia, (Western) liberal variants of democracy meet with considerable skepticism from parts of the public and among political leaders.

*Democracy in Southeast Asian countries is strongly informed by notions of organic state theory, an amalgam of highly conservative political thought influential in Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and constructed indigenous political ideas. Organic state theory as embodied in authoritarian state corporatism is inherently anti-liberal and anti-pluralist and prioritizes unity, social harmony, and hierarchy.*

Due to the enormous normative attraction democracy still enjoys worldwide, political elites frame collectivist political systems informed by organic state theory in liberal parlance, suggesting that they represent a homegrown version of democracy shaped by local traditions and culture. In reality, however, they contribute to the plethora of “democracies with adjectives,” a discursive gimmick to conceal the essentially autocratic nature of the respective political systems. The Illiberal Studies Program thus helps to sharpen our analytical capacity to distinguish varieties of democracy that provide space for the peaceful contestation of policies from polities that abuse democratic terminology to depoliticize society.



## Péter Krekó on Hungary as a Force for Illiberalism

*Originally published October 15, 2021*

**Péter, much of your work has focused on Hungary, particularly on the weakening of democratic values under Viktor Orbán. Your article, *Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán's Laboratory of Illiberalism*, makes the claim that the causal factors for this decline are not unique to Hungary and could be replicated in other countries. Since that article's publication, how has the situation changed?**

Hungarian illiberalism has kicked into a higher gear, partially as a result of a pandemic power grab, but partially as a result of the government's attempts to maintain control of the political agenda with symbolic issues around the "life and death" of the nation as we approach the 2022 elections. Hungarian illiberalism is increasingly infiltrating the everyday life of citizens, as with the recent homophobic legislation officially aimed at "defending children," which was inspired by (but is, in many instances, stricter than) the Russian anti-gay propaganda law, and discrimination against singles, gay couples, and couples living in civic partnerships in favor of married couples. The relationship with the European Union has become even more bitter: the West is increasingly only a negative reference point in governmental communication, while authoritarian countries such as Russia and China are constantly praised. Orbán has tightened his grip on the economy through endemic corruption, abusing the special legal order that prevailed during the pandemic and the fact that citizens' attention was focused on their survival.

At the same time, the nature of the regime has not changed. And yes, the argument that Zsolt Enyedi and I made in that article is still valid: Hungary has become a champion of illiberalism in Central and Eastern Europe not because this is the historical fate of Hungary and the preference of Hungarian voters, but because of a combination of situational (the 2008-2009 crisis), personal (Viktor Orbán as a charismatic leader able to centralize the regime), and institutional (the electoral system that gave a two-thirds majority to Fidesz with only 45% of the vote in 2014 and 49% of the vote in 2018) factors. And it is no coincidence that we can now see similar patterns in Poland and Slovenia.

**Should we interpret Fidesz's expulsion from the European People's Party as a sign of changes at the European level?**

I was never a huge and enthusiastic fan of the idea of Fidesz being expelled from the EPP. I think it was a good move to defend the European values and image of the political mainstream in the European Parliament. I never thought though that it would change anything in Hungary for good. The departure of Fidesz from the European People's Party has produced a more vocal and combative Hungary, but

also a less influential one. The rhetoric against the European Union and Brussels is more hostile and aggressive than ever before—but still, Hungarian public opinion remains strongly supportive of the EU. Politically, Orbán is in no-man's-land, having failed to join any European groupings. He has also lost many allies in the European Council, especially since passing the homophobic law this summer. But Orbán is strengthening his grip on the Hungarian institutional system and accelerating his attempts to make Hungary more conformist, more conservative, and more hostile toward the EU. As Orbán finds himself with fewer and fewer allies on the world stage (in the last year, he has lost important allies in DC, in Tel Aviv, and in Berlin), he becomes increasingly aggressive toward the West and its institutions. Of course, there are limits to his illiberal adventures, as he is interested in a well-functioning economy. Contrary to the common wisdom, big business is highly tolerant of (predictable) illiberalism. EU funds and big companies are still the most important financial resources for Orbán's illiberal regime. But the EU's Recovery Funds are currently suspended due to rule of law concerns, and Hungary also stands to lose a huge amount of money from the Norway Grants (compensation paid by Norway, Liechtenstein, and Iceland to EU countries for their use of the single market) due to the government's lack of willingness to compromise on who can handle one-twentieth of the funds that would go to NGOs. Orbán's regime is becoming less pragmatic, more ideological and, in many senses, more irrational.

*The departure of Fidesz from the European People's Party has produced a more vocal and combative Hungary, but also a less influential one. Big business is highly tolerant of (predictable) illiberalism*

**You previously wrote about the relationship between Fidesz and Jobbik, arguing that Jobbik used the “stolen transition” theory to motivate its political ambitions and that this paved the way for a more moderate Fidesz to step in and transform Hungarian legal and institutional systems. Can you expand on the “stolen transition” theory and explain its significance? What has the relationship between Fidesz and Jobbik looked like in recent years? How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the dynamic between the two parties, if at all?**

Jobbik, especially until around 2014, played the role of the “pioneer,” exploring uncharted territories and proposing policy measures (Eastern Opening in foreign policy, banking tax, Trianon commemoration day) that were later implemented by Fidesz. Jobbik has now become a more or less moderate centrist populist party that is part of the anti-Orbán coalition; another party, the even more extreme “Our Homeland,” (*Mi Hazánk*) has taken over Jobbik's pioneer role. Orbán always likes to play the centrist, and a more extreme right-wing party—which is currently enjoying huge media support from the pro-governmental media—helps him to do so. Our Homeland was the first, for example, to propose the ban on “pro-gay” TV news and books for children under 18, a measure the Hungarian government later implemented.

*Jobbik has now become a more or less moderate centrist populist party that is part of the anti-Orbán coalition; another party, the even more extreme “Our Homeland,” (Mi Hazánk) has taken over Jobbik's pioneer role*

**You have also written a lot about conspiracy theories and false information. What aspect of countering the prevalence of false information do you think is undermentioned? How prevalent or accepted are false narratives in Hungarian politics?**

In Hungary, conspiracy theories and disinformation have reached the level of officiality. Media capture has increased and government-organized media increasingly serve as part of the disinformation machinery, constantly fabricating fake news and conspiracy theories about George Soros, the pro-pedophile and pro-migrant Brussels, and domestic opponents of the regime. I have **been a target of this** myself—and I am just a political analyst and academic. **State-sponsored disinformation** increasingly makes the Hungarian public discourse Orwellian, and the state invests unlimited resources to maintain popular support and mobilize against enemies. And while there are governmental-critical media (especially online), their outreach is slowly shrinking, as pro-governmental information from a huge number of media outlets and political advertisements is simply omnipresent—it's in your face, on billboards, every time you go out into the street.

**Finally, our program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. How do you understand the term “illiberalism”? How would you characterize the intersection or overlap between illiberalism, populism, and radical politics?**

While many think that “illiberalism” as a term makes no sense, I do think it is a tremendously important term for describing contemporary politics. For me, the most important aspects of “illiberalism” are (1) strong authoritarian, transformative politics disguised as populist majoritarianism—the politics “of the majority”—and (2) a rhetorical style that makes liberalism and its institutions the bogeyman and blames them for undermining national interests. My favourite term, though, is **“tribalism,”** a political style and attitude that combines Manichean thinking (an understanding of politics as constant war between political tribes), authoritarianism (rallying around the leader of the tribe), and anti-pluralism (a lack of tolerance of dissent in times of political war). But I think both illiberalism and tribalism are better terms for describing our *Zeitgeist* than “populism,” which is increasingly empty, meaningless, and non-distinctive.

*I think both illiberalism and tribalism are better terms for describing our Zeitgeist than “populism,” which is increasingly empty, meaningless, and non-distinctive.*

## **A. James McAdams on Far-Right Thinkers and Democracy**

*Originally published October 20, 2021*

**Jim, you just edited *Contemporary Far-Right Thinkers and the Future of Liberal Democracy* with Alejandro Castrillon.\* Could you tell us the story behind the project and what you were aiming at?**

In organizing this project, I wanted to call attention in a systematic way to the most prominent contemporary far-right thinkers and to ask specifically about the similarities and differences among them. Some of these figures are well known—Alain de Benoist, Guillaume Faye, Pat Buchanan—but others are not—Fróði Midjord, Götz Kubitschek, Jason Jorjani, certain contributors to the online magazine *Quillette*, and the anonymous individual known as the “Bronze Age Pervert.” As a group, they are all worthy of examination. Equally important, they represent different streams of far-right thinking. When we began this project, all of these figures were still active; Faye died before we concluded our study.

To encourage a diversity of topics and views, I sought to bring together scholars who were working on specific far-right intellectuals and activists in different parts of the world, Western and Eastern Europe, Canada, Australia, and the United States. I also deliberately invited scholars from multiple disciplines, including historians, anthropologists, political scientists, political theorists, and philosophers. Many of the participants in our project had never met each other, although they were familiar with each other’s work. Thus, our meetings were a perfect opportunity for all of us to share ideas and perspectives. Indeed, throughout the two years of our collaboration, there was a remarkable amount of excitement and “electricity” in our discussions and in the circulation of draft chapters. By the time we were finished, we all emerged from the project with a deeper understanding of the broad spectrum of far-right thought as well as new ideas about how to study these thinkers.

**How are the authors collectively tackling the issue of such “illiberal moment” and what it means for liberal democracies?**

From the beginning, we envisioned this project as a collective enterprise. In two conferences, one panel at the American Political Science Association, and numerous shared draft chapters, we sought to develop a common, overarching approach to interpreting and understanding each of these thinkers. For this reason, I hope that readers of our book will be able to envision each of the contributors talking to each

other. We now know each other quite well. In addition, we zeroed in on unifying themes: the way these thinkers understand liberalism and liberal democracy; their distinctive use of the concept of rights; their common focus on the issue of “identity;” and their recurrent use of tropes, such as “difference,” “ethnopluralism,” “civilization,” “the real,” and “culture.”

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Thematically, I believe we have made an original contribution to the study of far-right thought. In much of the academic literature, scholars have tended to look to the past for insight into these thinkers’ views. For example, many experts point to what these figures share in common with the fascist movements of the 1920s and the 1930s. I wouldn’t dispute the fact that there are notable similarities; in some of these cases, it makes sense to call certain thinkers neo-fascists. However, as I emphasize in the book’s first chapter, we need to take into account the fact that there is a significant difference between the conditions of the early twentieth century that fueled fascism and those of the early decades of our twenty-first century. In the first period, democratic regimes were new and struggling for survival. Fascist theorists, such as Giovanni Gentile, were attacking democracy from outside the system, making the case for a fundamentally different form of politics. In contrast, today’s democracies are well-established, although they are currently being tested. For this reason, I believe it makes sense to consider personalities like de Benoist, Buchanan, and Kubitschek as critics of advanced democracy. In fact, most of the figures in our book like to portray themselves as sincere defenders of liberal democratic values, whereas we know that they mean to subvert these values. In this way, unlike the fascist thinkers of the past century, they attack liberal democracy from within.

**Do you see the current ‘conservative revolution’ happening under our eyes as unified in its doctrines? Which different ideological trends did the book’s authors identify?**

One outcome of our project was the realization that one can’t, and shouldn’t, put all of our subjects into a “procrustean bed” by treating their arguments as identical. One cannot understand them without recognizing that there are significant differences in their views. For example, many of the figures who classify themselves as Alt-Right in the US emphasize racial themes in their arguments and focus on patriotism and the defense of “the nation.” In contrast, many of their European counterparts emphasize ethnicity; they are also inclined to make the case for collective identities that transcend mere nation-states.

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We also recognized that one can’t always apply the term “far right” to all of these thinkers. Although most of us agreed that “far right” could be used in ways that facilitated comparison, some preferred terms, such as “New Right.” In some cases, such as the Russian Young Conservatives, it didn’t make sense

to use these terms at all. In the end, we had to agree upon a term to use as an organizing concept for the project, as well as for the title of our book. As a generalizable term, “far right” seemed to work the best.

**We are here talking mostly about ideas. How does this ideational production relate to broader populist movements? Are ideas really shaping the popular Zeitgeist, through social media for instance, or is the interaction more complicated, with also a bottom-up dynamic?**

I am personally fascinated with the study of ideas. Interestingly, political scientists have tended to relegate this topic to the margins of the discipline because ideas can’t be quantified or expressed in cause-and-effect terms. I think the exclusion of ideas is strange. You only have to look at the impact of personalities like Lenin, Mao, Gorbachev, Thatcher, and even Trump (not exactly an intellectual!) to recognize that politics is all about ideas. In my view, it is impossible to prove that ideas actually cause anything; rather people draw upon them to cause things. Instead, I lift the burden of causation and treat ideas as the constituent elements of constellations from which actors choose those that interest them the most.

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Thus, illiberal and antiliberal thinkers choose ideas that seem to work best to serve their interests. Among these ideas are issues of race, ethnicity, religion, culture, and modernity. In advanced democracies, illiberal and anti-liberal ideas are available to anyone who is looking for them. Thus, an illiberal personality like Tucker Carlson does not need to read the arcane works of far-right intellectuals, such as Faye, to find the idea of “replacement” attractive and useful. The idea that one ethnic or racial group is threatened by the intrusion of those whom he finds alien to US culture is already out there in the ether. It is waiting to be acted upon.

Of course, one doesn’t have to cut far below the surface of Carlson’s arguments to see that his concern is all about race, especially the fact that the US is quickly becoming a multi-racial society. Indeed, Carlson demonstrates his anxiety about race by inviting people, like Curtis Yarvin (a.k.a. Mencius Mordbug), an open defender of slavery and terrorism, to be guests on his show. Similarly, Carlson does not have to cause his millions of followers to agree with his views. They already have these views in inchoate ways; this is one of the reasons they watch his show.

What Carlson does is to provide them with frameworks within which they can formalize sentiments. Indeed, he and other far-right ideologues, both pundits and politicians, implicitly give their viewers “permission” to express views, such as racial hatred, that they might have kept to themselves in the past. Naturally, the explosion of extremist right-wing social media outlets has allowed these views to spread everywhere and at incredible speed. Hence, enthusiasts have only to follow conspiracy theorists like QANON to find purported evidence that supports their worst instincts and ugliest thoughts. We witnessed one of the manifestations of this development in the insurrectionary attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.



*Far-right ideologues, both pundits and politicians, implicitly give their viewers “permission” to express views, such as racial hatred, that they might have kept to themselves in the past.*

**You personally have worked on Leftist trends for a long time. How do you understand the differences in studying “leftist” and “rightist” ideologies and movements? Do we have elements for comparison, or do you consider their philosophical bases too different to study them in parallel?**

Yes, I have worked on communism for most of my career. My most recent book, *Vanguard of the Revolution: The Global Idea of the Communist Party*, is focused on the idea of the communist party and the ways in which it took concrete form in countries throughout world. I began the far-right thinkers project precisely because I was looking for analogues to communist theorists who were located on other parts of the ideological spectrum.

Naturally, the far-right thinkers in our new book have significantly different views about what should be changed and how they envision an ideal society. Still, these far-right thinkers share one important characteristic with their communist counterparts. They do not see themselves as populist leaders. Rather, they are elitists who seek to take advantage of the polarized conditions generated by populism. Much like the communists whom I analyzed in *Vanguard of the Revolution*, they see themselves as vanguards, standing above the masses and stirring them to action. They justify their elitist attitudes by arguing that they have special insight into the workings of society. Their self-assigned job is to bring “true consciousness” to the masses. In this way, all, or at least most of them, fit squarely within the Leninist mold.

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\*Disclaimer: The interviewer, Marlene Laruelle, has authored a chapter in this volume.

## **Armando Chaguaceda on Democratic Decay in Latin America**

*Originally published November 12, 2021*

**Armando, you have been working on democratization; democratic decay, populism and authoritarianism; and the role of global powers such as Russia and China in Latin American politics. Let's begin with democratic backlash. How would you assess democratic decay in Central and Latin America globally?**

Latin America is a veritable melting pot of identities, processes, and socio-economic and political structures, where you cannot apply any simplification. Four decades after the deployment of democratic transitions, our region has accumulated progress, stagnation, and, more recently, setbacks.

On the continent, the recovery of democracies (during the 1980s) did not come hand in hand with the construction of robust and inclusive welfare states; rather, it coincided with the expansion of neoliberal adjustment policies. The middle class grew in several countries, but without eliminating unbearable levels of poverty and inequality. Notable social and economic inequalities were maintained and in some cases—classes, regions, nations—they widened. But the status and mechanisms for exercising citizenship were also strengthened. The fight for human rights became a powerful regional movement, which brought together diverse activists with common agendas in diverse contexts.

In recent years, the subsequent end of the commodities boom, the resulting economic recession, and the adjustment and debt policies adopted by various governments contributed to the current situation of economic stagnation and social anger. This discontent, added to the growing deterioration of a democratic institutionalism that does not seem to effectively channel multiple citizens' demands, seems to be the origin of the popular mobilizations that took place in several countries in 2019 and 2020. The situation with the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the processes of impoverishment, autocratization, and the state's inability to respond effectively to demands and fulfill citizen rights.

In Latin America, political support for liberal democracy has been declining systematically over the last decade. While ten years ago, approximately two out of every three Latin American citizens argued that "democracy is the best system of government beyond its problems," in 2018 that proportion fell to 48%—the lowest level since the beginning of the century. This is the main reason for two confluent phenomena: the first is an authoritarian political culture, which beyond conjuncture, shows a permanent disaffection

with the democratic model; the second is a rejection of the functioning of existing democracies, not a break with the regime as such. The first of these trends is clearly illiberal.

*In Latin America, political support for liberal democracy has been declining systematically over the last decade.*

The latest report from Freedom House (2021) **shows** that, in addition to marking the fifteenth consecutive year of decline of global freedom and revealing that countries with democratic setbacks are more than those showing improvements, COVID-19 and state responses to the pandemic worsened the situation. Even in countries with democratic systems and liberal leaders, people were ready to accept reduced freedoms in the name of the fight against the virus. And the seduction of illiberal imaginaries increased.

Despite the formal validity of a majority framework of democratic order and rule of law, Latin America is a kaleidoscope of types of regimes and openness to civic participation. In countries such as Costa Rica, Chile, and Uruguay, we find cases of high democratic regime, combined with adequate levels of state capacity. Brazil and México are nations where a democratic political system coexists with populist governments, coinciding with a very diverse civil society. Central America—and other Caribbean countries and the Andean zone—have fragile democracies, with institutions of low capacity facing health emergencies and formally opening civic spaces, but with systematic and variable violations of citizens' rights.

On the other hand, we have a completely autocratic and, therefore, coherently illiberal subsystem in the region. Nicaragua and Venezuela have a hybrid regime, combined with variable levels of state capacity (high in the repressive way, low in the provisional way) and social mobilization, within a repressive environment of space and civic rights. In Cuba, we have the only regional case of a closed autocratic regime with high state capacity. Haiti represents a failed state, with almost no state capacity. This shows the survival (and potential expansion) of socio-political orders adverse to the institutions, rights, and ways of life of an open society with political pluralism in Latin America.

**You have been doing an in-depth study of Russia's influence in Venezuela. Would you speak about a convergence of narratives and alignment of interest, or about a genuine "influence" of Russia over Venezuela's ideological transformations? What are the domestic components and those that are "imported"?**

I will develop this in an upcoming article, the result of research I developed this year to explain the convergence of Russian and Venezuelan political discourse around the Venezuelan crisis. In summary, I would say that there is a confluence of common interests and ideological factors, which converge within an illiberal scheme. Let me explain. Following Kurt Weyland and several colleagues, I consider ideology as a factor among many others (including resources, opportunities, and pragmatic interests) for autocratic influence and cooperation. But, as you have shown in previous research, illiberalism operates a flexible and encompassing ideology of autocratic regimes opposed to democracy in the post-Cold-War world. In this case, there is illiberal synergy between Russian conservative nationalism and Venezuelan leftist Bolivarianism.

*There is illiberal synergy between Russian conservative nationalism and Venezuelan leftist Bolivarianism.*

So, we can analyze how two autocratic allies, Putin's and Maduro's regimes, cooperate through propaganda projection and media coverage to defend their respective political positions and public legitimacy—Venezuela as a gateway to the Latin American regional space and market and also as an ally of Russia against the U.S. In specific areas, as researchers [Iria Puyosa](#) or [Victor Mijares](#) have shown, media cooperation, internet control, and military and diplomatic support have been fundamental. And in those camps, the revisionist agenda (and illiberal values) of the Kremlin, opposed to the global liberal order, have boosted the positions of the Maduro regime.

**How does that fit the notion of “sharp power” developed to discuss Russia? And where do you see similarities and differences with China’s presence in Latin America?**

China and Russia have begun to expand into education, science, civil society, and culture in the region, also advancing on the public opinion in a broader sense. Through the increasing expansion of Chinese and Russian disruption, individuals and groups of Latin American illiberals can sublimate their aversion to the West and to capitalism, and also find an umbrella that matches their hierarchical and authoritarian vision for society. At the same time, this new alliance will provide more resources and access to global power.

China and Russia have paid close attention to their own version of soft power—the sharp power—which is not so different in its forms, although it is in content, to that of the Western countries of the 20th century. Russia is a geopolitical power with significant military, intelligence, propaganda, and information resources, but it is declining economically and demographically. Therefore, it must bet on a more aggressive presence, unlike China, which is betting on buying—with financial muscle, investments, and diplomacy—a broader and more systematic presence in Latin America.

**As a Cuban scholar in exile, could you address the question of a leftist illiberalism? I am interested here not in the authoritarian aspects of communist (current or former) countries such as Cuba, but on the current new left in Latin America. Would you say it is illiberal, and what does that mean concretely? Which forms of liberalism are they challenging? Economic liberalism seems obvious, but what about political liberalism in the sense of pluralism of opinions?**

The field of the production and dissemination of ideas, images, and information reveals such illiberal progress. In Latin America—and other parts of the West—universities and cultural institutions are increasingly populated by a type of left-wing hegemony, in its multiple tribes, accompanied by an amorphous and passive center, which leaves it to the fundamentalist segments to impose a lexicon and agenda. Certain traits—*obsessive anti Americanism*, *dogmatic egalitarianism*, *ideological overrepresentation*, and *illiberal propensity*—delineate, in the Latin American sphere, the identity and projection of much of this intellectual field closed to illiberal ideologies.

The first problem is our relationship with the regional hegemon that I've called *obsessive anti-Americanism*. We have conceived of the United States as the primary source of our misfortunes and a threat to our identity. However, unlike what would have happened to a European or South Asian intellectual threatened by Russian or Chinese despotism, here there is a more complex legacy. Our imperial neighbor is both a vibrant and veteran republic. If we were to suffer domination from Beijing or Moscow, perhaps we would understand the crucial difference and the emancipatory opportunity that such dualism entails.

*Ideological overrepresentation* is alien to the demographics of the country. The regional population is not reducible to any one ideology, even a predominant one. Periodic polls—Latinobarómetro or Latin American Public Opinion Project, among others—show a Latin American citizenry extraordinarily divided in terms of values, affiliation, and vote. However, public overrepresentation presents the entire academy as “progressive,” with which the regional intelligentsia would not be particularly democratic, as it does not correspond to the identities and heterogeneous interests of the population for which it speaks, including its popular sectors.

A third point is a certain vision and justice, which I identify as *dogmatic egalitarianism*. With Latin America being the most unequal region on the planet, our intellectuals claim the great banner of social equality. But the predominant approach around it is usually that of an equality erected in absolute value and opposed to political freedom, reduced to the clientelist forms of compassionate and market-focus statism, and opposed to a redistributive justice based on complex rights and policies. Interestingly, several European right-wing populisms defend similar ideas in an ethnic key.

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At last, the systematic public behavior of much of the *intelligentsia* in Latin America reflects a preference for revolutionary rather than reformist politics. The criticism is not directed at the oligarchic deficits of liberal democracy, but at its very foundations. This *illiberal propensity* is revealed in its questioning of the institutions and processes of the liberal democracy: to privilege supposed “participatory” democracy over “representative” democracy; to hold populist leaderships “connected” to the masses, who do not know and criminalize the opposition; and to reduce the political dispute to a Schmittian struggle between “The People” and perverse “neoliberalism,” which actually encompasses all critics of illiberal rules, from conservative politics to leftist autonomous social movements.

**You have been looking at the role of civil society and the academia in resisting or embracing illiberal values. Do you see them as weak link or as robust fortress of liberal values?**

In Latin America, there is a conservative socio-political sector whose ideas are overrepresented in private centers, religious groups, media conglomerates, and some public entities of right-wing governments. But the political, media, and social-civil networks of Latin American conservatives do not show an intellectual muscle that is in tune with their enemy twins on the left. At the present time, those who seem to enjoy greater regional articulation, a strengthened presence in public opinion, and even financial and intellectual support from the U.S. and Europe are the anti-liberals of the left.

While the promoters of illiberal ideas—their representatives and agendas in the scientific, academic, and cultural worlds—seem to grow successfully, those who oppose them find themselves disintegrated, fragmented, isolated, and, in many cases, without institutional support. But most importantly, they lack common strategies, deprived of symbols and discourses of collective articulation. The academic and cultural world suffers from having spaces co-opted by defenders of the authoritarian model, either by militant conviction or because they reproduce the bases of a common sense to interpret reality. And now that illiberalism is spreading more and more across the ideological spectrum, if you review the

leftist discourse of ideologues Evo Morales and Andrés Manuel López Obrador, but also the visions of right-wing populists such as Jair Bolsonaro or Nayib Bukele, you can detect those common elements.

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Think of academic freedom, one of the axes of civic space. The state is certainly primarily responsible for guaranteeing academic freedom. But it's not the only one that can affect it. In the region, powerful business interests operate with little regulation, which favors a growing commodification of the process of production and dissemination of knowledge. Various criminal actors—whether or not they collude with politicians—also bring violence to the heart of academic communities. Finally, the activism (mostly from the radical left) of the academy can also attack freedom within it, from the overrepresentation of speeches and the cancellation, within intellectual debates, of other ideologies and peoples linked to these.

Spaces born in the heat of the exile of intellectuals and the need to renew the ideas of the time, such as the Latin American Council on Sciences Social (CLACSO), were transformed into spaces of reproduction of a type of illiberal discourse with increasingly hegemonic vocation, identified with leftist populism and the so-called *socialism of the 21st century*. Networks, such as the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), have maintained a more open and plural character, but also accuse the presence of discourses (postcolonial, decolonial, etc.) that see liberal democracy, the market economy, and the open society as mere colonizing constructs of an "Imperial West."

Confronting illiberalism requires comprehensive strategies. On that path, possible actions in civil society and public space can go, among others, to identify activists, young leaders, officials, and academics to form networks of democratic reflection, solidarity, and advocacy. These include: 1) supporting featured personal profiles—for its diversity of ethnic origin, class, of gender and others, as well as for their professional quality and managerial capacity and leadership—to compete and move forward against its competitors identified with authoritarian projects; 2) stimulating investment, public and private, in resource excellence by training humans in medium and upper education systems, seeking inclusion and upward social mobility, breaking the often-self-referential dynamics of the regional elites; 3) supporting persecuted academics, scientists, and people from the world of culture or imprisoned in non democratic countries, and denouncing their authoritarian counterparts before the international community; 4) installing an agenda of coordination and cooperation with foundations and institutions, both governmental and non-governmental as well as European and North American, so that they do not support militants of authoritarianism; 5) and, last but not least, confronting in public debates against illiberal discourses and ideologies to support and promote in the media fresh faces, recognizable and popular that act as spokesmen for a democratic ideology.

**Our Program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program, so I cannot refrain from asking each of our interviewees their vision of the concept. Does illiberalism appear to you as a legitimate concept to be dissociated from the widely used notion of populism, and, if yes, how and why?**

Illiberalism is a broad phenomenon, encompassing ideology, psychology, and everyday life in different landscapes, groups, and subjects. In your own formulation, it rejects multilateralism in favor of the



nation-state and defends a model of leader and people, without intermediary institutions. It promotes protectionism, although it implements neoliberal reforms. It privileges an essentialist definition of the nation, that prevails today in Latin America, within a statist and mercantilist conception that neglects (borders inside and outside) the intrinsic value of defending a **democracy of citizens**. But perhaps—and it is my consideration—I could admit broader contents, just to differentiate it from populism.

For its part, populism can be studied more in the fields of history, sociology, and political science, as a specific way of *understanding*, through the endogenous (Leader-Mass) and exogeneous (People-Enemy) polarities; *exercising*, through decisionism, mobilizing, and conflicting; and, to a lesser extent, *structuring*, in movement forms rather than in stable institutions, **modern politics**. It is a phenomenon located halfway between (degraded) democracy and nascent authoritarianism.

The links are obvious, but I believe that illiberalism is broader than populism—a phenomenon related to political modernity—in conceptual terms and in its concrete socio historical expressions. If you analyze, for example, the rhetoric of Islamic regimes (Iran), conservatives (Russia) or revolutionaries (Venezuela), the phobia against liberalism is a central element. And none of them is, per se, a populist government. Their ideological configurations, their social bases, and their political structure are different. But everyone is suspicious of the Rule of Law, representative government, checks and balances, and political pluralism, for example. Not to mention the official documents of the Chinese Communist Party, which condemn various liberal principles as threats to national security and the cohesion of “Chinese civilization.”

*I believe that illiberalism is broader than populism—a phenomenon related to political modernity—in conceptual terms and in its concrete socio historical expressions. If you analyze, for example, the rhetoric of Islamic regimes (Iran), conservatives (Russia) or revolutionaries (Venezuela), the phobia against liberalism is a central element.*

We cannot forget that liberal and democratic principles (notions of human rights and popular self-government, for example) after 1945 constituted the basis of the founding discourse of the United Nations. I believe that the potential for theoretical development and empirical application of the research agenda on illiberalism is still enormous.

## Reece Peck on Fox News' Blue-Collar Conservatism

*Originally published November 17, 2021*

**Reece, you published a few years ago *Fox Populism. Branding Conservatism as Working Class*, a major piece on research on the transformation of rightist political culture in the US. In it, you move away from the usual disdain for Fox narrative expressed by a large part of the literature and see it “as one of the most sophisticated and culturally astute forms of political communication in recent American history.” Could you summarize both your textual analysis and ethnographical research?**

Anyone who reads my book, even in passing, can see I am critical of Fox News. Yet, I tried my best not to be disdainful of the network, like the majority of writing on the topic. Growing up in the conservative state of Utah, many of my family and friends are big Fox News fans. Because I respect their intelligence and character, it has always been harder for me to dismiss the Fox News audience than possibly it is for others who grew up in more liberal, college educated communities. I genuinely wanted to understand why Fox's programming was so compelling to them and to millions of other conservatives, especially when the economic policies that Fox promotes does not so obviously seem to suit their class interests.

In early 2009, I committed myself to watching Fox News closely and systematically. I analyzed over 800 broadcast transcripts and used UCLA's cable television archive to watch hours upon hours of Fox News programming. I did this for roughly two years. The programming period I analyzed and coded ranged from September 2008—or the beginning of the financial collapse—to the midterm elections at the end of 2010. During this time Fox News would experience one of the highest ratings surges in its twenty-five-year history and would galvanize a street protest movement in the Tea Party. This was a moment when Fox's engagement in American politics was dramatic and undeniable.

The benefit of becoming so engrossed in the textual world of Fox News is that it allowed me to become familiar with the network's special vocabularies and catchphrases. From such sustained viewing, I discovered elements of Fox News's programming style that, yes, promote Republican policy goals but cannot and should not be reduced to them. My analysis strives to tease out these “extra-partisan” or “meta-political” aspects of Fox's appeal. Specifically, I zero in on the populist moral logics and tabloid presentational techniques that the network has used to present the Republican Party as the natural political home of the white working-class. These populist moral narratives and tabloid media styles have been recycled in American culture for centuries and it is their historical rootedness, not their inherent

conservatism, that gives them their resonance. With this line of inquiry, I wanted to capture what I see as the true source of Fox's ideological power; to reveal how it derives not from the network's partisan talking points but rather from the cultural-aesthetic referents Fox programs use to make such talking points socially meaningful and emotionally engaging. To only rely on a left-right schema to analyze Fox News is to miss how the network creates Republican partisanship as an identity *style*.

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In the course of my research, I also sought to confirm my interpretations of Fox News programming by investigating other important sites for the production of conservative political discourse. From 2009–2011, I attended Koch-funded, Americans for Prosperity conferences and interviewed Tea Party protestors at events across Nevada and Southern California. This functioned as a safeguard against allowing my analysis to veer toward idiosyncratic, overly impressionistic interpretations that have no or little recursive connection with other sources and forms of conservative political communication. I found the language and narratives being used by the Tea Party activists and conference attendees that I interviewed to be patently identical to what I observed on Fox News shows. This made me more confident about the core interpretive claims of the study.

### **How would you describe Fox “intersectionality” construction of the gender, race, and class in the image of the *while blue-collar man*?**

There are plenty of examples in my book that illustrate how Fox News's populist imagination of the working-class majority, the so-called “real Americans,” is often narrowly represented as white, country music loving people living in the rural heartland. But even though Fox's programming strategies have taken advantage of populism's race and gender exclusions, by no means did it invent them. As historians like David Roediger have shown, the image of the American worker/“producer” has almost always been a white, masculine image. This was true even of the New Deal coalition's leftist articulation of producer populism during the 1930s. Still, maintaining the contemporary link between populism and whiteness is not automatically guaranteed. It is contingent on continued attempts to reinscribe the productive-worthiness of white workers.

In Chapter Four of my book, I demonstrate how Fox News's framing of the late-2000s economic crisis used the populist dichotomy of “producers” and “parasites” to paint subprime mortgage borrowers as undisciplined loafers. The network's coverage of the crisis drew from the racialized mythology of Ronald Reagan's Cadillac driving welfare queen. I argue that this worked to depict Obama's political base as antithetical to the “producer ethic” of the populist tradition. Fox News was effective in discrediting Obama's stimulus policies and the very idea of government aid because these old producerist tropes still inform, often in unrecognized ways, the underlying normative assumptions about race, work, and wealth distribution in the US.

In other sections of the book, I show how Fox News hosts build their “blue-collar” anchor personas by making taste-based appeals to ‘lowbrow’ cultural practices like attending NASCAR races and eating at Red Lobster and through aesthetic choices such as bleach blonde anchors and hyper-patriotic graphics,

things hipper, more educated viewers might see as tacky. But notice how these gestures of cultural affiliation do not reflect a universal working-class experience but rather a distinctly white one. The American working class is culturally segmented by race in much the same way it is by economics. This fact means that nonwhite politicians face difficulties in performing the kind of white, blue-collar identity politics that conservatives gravitate to.

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As much as any president before him, Obama engaged popular culture to increase his likability; most notably, he reached out to artists in the hip-hop industry. On Fox News, such moves were not treated as signs of Obama’s down-to-earth nature. From Fox News’s white conservative gaze, hip-hop was mostly read as “ghetto”—or to use Bill O’Reilly’s language, as “gangsta”—meaning that from Fox’s view, hip-hop’s “menacing” racial codings completely overwhelmed and erased its working-class elements.

When evaluating the gendered dimensions of Fox’s political communication strategies, we find equally striking double-standards. When male conservative pundits like Glenn Beck open up about their private lives and cry on air, it shows they are well-rounded human beings. However, citing one’s personal life to enhance one’s public persona—something critical to a populist performance style—carries far more hazards for women than it does for men. If women public figures do not reveal their sensuality and private, domestic life enough, they risk being painted as cold, uncaring, and careerist—think Hillary Clinton or Germany’s Prime Minister Angela Merkel. On the other hand, if women emphasize their physical beauty and roles as mothers, they risk not being taken seriously as political leaders, public service roles that are pre-coded as masculine.

By not having to work against historic stereotypes, white, male political communicators do not have to invest so much energy in proving their institutional competence and middleclass propriety. This frees them up to display their personal, emotional self and cushions them when they break the normal rules of political respectability, rules Trump has transgressed in historically unprecedented ways (e.g., “pussy-gate”). As a politician, Sarah Palin was no more ineloquent, unknowledgeable, and gaffe-proof as Trump. Yet, the Republican Party treated her as a feminine, working-class token. The same party, by contrast, nominated Trump as their figurehead. Palin’s embodied femininity skewed how the public, including members of her own political community, assessed her legitimacy as a presidential candidate.

**To stay on the class aspect, probably less studied globally, of rightist populism, could you explain how the blue-collar world and the business elite relationship—embodied by Trump—were articulated by Fox?**

Throughout Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign, his surrogates in conservative media referred to him as a “job creator,” and this term is very important because it is what is used by conservatives to define rich businessmen like Trump as “producers.” Producerism is an old 19<sup>th</sup> century strain of American populist discourse that conservative media has reconfigured in order to include CEOs and corporate managers in the moral community of producers alongside the long-venerated working class. When translated into the moral terms of producer populism, the privileged position of business elites like Trump is

redefined as a product of the labor-value of their work. By this logic, all actors whose worth is defined by the market share a solidarity as workers and producers. Conservative hosts and pundits on Fox News emphatically argue that the business class and the wealthy are workers too! Often, these “job creators” are framed as the hardest workers, as “super workers” who, like Trump, do not even sleep.

*Producerism is an old 19th century strain of American populist discourse that conservative media has reconfigured in order to include CEOs and corporate managers in the moral community of producers alongside the long-venerated working class. When translated into the moral terms of producer populism, the privileged position of business elites like Trump is redefined as a product of the labor-value of their work.*

When depicting the business world from which Trump came, conservatives often use a discourse of what I call “market empiricism,” that is, a notion that the market is a pragmatic institution that most accurately reflects empirical reality, aka the “real world.” In contrast, the public sector is represented as a sphere of distorted reality that has been created by those who want to selfishly and irresponsibly insulate themselves from the moral obligation of work. Government figures are depicted as ideologically driven proponents of social engineering who only have over-intellectualized knowledge. Unlike public sector workers and politicians, business figures are driven by practical concerns and rely on a-political, utilitarian reasoning. So businessman populists like Trump are not only defined against government workers, but also against academics and activists who also do not measure worth in market terms. On Fox News, all private sector actors, big or small, are presented as having a greater sense of economic realism than those working in the public sector or than those racialized groups receiving public aid. Conservative media consistently framed Trump’s business background as a sign of his outsider status. He was not a career politician.

The most important thing to note about this is the enormous amount of energy conservatives expend trying to naturalize the association between free market capitalism and practical, “common sense” thinking. They do this to emphasize social affinities between the business class and the working-class. This is a powerful rhetorical move because, as so several social scientific studies have shown, the American working-class tends to see small business ownership as a more likely route of upward mobility than becoming a professional through higher education and credentialization. This helps explain the increasing political relevance of the education gap between those with and without college degrees that was so striking in the 2016 presidential election and that widened in the 2020 election season.

This is to say nothing of Trump’s shrewd understanding of tabloid news and “lowbrow” entertainment genres like reality television and professional wrestling. As French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu recognized long ago, there is a “low” cultural commonality between the “square” tastes of the working-class and the “gaudy” tastes of the business class. Both are seen as vulgar by college educated professionals, artists, and other members of the cultural bourgeoisie. On the campaign trail, Trump engaged in ostentatious displays of his wealth like landing his Trump-branded helicopter at the Iowa state fair and promoting Trump branded steaks during press conferences. If one only understands class identity as an economic position, Trump’s appeal with working-class voters seems to make no sense. But it makes perfect sense from the perspective of class taste.

Ultimately, Fox News's representation of social class is deceptive in that it conceals the market's role in creating economic inequalities. The Democratic left should nonetheless pay close attention to the aspects of Fox's populist style that does make compelling class identifications.

**The famous 'gender gap' in populist and far-right movements is gradually disappearing, with women playing an increasingly important role in party activities and leadership. What has been Fox's role in that trend of promoting feminine figures to express conservative values?**

Most of the commentary about Fox's women hosts and pundits has focused on their notorious short skirts and the significant number of former models and beauty pageant contestants that Fox has employed. This makes the obvious point about how they function as "eye-candy" for the male segments of Fox's audience and apparently for former Fox executives and talent such as Roger Ailes and Bill O'Reilly, who were both ousted due to multiple sexual harassment charges. However, few have considered how this programming tactic operates as a feminine mode for expressing Fox's populist media brand and tabloid aesthetic, a style that is directed at the network's women viewers, who are majority non-college-educated, and who comprise Fox's dominant audience segment.

Pundits such as Laura Ingraham, Tomi Lahren, Dana Loesch, and Fox's "Judge" Jeanine Pirro all exhibit the same confrontational rhetorical style as their male counterparts in the conservative talk industry. Paradoxically, these women pair this aggressive style with an always present but unacknowledged hyper-feminine appearance (low-cut dresses, shoulder length hair, hourglass figures, expensive jewelry, subtle but intensive makeup, etc.). This all plays into a conservative aesthetic politics. In other words, women Fox hosts look the part of the conservative ideology they promote, an ideology that champions "traditional" patriarchal marriage and stresses the naturalness (read: rightness) of gender differences.

On Fox News, both the hedonist and class-based elements of its female pundits' sexual performative style are ironically reframed as a religiously inflected affirmation of traditional demarcated gender roles (i.e., patriarchal heteronormativity). However, this same performance trait implicitly works, I argue, as an attempt by Fox News to create a feminine point of identification within its broader political narratives about class and liberal cultural elitism. The former Alaska governor and 2008 Vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin may be the best modern archetype of this feminine brand of conservative populism. More recently, conservative congresswomen Majorie Tayler Green and Lauren Boebert have made waves in the conservative movement by adopting a similar style.

**In today's COVID-19 times, how do you analyze the "counter-intelligentsia" aspect of Fox in developing its own discourse and realm of experts of the sanitary crisis and the vaccine polemics?**

Through the pivotal month of February 2020 and well into March, the Trump administration and the President's favorite channel Fox News downplayed the severity of the virus repeatedly suggesting it was no more dangerous than the 'standard flu.' As someone who has studied Fox's opinion shows for over a decade, I cannot say I was surprised by this. From the beginning, the editorial agenda of Fox's primetime shows were devoted as much to how other outlets cover the news as to the news itself. Fox's opinion hosts have long depicted journalists as a 'villainous' social group, using rhetoric that dovetails with Trump's repeated casting of the press as 'the enemy of the American people.' And like Trump, Fox hosts endow journalistic interpretations with the capability to determine the nation's destiny, a media power



so menacing that Fox hosts deemed countering the negative press Trump was receiving for his handling of the covid crisis more important than the physical threat of the outbreak itself.

Fox News hosts and pundits are more likely to use lay forms of knowledge like personal experience in the midst of a policy debate. They do this to ventriloquize what they see as a working-class brand of intellectuality and news analysis. But because critics emphasize this tendency, Fox is often casted as anti-intellectual. Yet a closer look at Fox News programming reveals that network's own performed hostility to educated elites and experts is, in fact, selective and, to an extent, contrived. This contrivance was no more apparent than during Fox News's coverage of the stimulus debate of early 2009. In this period, an unprecedented number of conservative authors and think tank researchers appeared on Fox News's top shows to lend "official" legitimacy to the network's critique of Obama's stimulus bill. We see something similar with the network's use of conservative experts to deny climate change and, more recently, to question Covid-19 and the effectiveness of vaccines.

In order to create a conservative "consensus" about Covid-19—one seemingly shared by the common sense-thinking Fox hosts and by their credentialed expert guests—Fox programs borrow from different bases of cultural authority. I refer to this performative orchestration of populist and technocratic modes of argumentation as the 'populist-intellectual tactic.' With this term, I strive to capture how analytically ambidextrous Fox News programs can be. As opposed to merely fact-checking Fox News, it may behoove liberal journalists and politicians to try to learn from and possibly emulate this kind of communicative versatility. The ineffectiveness of merely citing what the experts say is no more apparent than with the issue of climate change. Liberals continue to stress how the vast majority of scientists and peer-reviewed studies support the idea that humans are causing climate change, yet, a significant amount of Americans continue to not believe this scientifically established fact to be true. The success of the expert-activists of the right demonstrates how research and "facts" do not speak for themselves. No different than populism, expertise must be performed and translated, ideally on the most mass mediated stage available.

*I refer to this performative orchestration of populist and technocratic modes of argumentation as the 'populist-intellectual tactic.' With this term, I strive to capture how analytically ambidextrous Fox News programs can be. As opposed to merely fact-checking Fox News, it may behoove liberal journalists and politicians to try to learn from and possibly emulate this kind of communicative versatility. The ineffectiveness of merely citing what the experts say is no more apparent than with the issue of climate change.*

To move the discussion on populism and media disinformation forward, scholars must be able not only to address questions of epistemology and bias but also to think beyond them. More consideration should be given to the persuasive power of moral framing and to the political-identitarian pull of aesthetic style. As histories on conservative think tanks document, the 1970s and 1980s was a crucial building period for the conservative knowledge establishment. This intellectual project would share conservative populism's oppositional consciousness—meaning the picture it painted was mostly defined in negative terms, as a struggle against what historian Alice O'Connor refers to as the liberal "philanthropic-government-academic establishment." The rise of conservative think tanks like the Heritage Foundation created a knowledge infrastructure for transmitting the populist repertoire of the conservative movement, especially in regard to economic issues. This infrastructure provided

subsequent generations of conservative activists, including media organizations like Fox News, with a sort of collective intelligence about which political narratives and styles work best.

**In your postscript, you discuss the gaps and overlaps between populism and nationalism. Could I ask you to reflect on the notion of illiberalism, that is central for our Program? Illiberalism calls for majoritarian and culturally homogenous solutions to what it sees as the crisis of liberalism. How would Fox worldview fit in it?**

Fox News's programming themes have historically fluctuated across a white nationalist/working-class populist spectrum. During the Great Recession of the late-2000s, the editorial direction of Fox's top programs was more evidently weighted toward domestic issues of wealth distribution and class. During the Trump era, Fox News's programming seemed to be less focused on the cultural elitism of the media and liberals and more focused on stories about threatening Islamic terrorists and immigrant street gangs like MS-13. These topics naturally fit within one of the main political narratives of the online "alt-right" and of a much older paleoconservative tradition. Both advance a story about how increased immigration and the multicultural values of the left will destroy "Western civilization." In short, Fox News's political imagination of "the people" undeniably propagates a white, culturally homogeneous vision of America and, believe it or not, Fox's audience demographics are actually whiter than the already exceptionally white Republican Party.

Maybe the best way to illustrate Fox's illiberal qualities is by contrasting the network to its partisan media opposite MSNBC. Taking cues from Fox News's commercial success, MSNBC in the mid-2000s started to counter-program Fox as the liberal cable news alternative. Emulating Fox's partisan branding strategy and programming formula, MSNBC also prioritized opinion-based shows over straight reporting. Yet even while adopting a partisan brand, MSNBC's conceptualization of the US public sphere still upheld the basic tenets of liberal democratic theory. Their programming discourse assumed that social tensions and opposing political demands could be managed through reasoned debate and by making politics more informationally sound, receptive and inclusive.

In contrast Fox's populist imaginary of the US public sphere suggests that the national community will only be whole if and when the elite power block that corrupts its body politic is confronted and then excised. Fox News's anti-establishment posture brings the conservative coalition together by emphasizing its members' common (perceived or real) 'outsider' status away from the elite corridors of power. The communal tie for MSNBC liberalism, on the other hand, is founded on the equal inclusion of all individuals and minoritarian voices into the national discussion. MSNBC values the 'politics of difference' above all else, which aligns with the Democratic Party's signature embrace of multiculturalism. In contrast, Fox's populist representational strategy is designed to find and perhaps even manufacture 'common ground.' The populist terms Fox uses to address its audience such as 'the folks' and 'middle America' thread and 'articulate' the various political issues of the conservative movement—gun rights, pro-life, deregulation—on what populist theorist Ernesto Laclau terms a 'chain of equivalence.'

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Still, populist signifiers have no meaning by themselves; their coalescing function only works within a 'us-versus-them' framework. While part of Fox's strategy is to bombard the audience on a nightly basis with a consistent set of associations between different conservative factions (e.g. libertarian men, religious women, blue-collar workers, wealthy business owners), the central way Fox's programming fuses these constituencies together is by positioning them against a common enemy. Conservatives are one because they are all looked down on by the liberal cultural elite.

With all this said, I disagree with anti-populist critics such as Jan-Werner Müller who argue that populism is inherently illiberal. In line with political theorist Camila Vergara's 'plebian,' Machiavellian reading of the populist tradition, populist movements can express a reformist mission that challenges oligarchic power and asserts working-class people as a legitimate part of the political public sphere. Unlike far-right formulations of populism, leftist evocations of the "people" do not rely on or appeal to cultural-ethnic homogeneity nor do they claim to be the *only* legitimate political voice in a totalitarian sense. The "People's Party" of the 1880s and 1890s, where the term 'populism' got its name, worked within the American liberal system and its political reforms (e.g., direct election of Senators) made the system more democratic, not more authoritarian. For all its flaws, the 2016 Bernie Sanders for President movement ultimately showed that populism and multiculturalism can co-exist within the same representational system and there is a growing populist-styled left media culture that is emergent in the "alternative," online news sector that attests to this as well.

## Anna Grzymala-Busse on the Different Contexts of Populism

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**Anna, you have been working for several years on political parties, political competition, and parties exiting from the communist system. What is the role of ideology in this transformation and how do you articulate ideology with systemic party transformation? What is the place for ideas and ideologies in that transformation?**

Ideology is critical and specifically the lack of ideological differentiation is critical. What we see in both Western Europe and in Eastern Europe is the perception that the parties are all the same, that the mainstream political parties have the same offer on hand. There's no real alternative to this kind of mainstream set of policies that they offer. As a result of this perceived lack of ideological differentiation, illiberal forces, such as populist parties, can gain quite a bit. There's been some fantastic work done by Grigo Pop-Eleches and others on the ways in which voters in Central and Eastern Europe try one political option after another, and find that they don't really differ. As a result, they wind up choosing illiberal, populist, and extremist parties, in an attempt to finally get something different.

Populist parties, I think, contrary to the popular opinion, actually have an ideology. I think Cas Mudde's really nicely identifies it: elites are bad and the people need to be represented. This means that this is a profoundly anti-institutional movement because the liberal democratic institutions set up by these elites are also suspect. It also means that the nation has to be defined. This is why we see such appeals to xenophobia, to nationalism, and religious homogeneity all done in the name of defining the people. These are things that mainstream parties weren't willing to do, but the illiberal populists are thriving on doing.

*This is a profoundly anti-institutional movement because the liberal democratic institutions set up by these elites are also suspect.*

**Does that mean also that the social democracy model has failed in being able to be distinguished from more U.S.-style liberal party?**

I think so. If you look at just at the voters, social democratic parties have been steadily losing votes. I think it's partly because they face a very different context, and they don't encapsulate voters the way

they used to. They seem unable to articulate an alternative that would convince voters that their home is with the Social Democrats. It's kind of ironic given that these were the parties that would encapsulate and certainly hold fast to voters from cradle to grave.

**I find your *work* on the religious routes of the modern state fascinating. How would you position religious nationalism as an ideological way to frame some societal political issues? How do you evaluate what has been described as the growing de-privatization of religion and the capacity of a religiously-based civil society to replace some of the state's functions?**

I don't think what we see—in Europe certainly—is any kind of a replacement of the state by the religion, the way that we saw earlier in the Philippines. I do think what is happening is that religious nationalism is being used entirely instrumentally, where it's available to politicians. In places where there's any kind of religious component to the national identity, populists and liberal politicians grasp that and use it instrumentally. It's a fantastic way to redefine the people: e.g. you have to be Catholic to be Polish. This would automatically exclude immigrants, religious minorities, atheists, sexual minorities and so on. It is also a way to coalesce one's electorate and to provide a justification for whatever that the party is fighting for. I think where it is available to political parties, religious nationalism can be a very powerful force in both convincing voters and coalescing around a set of policies.

**So religious nationalism is a way to recreate boundaries in deciding who is in and out the group, in and out the nation?**

That's right, absolutely. It defines the electorate, but it also nicely justifies some policies. For instance, "we have to have a more strict abortion law." Not because it keeps our electorate happy, but because that's what's necessary for the future of our country. We have to give special status to churches because they represent our national identity and so forth.

**Your new research is on Global Populism. Can you talk about how context matters when we study populism? It is such a broad term; how do both time and space make a difference?**

On the one hand, I want to preserve a core to the populist idea. Again, I think this is where Cas Mudde's core definition works beautifully. Having said that, populism takes very different forms across both time and space and across political systems. Ken Roberts, for example, has done wonderful research on the ways in which different configurations of labor markets and welfare states lead to left wing populist parties in Latin America and the European South, but to rightwing populist parties in the rest of Europe. When we talked about religious nationalism, for instance, those kinds of ideological appeals and the definition of the nation will look very differently from country to country. So in Modi's India, it's making Muslims into second class citizens. In the case of the United States, it's coded racial and anti-elitist claims, and so forth. I think retaining a conceptual core allows us to examine the different manifestations of populism across regions, across political systems, and across time.

*Different configurations of labor markets and welfare states lead to left wing populist parties in Latin America and the European South, but to rightwing populist parties in the rest of Europe.*

**Do you think there is a distinction between the Global South populism and populism in “Western developed” countries?**

I think Ken Roberts makes a really good argument that if you have sort of attenuated welfare states and a lot of informal labor markets, when populism arises, it wants to build a broader coalition. On the other hand, when you have relatively strong welfare states and relatively formal labor markets, what you see is basically welfare chauvinism and the idea that we want to defend our welfare system against the claims of immigrants, of people who don't contribute or people who don't look like us. I think that goes a way to explain why we see—certainly in Latin America, in Greece and in Spain—more left-wing manifestations of populism and that elsewhere it is much more right-wing. So I'm not sure that it just maps onto the Global South. If you look at places like the Philippines or India that are traditionally seen as part of the Global South, populism there is mostly right-wing, it is highly exclusionary, it is one that is more than happy to eliminate its “enemies,” and it's not one that offers any kind of redistribution or inclusive coalitions to its supporters.

**As always, a question about concepts. How would you articulate populism with illiberalism?**

Populism articulates illiberal ideas but there are clearly other ways of being illiberal. Illiberalism includes everything from deliberately ignoring the rule of law all the way to fascism and communism, to totalitarian systems. Populism is a particular way of being illiberal and the illiberalism of populism comes from the fact that there no commitment to respecting minority rights and the rule of law. These are two of the pillars of liberal democracies. To me, populism is a different way of doing illiberalism or *a* way of doing illiberalism that is characterized by a deep suspicion of formal institutions and the rule of law as being creatures of corrupt elites, and a deep suspicion of minority rights as violating the nations or the peoples' claims to governance.

*Illiberalism includes everything from deliberately ignoring the rule of law all the way to fascism and communism, to totalitarian systems.*

**One of the interesting points of tension, I think, in the literature on populism is whether we ought to look at it as a bottom-up or top-down phenomenon. The literature often works more on the political offer than on the grassroots demand for populism. Do you share in this impression, or how you would articulate the tensions between supply and demand?**

I tend to focus more on the supply than the demand. To me, a lot of the demand comes from voters who basically have felt ignored. I think it's easy to dismiss this. It's because we look at them and say, “Look, (in the case of Europe) you have a welfare state, you have all these benefits. What's the problem?” Or (in the case of the United States) “you're in a privileged economic and racial position. What's the problem?” Yet that is not how these voters perceive themselves. They perceive an enormous threat of insecurity. They think that their children won't have a life that's nearly as good as theirs and they feel threatened by the fact that the languages that they hear spoken in the stores and everything else around them is rapidly changing.

There's been a tendency to dismiss this a simply irrational, self-regarding, or xenophobic. However, we do that at our own peril because a lot of us feel a need for community, for roots and for status; for lack of



a better word: dignity. I think this is what's missing from a lot of the academic language describing the populist demand side (a notable exception is Frank Fukuyama.) These are people who are afraid that their dignity is basically threatened, no matter what we might think about their objective standing in society and their privileges. Populists are the people who make these voters feel empowered and above all listened to.

**How do we move from populism as a movement to access power, to populism once it's become a regime? How do populists manage the tension once they become the regime and are now the elites?**

We don't have that many cases of populists actually governing, but when they do, we need to take them both seriously and literally. They do politicize formal institutions in the name of making them an expression of the popular will. For an example of this, look at the near court system in Poland, citizenship laws in India, the entire constitution in Hungary, or the attempts to dismantle the rule of law in the United States. When populists get into power, they try to live up to their commitments. I think their success in governance varies widely. For better or worse, the Hungarian government is a team of experts that has been very good about implementing their policies. The populists in Poland, are half as competent.

We need to take seriously that, like any other government, populists will respond to economic and political crises. They will react to those, but they will be less likely to be bound by international agreements or the rule of law or any binding constraints. For the most part, however, they govern (where they can) by buying off voters with favorable redistributive policies that live up to their promises to be more responsive to popular grievances and to target benefits to constituencies. Whether it's tax subsidies or family subsidies, they try to deliver monetary benefits to their constituents, in an attempt to convince them to keep supporting the party.

*We need to take seriously that, like any other government, populists will respond to economic and political crises.*

**My last question is about authoritarianism diffusion theory. What is the relationship between a local national context and some forms of international ideological affinity? Should the literature be looking for an "original sinner," or insist on the importance of local contexts?**

I'm not a fan of mono-casual explanations. To me, the bulk of the explanation lies domestically. International ties to Putin or to Erdogan may provide a gloss of legitimation in some cases, and Putin has even provided material resources to Marine Le Pen and to others. But fundamentally it's about the domestic situation, the ways in which political parties have failed to address domestic crises and domestic policy developments. To a large extent, some of these structural forces may have been caused by globalization. Some of it might be caused by party stagnation and institutional senescence. But fundamentally this is about domestic party responses, voters feeling that they're not being listened to, and that there is not a to party that can articulate what they want to see happen. If we want to find the origins of populism, if we want to find the guilty party, we need to look in the mirror.

## Emmy Eklundh on Left-Wing Illiberalism

*Originally published December 8, 2021*

**Emmy, let's start with a question about the broad conceptual framework on which your work is based, namely the role of emotions in politics and its connection to populism. Could you talk about how you see that relationship?**

I see emotions as an intrinsic part of politics and of the development of any political identity. When people say that some actors are emotional and some are rational, I find that to be problematic and a bit strange. I come from the tradition of radical democratic theory, where affect and emotions play a much more prominent role than they do in other theories. This has really helped me articulate my research, but I also find that it's very applicable to the current context and the way that we look at populism now. I have been influenced by the work of Ernesto Laclau, an Argentinian political philosopher who has written several different works on this, perhaps most notably his 2005 book *On Populist Reason*. Funnily enough, the title contains the word "Reason," which I always have a bit of an issue with, because I think that it doesn't fully reflect the content and the focus on emotions.

*I come from the tradition of radical democratic theory, where affect and emotions play a much more prominent role than they do in other theories.*

Populism for Laclau is not a strange animal that is foreign to politics; it is something that is absolutely essential to politics, and most political identities are developed in a populist manner. That's not to say that everyone is a populist, but all identities are potentially populist. The focus on emotions and affect is inspired by psychoanalytic theory and primarily Jacques Lacan, who believes that we all experience what he calls a "constitutive lack." The idea is that there is a part of our identity that we never really feel is fulfilled; there's always something that we are desiring, something that we are craving, and this isn't just true for us as individuals, but importantly, it's true for us as groups as well. And it's true for collective identities. This is the beauty of Laclau's theory—he takes a psychoanalytical theory that is often very centered on individuals and puts it up on a collective level: "How can we understand affect in relation to politics and groups more generally?" Affect becomes the driving force behind politics. It is that desire to pin down your identity, to understand what you are, to realize your goals and desires, but according to psychoanalytical theory, this will never happen. It's always something that is in the process of happening; we want to feel complete. Laclau states that we often attach meaning to certain empty

signifiers that are supposed to fill the constitutive lack, to make our lives complete—something that allows us to reach that unreachable part of ourselves.

These empty signifiers can be politicians, like Peron in Argentina—which is an example that he uses a lot—or Donald Trump. They can also be slogans or ideologies. They can be singular words. And I would also say that they can be non-material things: art, a protest movement... We attach meaning to these empty signifiers. Everyone has an affective investment in a certain leader or political ideology or program. This is what forms collective identities and it is what forms populist identities as well.

And this is why affect cannot be separated from politics at all. The reason we think that a certain ideology is just, that a certain leader is sensible and right, is because we feel that this is going to emancipate us, to make our life better. This is Laclau's grand theory. Some people have accused him of trying to explain everything. I find it quite appealing but there is a lot of debate around it. In broad strokes, that is the relationship between affect and populism.

**Does that mean that we should see populism as a reaction to the technocratization of politics that always seems to emphasize rationality? Is populism a way to retake the right to choose and say yes or no to certain political offers?**

Laclau would say that the purpose of populism is to break down the reigning hegemony, but that reigning hegemony can be many different things, including an authoritarian regime. Similarly, it could be what you just said: an idea that there is a technocratic idea of governance, which doesn't actually provide the people with what they want. However, I think that there is an added element in Laclau's work that isn't really discussed very much, but one in which I'm very interested, which is the duality between reason and emotion. The reigning hegemony that we have now is very centered on rationality. Political leaders are often thought to be good if they're seen as rational—the problem of course being that we have a certain, quite narrow, concept of rationality, which is afforded to some people but not others.

For example, it is more often afforded to men than women, to people that are white than those that are non-white. By labeling some people as rational, we are immediately saying that these people are legitimate holders of power—they should be part of the hegemonic order—whereas the emotional bit is a marker of being an outsider. I think that this has been very obvious in U.S. politics in the past few years. People threw these accusations at Hillary Clinton: because she was a woman, she would be too emotional. They have also been directed at Trump and at other Republicans. This sensible/non-sensible, emotional/rational divide remains understudied even though it is key in our political debates as a proxy for saying that some people don't belong in politics.

*This sensible/non-sensible, emotional/rational divide remains understudied even though it is key in our political debates as a proxy for saying that some people don't belong in politics.*

**Indeed—I remember once Trump was elected, there was a profusion of supposed medical and psychiatric reports telling us that Trump was medically insane.**

It is really interesting that you bring up this medicalization. We have to remember the history of medicalization and the clauses of sanity and how that has played out in history. This has been a way to suppress unwanted elements of society. It was done in France and England in the 19th century, where

people were incarcerated and put in mental asylums for voicing their opinions on the pretext that they were insane. I find that it's a very dangerous path to go down, to say that someone is not in charge of their own thinking when it comes to politics just because they are furthering a different cause.

**Moving on to some other research you have been doing, I would like us to address the articulation between left populism and nationalism. We usually connect populism with right-wing ideologies, yet there is also xenophobia coming from leftist audiences in Europe. How can leftist populism be multicultural in some respects yet nationalist or xenophobic in others?**

This is indeed another aspect that we don't discuss much: the nationalism of the populist left. My research is on the European populist left, and I find that the empirical circumstances in Europe are vastly different in Latin America, so I will not make any claims about the exclusionary nationalism of the Latin American populist left. What I can say from my research, though, is that within the European populist left, there is a very strong commitment to the European nation-state order: nationalist identities are seen as vehicles through which to further the progressive political struggle. This rhetoric at times does not differ that much from what we would call the xenophobic radical right. The will to protect the national borders is also very strong within the populist left.

*Within the European populist left, there is a very strong commitment to the European nation-state order: nationalist identities are seen as vehicles through which to further the progressive political struggle.*

If you think around the concept of "the people" in the European context, this has been deeply embedded in the thought that particular people have a right to a particular territory. This thinking is what has given rise to the colonizing enterprises and the deep injustices against indigenous peoples that we have seen in Europe and of course elsewhere. Certain people—primarily white people—are afforded a right to "the land." This thinking is endemic in European politics, and the populist left plays within this rulebook. It plays on the rhetoric that we need a nation and a territory in order to create a "people" through which we can deliver equality. But the thought that a certain people belongs to a certain land is a discourse that is very much embedded in difference. You would think that left-wing thought is based around equality, but it may sometimes embrace differentialism, too.

**What about a leftist populist narrative that sees migrants both as victims of big, globalized corporations looking for cheap labor and as "culturally different"?**

You're absolutely right here. If you're really against capitalist exploitation of cheap labor, then the solution should be to legislate against that, not to close borders. The answer from the populist left is sometimes to close the borders and to take care of domestic workers first—the claim being that we first need to implement socialism nationally and then build socialism internationally. I find that this type of narrative goes against a lot of left-wing thought, and it's been debated within the left in Europe since the Second International—it's like a 100-year battle. It is fascinating that this is still presented as a very progressive thought, even though one can see very strong similarities to the right-wing vision. This is not to say that the left and the right are the same or that the extreme left and the extreme right are the same. I do not want to endorse in any way any type of horseshoe theory that says that extremism looks the same wherever you turn. What I want to say is that in the European context, the narrative of the nation is sometimes stronger than particular ideologies on the left and right.

**You have worked a lot on Spain and on the rise of Podemos. I would like to know more about the Spanish context and the relationship between Podemos and Vox. Do they find themselves in a sort of mirror game? Southern Europe is a fascinating case of both a leftist and a rightist version of populism emerging more or less at the same time.**

We've seen a fragmentation of the Spanish political landscape in the past 10 years. Personally, I think this is probably a good thing because there is more choice. Spain, despite being a proportional representative democracy, also subscribes to the d'Hondt electoral system, which disproportionately favors large parties. This has produced quite a strong reign for the Social Democrats (PSOE) and the Partido Popular (PP), the main conservative party. Spanish voters now have more parties to choose from. But it's very important to see the different histories of Podemos and Vox.

It's facile to say that both parties have turned against the establishment and are challenging old truth in Spanish politics. The reality is much more complex. Podemos emerged from the post-2008 financial crisis and austerity movements because Spanish governments—both left and right, PSOE and PP—had made such strong commitments to cut public spending. These had made life extremely difficult for large segments of the population, including the middle class. Podemos played a lot on this and, in that sense, has a very traditional left-wing agenda. Yet they have been in coalition with the Social Democratic Party for the past couple of years and it's worked surprisingly well. There aren't any extreme differences between them.

So Podemos is definitely left and Vox is definitely right. For me, the emergence of Vox is less of a movement to the right of the political spectrum and more of a split in the main conservative bloc. Many of those voters who now vote for Vox used to vote for Partido Popular. I don't think that they have changed massively in terms of what they think; the programs and policies that Vox represents have been present in the Partido Popular ever since the transition to democracy in the late 1970s. The old ideas of glorifying the dictatorship, being against migration, being very hostile to any sort of progressive social policy, being very much against the Catalanian independence movement....Partido Popular has campaigned on these for the past 40 years.

Therefore, the rise of Vox is not as surprising as some people make it out to be. It's more that Partido Popular isn't holding onto those voters as well as they have in the past. So I would say that the rise of populism in Spain, both left and right, is due to very different causes and isn't a complete rejection of the mainstream at all, but has strong connections to mainstream politics.

*The emergence of Vox is less of a movement to the right of the political spectrum and more of a split in the main conservative bloc.*

**And a final question about the role of social media, which I know is also something you look at. Do left-wing populists use social media instrumentally, as right-wing populists do?**

Definitely. I think the role of social media is important when discussing left-wing populism because they've typically been better at it than mainstream social democratic parties. But there is a bigger discussion than just social media and how people access information, namely how to ensure participation. How can we make sure that people feel that they are participating in the decision-making process? Podemos has embraced digital tools to ensure the involvement of their membership, which is completely free—

you can just sign up at any time and there are no barriers to membership of Podemos of the kind that sometimes exist in other parties. So it is not just about Facebook and Twitter, but the deeper question of “How can we vote on new policy proposals online? How can we make sure that more people put forward proposals for us to consider at our party congress?” This is a very important part of the discussion: How do we increase deliberation and participation?

On the other hand, it’s important to bring up the connection between the online and the offline, because it isn’t a sharp distinction. A lot of the work that is done online mirrors what is happening offline and the occupations of squares that we’ve had on the left mirror things that are going on online—they feed into one another. A lot of people would like to think that because of the rise of social media, we now have this very different political landscape. I think it’s more accurate to say that online and offline are co-constitutive; social media is yet another tool that political actors have for organizing—and they’re using it—but that doesn’t mean that they’ve forgotten about their physical presence.

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## Mabel M. Berezin on Fascism, Populism, and the January 6 Coup

*Originally published January 6, 2022*

**Mabel, I would like to begin with a broad question on your global approach, as your work has focused on the link between cultural and political sociology. Your [first book](#) analyzed the emergence of fascism in Italy under Mussolini and argued that the regime intentionally used spectacles and rituals to build support. Today's rise of populism is mostly studied through political science concepts. Are we missing something by not looking at populism as a culture?**

Thank you for asking me to take part in an Agora Interview hosted at your Illiberalism Studies Program and thank you for your careful engagement with my work.

When I began my research on fascism as a graduate student in the 1980s, I looked at it as a product of the past with historical interest. I never imagined that it would become a present-day possibility—not in Europe again, or in the United States. The post-World War II reconstruction of both continents did not yield perfect societies. The various political and social struggles that ensued in the United States and Europe in the 1960s and beyond suggest that “good” and fully inclusive democratic societies were aspirations rather than realities. I considered your questions in the three days prior to the first anniversary of the January 6 insurrection and storming of the United States Capitol. Writing during this period forced me to question whether the collective commitment to democracy has become so attenuated that it is no longer even a political aspiration. I am struck by my own increasing recognition that to borrow from Sinclair Lewis—it can happen here.

In my 2019 *Annual Review* [article](#), I described populism as an analytic category that defies definition because it typically represents a shifting aggregate of popular preferences without a clear ideology that unites them. Populism has become almost a residual category in contemporary political discussion. It has left and right variants and often includes politicians as different from each other as Donald Trump and just about any European “populist” that you might mention. While populism is not itself a culture it does use cultural tropes to tap into collective meanings and to craft its messages—what historian Michael Kazin calls a “persistent but mutable style of political rhetoric.”

The central idea that I took away from my early research on fascism was that all politics—left and right—has to connect with deeply held cultural understandings—what I call thick culture—if there is to be any hope of viable political rhetoric and communication. Political messages, as well as issues, have to resonate with citizens. Resonance does not come from thin air. Scholars often point to the public display of political power in Fascist Italy—but at least in Italy the medium was not the message. The Italian regime successfully deployed Italian culture not when it marched in the streets but when it appropriated the folk culture of Roman Catholicism or the cult of the Mother. Ordinary Italians may not have benefitted from the 1929 Lateran Pact but it enabled the Catholic Church to keep its hold on Italy long after Mussolini was gone. As to the mothers, the regime had multiple maternal and child health programs and gave awards to the mothers of large families. In turn, women across Italy lined up to donate their gold wedding bands to be melted down to raise money for the fascist war against Ethiopia. In the long run, the messaging did not matter. The regime fell, but the cultural beliefs around religion and motherhood remained.

*All politics—left and right—has to connect with deeply held cultural understandings—what I call thick culture—if there is to be any hope of viable political rhetoric and communication.*

Fast forward to 2016. Trump's xenophobic, racist, sexist, etc. comments, and there were many of them, attracted media attention, outrage and academic analysis. Trump's rhetoric gave the opposition confidence that not enough people would vote for such a person to enable him to win an election. But, Trump's speeches, no matter the subject, often relied on an overlooked retreat to a salient psychological and cultural trope—fairness. The trade deals with China were unfair; the immigrants jumping the border and wanting to become citizens were unfair and the biggest unfairness of them all—how the coast dwelling liberal elites treated him and everyone else who did not share their views as lacking basic intelligence.

Anyone who has tried to discipline a young child knows that a claim to unfairness is the first tool of persuasion that a child learns—even if they lose the argument! Fairness exerts a powerful emotional pull that makes an implicit claim to earned merit in multiple domains. Fairness also speaks to the American attraction to individualism as a way of life. In contrast to “justice” which implies an ideological or moral position of some sort which you can agree with or not, fairness speaks to multiple ends. The universality of fairness as an emotion coupled with its substantive ambiguity renders fairness a benign rhetorical strategy in contrast to Trump's more hateful language. Fairness speaks to the political middle and encourages it to underemphasize Trump's outrageous speech. In the end, only the ultra-rich received “fairness” from Trump in the form of the *Tax Cuts and Jobs Bill* and the “people” got COVID—among other things.

**You previously wrote about the rise of right-wing populism in Europe, particularly in France, and the role that Europeanization and historical contexts played in shaping its emergence. Could you tell us more about the interplay of both a revival of the nation *against* Europe and the Europeanization of populist parties' strategies?**

First, the plea for fairness would have no resonance in Europe. In contrast to the United States, most European nation states have some form of a welfare state and some form of a commitment to a political community—although that community has until the post war period in many places been comprised of mostly the “native-born.” European nation-states have diverse political cultures and legacies. Until 2016,

only certain nation states, such as France, had populist parties—now they all do. So most of what I write here is a generalization that requires more detail and nuance. As I wrote in 2009, the enlargement of the European Union roughly between 1995 and 2005 coupled with the attempt to develop a European political community coincided with the increasing salience of European populism. The one Europe idea with its collateral espousal of multiculturalism and globalization appealed to educated Europeans who had skills that crossed borders. Suddenly, a new world opened for them. Citizens who had national skills—think elementary school teacher rather than college professor—were more or less glued to their places or origin.

*The triple crises of 2015—the explosion of debt in Greece, the Charlie Hebdo and ensuing terrorist attacks in France, and the refugee crisis—gave populism the push that it needed to move from curious extreme to political mainstream.*

The EU as envisioned was always a threat to somewhere people versus the nowhere people. The threat seemed inconsequential as long as EU could deliver tangible material benefits to multiple groups. But as the 2008 sovereign debt crisis and the austerity that it seemed to demand showed good results could not be taken for granted. Many scholars point to 2016—the year of Brexit and Trump—as the take off point for European populism. But I argue that the triple crises of 2015—the explosion of debt in Greece, the Charlie Hebdo and ensuing terrorist attacks in France, and the refugee crisis—gave populism the push that it needed to move from curious extreme to political mainstream. The EU did not effectively manage any of the crises of 2015 that still linger in various forms. The perceived and real lack of effective EU crisis management made appeals to national sovereignty and national solutions to problems persuasive to those beyond the populist right.

By the French presidential election of 2017, Marine Le Pen performed better than her father did in 2002 even though she lost in the second round. In her concession speech, she argued that the political struggle of the ensuing years will be between “globalists” and “patriots.” She did not envision, that the first truly global entity to hit Europe would be a virus—and yes, Covid crossed borders with more ease than any refugee or member of the global elite. Ironically, the first European response to Covid was to close national borders! The public health approaches to Covid have been national—reinforcing the populist and popular trans-European position that “all politics is national.” Today, virtually all European politicians no matter their party are touting some form of national approach to social and political problems.

**Not all populist movements are right-wing nor is the term “populist” necessarily synonymous with “illiberal.” How do you define these terms and how would you characterize their relationship with each other? Our Program is called Illiberalism Studies Program, and we are therefore interested in knowing how other scholars position themselves toward that new concept and its relevance. Additionally, what about the term “fascism,” which has been gaining new fashion recently? In a 2019 [article](#) you discussed the usefulness (or lack of) of the term for comparative analysis. As an historian of fascism, how do you interpret the new use of “fascism” to describe far-right/rightwing populism? Does it bring awareness, or does it create new semantic confusions that obscure our readings of today’s challenges?**

Earlier I discussed my conceptualization of populism as a political style as it has no consistent ideology that distinguishes it from other forms of politics. This is not the case for either illiberalism or fascism. I used the term “anti-liberalism” in my book on fascism. My early articulation of anti-liberalism argued that in contrast to liberalism, which holds a firm boundary between the public and private self, anti-liberalism was a political ideology that denied that boundary. Giovanni Gentile who held numerous positions in the Italian fascist regime argued in a 1928 article in *Foreign Affairs* on “The Philosophic Basis of Fascism” that fascism required that individuals submerge themselves in the life of the State. Gentile criticized the liberal state for its individualism and its commitment to freedom.

Contemporary illiberalism such as Viktor Orban’s concept of “illiberal democracy” does not articulate such sweeping claims about submerging the individual in the state. Yet, illiberal democracy as a concept makes the important point that democratic procedures can be in place without a commitment to the democratic values of freedom, social equity and toleration. It is no accident that Orban’s strikes against democracy aim at the Hungarian constitution, the courts, and institutionalized forms of free expression such as the media and education. The attack on institutions while keeping the structure of democracy such for example voting is what makes the present forms of illiberalism so pernicious. There is ample evidence that many US Republicans and Trump himself aspire to enact Orban’s playbook.

In contrast to illiberalism, I maintain my 2019 claim that fascism is more a historical reference than an analytic category. I respect many of the scholars who draw parallels between past fascisms and present-day U.S. politics. My own 2021 [take](#) on the present is more aligned with that of legal scholar and historian Samuel Moyn, who has questioned the value of comparison in this regard. Writing in the days before, the first anniversary of the January 6 *coup* attempt (and I can find no other word for the storming of the Capitol) it is imperative to acknowledge that we are in a dangerous moment and the threat to democracy as practice and political aspiration is real. Trump is and always has been an authoritarian with contempt for the restraints that democratic institutions impose. Yet, Trump and his cadre of enablers is not the most dangerous threat. The widespread belief among ordinary Republicans that the 2020 Presidential was stolen (aka the “Big Lie”) coupled with organized paramilitary groups that are ready to strike again and the willingness of some of the military to turn a blind eye is nothing short of a trigger for insurrection. If January 6, 2021 was a Molotov cocktail, then January 6, 2025 could be a nuclear explosion.

*In contrast to illiberalism, I maintain my 2019 claim that fascism is more a historical reference than an analytic category.*

Given our current moment, simply warning of fascism will not help. Labelling something as fascist will not in my view force us to do the hard work required to save our democracy. We have to get on it—now.

## Hilary Silver on Left-Wing Xenophobia

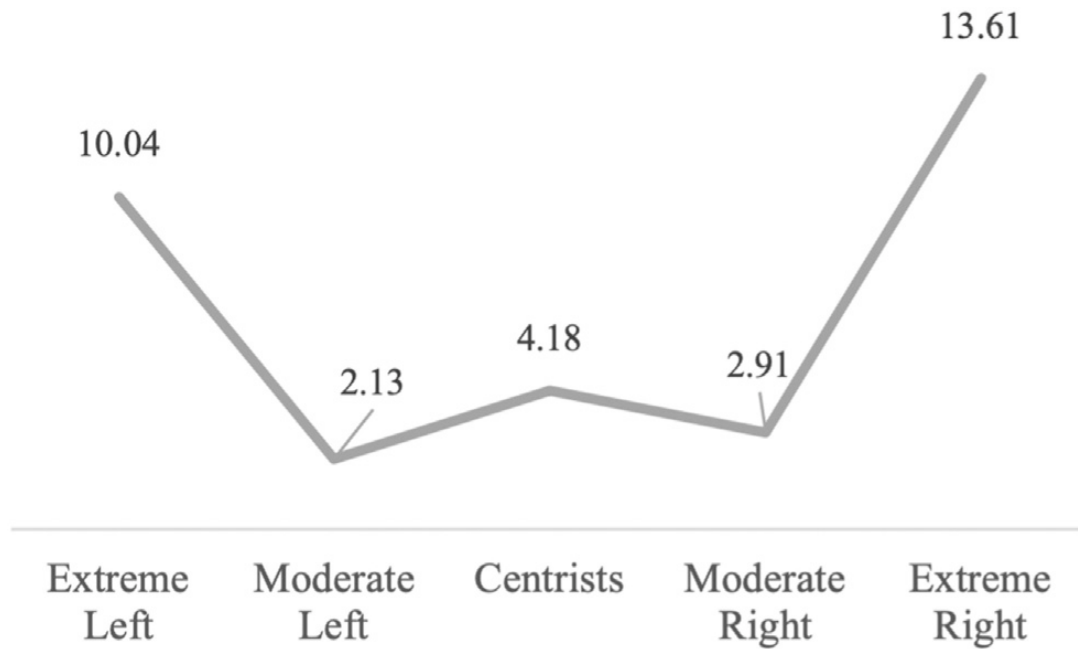
*Originally published January 10, 2022*

**Hilary, you recently published with your Brown University doctoral student, Svenja Kopyciok an article on left-wing xenophobia in Europe and, counter-intuitively, you found a surprisingly large share of those who identify as far left do express extremely xenophobic attitudes. Could you tell us more about your findings?**

Indeed. **Our analysis** of European Social Survey data broke down anti-immigrant sentiments by ideological disposition along the conventional right vs. left dimension, which revealed something unexpected, at least for social scientists—that there are some people who identify with the far left who express anti-immigrant feelings. Not as many as on the far right, of course, but there are also some on the extreme left who oppose immigration or think that immigrants make their country of residence a worse place to live (see our graph of “Percentage of Extremely Anti-Immigrant Respondents by Political Ideology”).

We then profiled the far-left xenophobes in contrast to far-right xenophobes, speculating that they have different motives for these attitudes. Although we hypothesized that far-left supporters may view immigrants more as economic competitors or unfair exploiters of the welfare state than as cultural threats, we found that some of them shared with the far right such nationalist reasons for opposing immigrants. This reality opens up an opportunity for far-left parties, like the residual communist parties in Southern Europe, to adopt anti-immigrant policies to try to retain their loyal voters and compete with the far right.

As **Emmy Eklundh** commented in an earlier Agora posting, “within the European populist left, there is a very strong commitment to the European nation-state order: nationalist identities are seen as vehicles through which to further the progressive political struggle... You would think that left-wing thought is based around equality, but it may sometimes embrace differentialism, too.”



**Percentage of Extremely Anti-Immigrant Respondents by Political Ideology**

**How would you explain that relationship between political orientation and xenophobia is not linear as often assumed, but curvilinear with the extremes being more xenophobic than those in between?**

Our data disconfirmed most of the demographic explanations for the curvilinear relationship. Xenophobia is pretty widespread. Surveys have found that anti-immigrant or anti-immigration sentiments rose in the 1980s in most EU countries, around the rise of the modern far right. By then, according to [Michael Minkenberg](#), over half the population felt there were too many people of another nationality living in their country. Although a minimal definition of the extreme right usually includes xenophobia and immigration, attitudes of intolerance do not correlate strongly with voting for radical right parties. Those voters may be motivated by other things, like culture or religion.

Illiberalism comes in many guises. Communist regimes have been autocratic and persecuted minorities. Extremism, intolerance, and authoritarian pursuit of order, obedience and conformity look the same to the victims, whatever the ideology. Populism is slightly different, but populist attitudes are likewise found on the left and right. Parties like SYRIZA and Podemos that won power in response to EU austerity policies fit the picture of populist parties of the left. Populism is sometimes defined as distrust of elites and democratic institutions. We found some support for the role of distrust on anti-immigrant sentiments. Generalized distrust is related to a lack of “social capital.” Alienated people who do not participate in civic life or encounter diverse others may demonize strangers.

Intense in-group feeling establishes strong boundaries between “us” and “them.” Xenophobia has long been associated with ultra-nationalism and the myth of a homogeneous or indigenous people. Those are not the exclusive attributes of the far right. For example, in December 2018, [the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights](#) asked European Jews who was responsible for the most serious incident of anti-Semitic harassment they had experienced: Only 13 percent said it was someone with a far-right



political view, while 30 percent said it was an “extremist Muslim” and 21 percent said it was someone with left-wing views.

But individual prejudices and discrimination are haphazard unless stimulated, organized, and expressed politically. White supremacists existed in the United States long before Trump came along and activated them. Likewise, far-left populist leaders have opportunistically played the “foreigner card” just as the far right has. Hostility to foreigners is often targeted at particular scapegoats, like groups of vulnerable immigrants or those who differ in appearance or religion. Therefore, a country’s party structure and leadership will also influence and condone pre-existing negative attitudes towards specific foreigners or even invent new ones. Our study admittedly did not explore contextual effects like party systems, discourse, or welfare effort. It also did not control for individual contact with immigrants, something that we sociologists take seriously but could not examine with this dataset. Social psychologists argue that normal interaction between in- and out-groups reduces prejudice.

**So should we speak about a welfare chauvinism on the left too, not based on ethnic motives but on economic/material factors? Should we talk of a leftist xenophobia as an answer to neoliberal globalization and its cheap labor policies?**

Many on the left would oppose “any type of horseshoe theory that says that extremism looks the same wherever you turn,” as Eklundh put it. We looked for ways to distinguish left and right. We were surprised that welfare chauvinism, measured by agreement that “immigrants should never be granted social rights,” could not account for left xenophobia as opposed to its right-wing counterpart. Prior research with the European Social Survey has found that perceived cultural threats are stronger motivations of voting preference for the radical right than perceived economic threats. Yet, we found the familiar curvilinear pattern of xenophobia along the left-right dimension held for welfare chauvinism, higher among the extreme left than the moderate left and highest among the extreme right. This is not to say that those who identify as left are as chauvinistic about welfare as the right are, but we found relatively high support for redistributive measures among the xenophobic far right as well as far left xenophobes. Egalitarianism did not differ, either.

*We found the familiar curvilinear pattern of xenophobia along the left-right dimension held for welfare chauvinism, higher among the extreme left than the moderate left and highest among the extreme right.*

One way to explain the difference between voting and xenophobia is that both poles of the political spectrum feel they deserve to hoard welfare measures for themselves, but for different reasons, say, prior contributions vs. nationality. We thought that the left xenophobes would want to exclude foreigners from welfare rights because benefits are contingent on lifelong taxpaying and contributions won through union struggles, not for cultural reasons. We don’t have enough specific data on this. There also seems to be a greater populist backlash against globalization and European integration at both ideological extremes. It is difficult to distinguish this from fear and distrust of foreigners.

**What does this tell us about the transformations of the notions of ‘right’ and ‘left’ in today’s Europe?**

Using the terms ‘right’ and ‘left’ to denote political parties and ideologies has always been ambiguous shorthand for what signified preference for capitalism or socialism. From the onset of mass democracy,

political parties were arrayed along social class lines, with conservatives preferring a status-based electorate opposed by workers whose parties demanded and won inclusion in the body politic. The great wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century cemented mass citizenship that, in the Cold War era, became a conflict between liberalism and socialism, as two social, political, and economic orders competing on the world stage and in democratic party systems.

By the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, this cleavage was sharply crosscut by so-called “**post-materialist**” conflicts over the environment, consumption, religion, and women’s, LGBTQ, racial and ethnic group identities, fragmenting the old ‘right’ and ‘left’ coalitions. Some even see the rise of the extreme right as a reaction to the rise of these New Left issues. While people can still place themselves along a right/left scale, the meaning of these terms vary by country, time period, party systems, and issues. In multi-party systems, the large, catchall “people’s” parties broke up and lost support to new Green and far right populist parties. The latest election in Germany is a case in point: the SPD—or alternatively, CDU—must now share power with the liberals and Greens unless they breach the firewall so far excluding the extreme right AfD. In the US and UK, this conflict is internalized within the two large parties. American progressives and moderate Democrats confront conservatives and Trumpist populists. The decomposition of the left and right is extreme in France and Italy, but even **Sweden** is experiencing partisan instability undermining social democratic coalitions. Immigration issues add to the stress on party systems.

*The decomposition of the left and right is extreme in France and Italy, but even Sweden is experiencing partisan instability undermining social democratic coalitions. Immigration issues add to the stress on party systems.*

In contemporary Europe, therefore, governing is increasingly complicated by the need to reconcile different partisan priorities within the government. The resulting indecision, delay and inaction, coupled with oppositional challenges to legitimate authority and layers of transnational bureaucracy, has left governance to professional technocrats and central bankers largely insulated from popular accountability. The democratic deficit in turn feeds distrust of elites and xenophobia, complicating what is meant by ‘right’ and ‘left.’

**How do you see the future of xenophobic attitudes in a post-COVID time? The sanitary crisis has both intensified public dissatisfaction and resentment, which could fuel populist claims, but also moved the public debate on more public health/economic recovery issues.**

**Theory suggests** that pandemics engender xenophobia and **authoritarian nationalism**, but is less definitive as to which outgroups would be targeted for hostility. There are a few new studies that address anti-immigrant attitudes since the onset of COVID-19. The pandemic has increased uncertainty about the future and anxiety about infection risk, leading to a search for culprits to blame. Throughout the world, convenient scapegoats like the Chinese or Jews were resurrected, fed by global conspiracy theories on social media and producing ethnic violence. Similarly, border closures, travel bans, quarantines and social distancing measures have reduced the moderating effects of intergroup contact during the pandemic.

Some leaders unwilling to accept responsibility for COVID-19 hardships permitted and even encouraged xenophobic bias and violence against particular outsiders. Anti-Asian sentiments were stoked with politicians' finger-pointing at Wuhan. Vigilantes in Eastern Europe and the Southern US were allowed to patrol the borders for undocumented Middle Eastern or Latin American refugees whose infiltration they believed could infect natives. The "immigrant-threat" narrative lent support for anti-Roma policies and right-wing populism in Central Europe. When even EU governments quickly closed national borders in order to slow the spread of the virus, it sent a message, unwittingly or not, that outsiders were, and would be the source of disease. It also implied social contact with domestic foreigners should be curtailed for self-protection. In sum, quarantine and isolation rules reinforced broad xenophobia. But not all strangers were construed as dangerous. Drawing sharp lines between insiders and outsiders was a selective and politically directed enterprise.

*When even EU governments quickly closed national borders in order to slow the spread of the virus, it sent a message, unwittingly or not, that outsiders were, and would be the source of disease. It also implied social contact with domestic foreigners should be curtailed for self-protection.*

Nevertheless, theories of natural disasters might also predict that mass uncertainty unleashes selflessness and solidarity across ethnic lines, as people regardless of background seek security through cooperation. Psychiatrist George Makari's *Of Fear and Strangers: A History of Xenophobia* points out that the term xenophobia emerged in French and English tied to Western debates at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century over nationalism, globalization, race, and immigration. Initially, this neologism referred to a new, wild kind of patriotic fervor in opposition to challenges to Western empires by the *xenos*, conceived as a rival nation. The challenges included the arrival of foreigners in the colonizers' homelands. The blanket fear of "strangers" named no specific maligned group, although xenophobia was historically expressed in anti-Semitism and racism. In fact, the idea is relational, and more informative about the frightened ones than their nemesis. What are they afraid of? Makari asks. He proposed that people cope with fear and uncertainty by bonding with others, demonstrating their trustworthiness through altruistic acts. "If a modicum of anxiety before strangers is adaptive and commonplace," he writes, "xenophobia is not."

The implication is that pandemic anxiety may result in new social policy initiatives. Belonging and collective purpose may therefore emerge in the post-COVID era, as countries rebuild after a tragedy that will at least be interpreted as beyond individuals' control. Consider the agreement of the "Frugal" European countries to grant as well as lend funds to less affluent member states for the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the key instrument at the heart of NextGenerationEU to invest in Europe's rebound from the pandemic. Surely the crisis was behind such a historic "Hamiltonian" gesture of solidarity. Biden's Build Back Better bill contains a wealth of new redistributive programs. The WHO's appeal for international distribution of vaccines invokes a universalistic humanitarian ethic. Even the daily applause for essential workers of all backgrounds that erupted from windows across cities early in the pandemic was a sign of hopeful solidarity. There remains a possibility that such a collective spirit springing from a shared fate will produce greater social cohesion in the years to come.

## **Daniele Albertazzi on the Radical and Extreme Right in Italy and Switzerland**

*Originally published January 12, 2022*

**Daniele, you have been working on Italian populist and radical right movements and recently co-authored *Populism in Europe: Lessons from Umberto Bossi's Northern League*. Can we begin by discussing what role does the memory of fascism play into the Lega Nord political outreach and more globally in today's Italian political life?**

First, it is important to keep in mind that there has always been an electoral market in Italy for parties openly inspired by fascism. These cannot call themselves 'fascist' as the Constitution prohibits it, but can of course be inspired by that tradition, while maintaining that they are something else. Hence the Italian Social Movement (MSI)—created by people who had fought alongside Mussolini until the bitter end—gained representation in Parliament at the very first free elections held in the country in 1948. Today there are various extra-parliamentary organizations drawing heavily from fascism, including Forza Nuova and CasaPound, and there is no doubt that several representatives of Meloni's Brothers of Italy come from that milieu and are known to have expressed views that are in line with that tradition.

The League (previously: Northern League) is something else. Under its founder and long-time leader Umberto Bossi, the similarities with fascism had to do with the very harsh language used against immigrants; in other words, with the party's nativism. However, the roots of this party were not in the fascist tradition and in fact, in many respects, the League was far from fascism in ideological terms. Firstly, under Bossi the Northern League was attempting to represent only one part of the country, the north, hoping it may even break away from the rest of Italy. This would be anathema to fascists who always ridiculed Bossi's claim that the north of Italy should itself be treated as 'a nation'. In other words, in the 1990s fascists and *leghisti* were what the Catalan nationalists and VOX are today in Spain: polar opposites.

Secondly, and importantly, Bossi's conception of the people and of the role of the state was very different from those of fascists. To summarise this in a few words: fascists argue that all is owed to the state and, when in power, aimed to 'remake' Italians, striving to forge the 'new man' and 'new woman'. For populists like Bossi, 'the people' is already perfect as it is, it does not need re-educating or re-making, it just needs representing through the party and leader. For them, the people's 'common sense' is all that is needed for the community to thrive. Moreover, at the time the League was very suspicious of the idea of

giving more power to state institutions and was also much less authoritarian than it has become under its new leader, Matteo Salvini. One reason is that it was suspicious of political, military, and civil elites, while fascism places great faith in society's hierarchies.

With Salvini, the League has moved into much more traditional nationalist territory. It is true that it has been able to attract new members coming from the extreme right, but even that has happened before Brothers of Italy looked like a serious contender for power. Now, the latter is the natural destination for people attracted by the neo-fascist tradition when they also wish to join a party that has influence and is present in the institutions. Hence, I do not think Salvini's League is 'fascist' either despite being authoritarian and—if possible—even more anti-immigrant than Bossi's League. However, its conception of the state, proposals about the economy, and conception of 'the people' all set them apart from fascism even today.

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**Literature on populism often discusses the role of social media as echo chambers, but Italy shows that even before social media, television—and radio before it—played a key role in mainstreaming some ideological narratives. How should we revisit Berlusconi's legacy today in the business/politics/media mixing of genres?**

It is interesting how we have been talking about "Berlusconi's legacy" for many years, when he could in fact turn out to be the kingmaker in the *next* election. He is not out of the picture yet. It is indeed unlikely we will see Salvini or Meloni as prime minister without Berlusconi's say-so (they will probably need his 7-8% of votes to gain a majority).

But if we want to start talking about his legacy, I'd say that he has left a profound imprint on the country in political terms for two reasons. Firstly, Berlusconi played an important role in ushering in a duo-polar system in Italy, whereby left- and right-wing alliances would compete for government. Secondly, throughout the last three decades Berlusconi and some of his many media have been major forces blowing on the flames of populism, heightening suspicion for the political elites and the justice system and attacking the rules and conventions that allow a liberal democracy to function. When I see journalists buying into Berlusconi's recent narrative that he is now become some sort of father-figure for the nation, someone who is above the clashes between left and right and only cares about democracy, I do not know whether to laugh or cry.

But as far as the media are concerned, Berlusconi is a man of the past. Yes, he still controls various television channels, and yes these are still influential, particularly among older cohorts of voters. However, he has always been the master of a top-down, "from-one-to-many" model of communication that truly belongs to the past in a world of social media and interactions "on the go." Of course, it has worked perfectly well for him, and I suspect that he is now the most seasoned political leader in Europe.

Not bad for someone who, back in 1994, argued to be a businessman reluctantly lent to politics on a temporary basis.

*But as far as the media are concerned, Berlusconi is a man of the past. Yes, he still controls various television channels, and yes these are still influential, particularly among older cohorts of voters. However, he has always been the master of a top-down, “from-one-to-many” model of communication that truly belongs to the past in a world of social media and interactions “on the go.”*

**Daniele, you have also worked on Switzerland. Could you explain how, given the nature of Swiss direct democracy, does the Swiss People’s Party mobilize grievance in its favor and create issue salience?**

The means provided by direct democracy have been expertly used by the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) in recent decades, but they are not only suitable to the populist right. They can be successfully deployed by the left, too, and indeed, in the Swiss context, also by pressure groups and private businesses. As long as you have the manpower and/or enough funds to collect signatures to launch a referendum, you can do so. The political culture is as such that nobody bats an eyelid if a party launches an initiative (i.e., a referendum requested by voters) against the advice of the *same* government this party is a member of.

In the specific case of the SVP, in recent decades they have tended to mobilize on controversial themes, such as the country’s relationship with the EU and issues having to do with identity, such as religion and immigration. When the SVP sides against all other major parties on issues such as whether the construction of minarets should be allowed in the country, or whether freedom of movement between Switzerland and the EU should continue, it puts itself in a win-win situation. If the vote goes in the party’s favor, the SVP can say that this is vindication for its claim that it speaks on behalf of the ‘silent majority’ ignored by the ‘political elites’. If they lose, they will still have forced the country to talk about an issue they ‘own’, hence strengthening their position as the party that voters can trust to bring up difficult topics, such as religion and asylum seeking. Not to mention that, for a party that gets below 30%, to be defeated in a referendum after attracting, say, 45% of the vote (as it has usually been the case in recent years) means having been able to side with a very large number of voters from other parties, too.

*When the SVP sides against all other major parties on issues such as whether the construction of minarets should be allowed in the country, or whether freedom of movement between Switzerland and the EU should continue, it puts itself in a win-win situation.*

In other words, if you have the means to organize canvassers and street stands to push your proposals before a vote takes place, and pick topics carefully so that your image as the owner of those topics is reinforced even in case of an honorable defeat, you have everything to gain from beating the drum of direct democracy and very little to lose.

**Would you say that the pandemic reshuffled the cards for populist movements in Europe? Some elements seem to play in their favor, some others seem not. How do you disentangle the COVID-19 impact on European—or just Italian—populist landscape?**



Of course, it is always very difficult to generalize but, overall, we can say that the pandemic has not been particularly good to populist parties in Europe. One reason is that the scare caused by the pandemic has revitalized the role of ‘experts’, especially after scientists came up with several vaccines in a matter of months. Let’s keep in mind that opposition to vaccination (or even just vaccine hesitancy) are typical of only a minority of voters, if perhaps at times a vocal one. A second reason is that—although the media never seem to take notice—several populist parties, left and right, are in fact insiders, not ‘challengers,’ they are parties of government in Europe. Hence, they have had to walk the tightrope of trying to show some understanding for those who did not want to get vaccinated, while making sure that countries could come out of this endless cycle of lockdowns and re-openings.

My home country of Italy—a true populist paradise—is actually a very good case study in this sense, as Salvini tries to pacify the vocal no-vax minority by paying lip-service to their concerns, while having to listen to the wealthy northern areas of diffuse industrialization that provide the backbone of his party’s support and want to be able to work, produce and move forward.

*I do not think that the pandemic has ‘reshuffled the cards’ in this sense. The structural factors that facilitate the emergence and success of populism are all still there, while it is likely that COVID-19 will pose less of a challenge to our societies a few years from now. Soon enough we will be talking about other topics again.*

**And a last, conceptual, question. Our Program is called Illiberalism Studies Program. How do you see the term illiberalism, where does it overlap with populism, where does it bring some new elements into the discussion?**

In the last two interviews that you have published, with [Emmy Eklundh](#) and [Anna Grzymala-Busse](#), you have discussed what populism is at some length. I subscribe to the understanding of this phenomenon that sees it as inherently at odds with fundamental principles of liberal democracy, such as the importance of checks and balances, the primacy of constitutions and the sacredness of minority rights. Populists simply cannot accept the idea that the power ‘of the people’ (which liberal democrats would call: the majority) must be kept in check and must be constrained. For them, the will of the people can be identified, after which it needs to be implemented without delay. Anything deviating from this is framed as tricks played by various elites that want to keep sure *their* will ultimately prevails, not that of ‘the people.’

But of course, while populists are illiberal, not all illiberals are populists, as the latter category includes a longer list of parties and movements, including those fascists we started our discussion from. The real tragedy today is that illiberalism has become mainstream, as the acts of the Hungarian, Polish and UK governments, as well as the years of Donald Trump, have clearly shown.

## Stijn van Kessel on Populism and Euroscepticism

Originally published January 26, 2022

**Stijn, you work on populism, Euroscepticism, and pro-European activism. Let's begin by discussing the relationship of populist parties with the European Union. How has Brexit influenced European populists when it came to leaving the EU versus staying and trying to change it from the inside?**

The short answer is that Brexit's influence has been limited. If anything, the chaotic Brexit process is likely to have incentivized parties to think twice about pursuing a 'hard Eurosceptic' strategy and to campaign for leaving the EU. In a co-authored [article](#), we have considered the responses to Brexit of four prominent populist radical right (PRR) parties in France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. These parties are typically the fiercest critics of the EU: they lament the loss of national sovereignty, which they consider the result of deeper European integration, they dislike the opening of borders, and criticize the EU for being undemocratic and elitist.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, many PRR parties greeted the outcome of the UK's referendum in June 2016 with enthusiasm. Consistent with their populist outlook, they framed the vote as 'ordinary people' dealing a blow to out-of-touch political elites. Yet we also found that the Brexit vote failed to leave a more lasting mark on the strategies of PRR parties—more generally, European integration did not feature prominently in most of their subsequent national election campaigns. A handful of them, including the Dutch Party for Freedom, still support an 'exit' from the EU, but Brexit has clearly not produced a general trend of PRR parties hardening or emphasizing Eurosceptic positions.

*The Brexit vote failed to leave a more lasting mark on the strategies of PRR parties.*

In our analysis, we explain the muted responses of PRR parties to Brexit partly in terms of the relatively low appetite among European citizens for leaving the EU—the UK is pretty much an outlier in this sense—but also the comparatively low salience of the issue of European integration. As long as PRR parties are successful by focusing on more tangible issues that are considered more important by their voters—not least those related to immigration—their leaderships have little reason to take a risk and focus on themes that potentially divide their electorates or parties.

## **Is populism a useful label for parties engaged in Euroscepticism? If not, how are such movements better described or understood?**

A widely recognized key element of populism is the distinction between ‘the people,’ whose interests and views populists claim to represent, and the unresponsive or corrupt ‘elites.’ Populism, in other words, offers a view on the relationship between people and elites rather than a concrete set of ideas about how to run a society. This explains why, in practice, populism can be adopted by political actors of various ideological persuasions. Nevertheless, populism and Euroscepticism can often be found in a **sympiotic relationship**. Populists are prone to dislike the ostensibly complex and opaque EU decision-making processes which stand in the way of the direct implementation of the popular will. The EU can also easily be depicted as an elite-driven organization with no connection to ordinary citizens.

Many populist parties are thus drawn to Euroscepticism, or to put it more precisely: a criticism of how the EU currently functions. As noted above, parties that are not only populist but also radical right typically portray the EU as an organization that threatens the sovereignty and cultural traditions of their member states. Radical left parties, which often voice populist arguments too, tend to describe European integration as a neo-liberal project that encourages a ‘race to the bottom’ in terms of welfare entitlements and working conditions. Yet such arguments are not necessarily populist as such, and relate more to the ideological agenda and policy positions of political parties. Criticism of the EU and its policies is not always framed in a populist (‘people vs elites’) manner, and being Eurosceptic does not automatically render one a populist.

It is also worthwhile noting that populists (**on the radical left and right**) are not principally opposed to every form of European integration. We have already seen that PRR parties are wary of pursuing a hard Eurosceptic strategy, and they don’t necessarily rule out all forms of European cooperation. They tend to emphasize the common cultural heritage of the various European nations and may see a role for the EU in dealing with ‘outside threats’ they identify, not least immigration from non-Western countries. To describe such an ambivalent position, scholars have spoken about the ‘**equivocal euroscepticism**’ or ‘**Euro-ambivalence**’ of PRR parties. Parties and social movements on the radical left—which in fact often desire *more* transnational cooperation—also call for ‘**another Europe**’ that prioritizes economic and social justice, as well as democratization, instead of free markets and neo-liberal capitalism.

**Another key question you have been looking at is the evolution of populist parties between the moment they are in opposition and the moment they access governmental responsibilities. We’ve seen some party organizations find electoral success and then moderate their positions and open a space for new populists. How does an organization like the AfD or Le Pen’s National Rally maintain their populist street credit while handling the moderating realities of electoral success?**

In earlier literature it has often been argued that populist politicians will find it hard to retain their credibility in power: how to preserve a populist anti-establishment appeal when they are in power themselves? Populist promises of **democratic renewal** and enacting ‘the will of the people’—to the extent there exists such a thing in the first place—may also be hard to redeem in practice. Various scholars thus theorized that populism is ‘**episodic**’ and unlikely to survive in established political institutions, or that the only chance of survival is to integrate into the mainstream.

Yet if we look at the political reality of the previous few decades it is obvious that many populist actors *do* survive in power, without necessarily losing their populist streaks or moderating their positions. One can think of examples like Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Viktor Orbán in Hungary and the Law and Justice Party in Poland. Or Donald Trump, who has not regained office, but who clearly became no less radical during his tenure and has essentially transformed the Republican Party. As **Zsolt Enyedi** has argued, the trick is to ‘redefine the opponent’ from the domestic power holders to other ‘elites’ supposedly threatening the interests of ‘the people’ or survival of the nation. There are a whole range of candidates for such a blame-shifting strategy. Depending on the specific ideology of a populist actor, typical targets include the European Union, powerful nations such as the US, global capital, a Jewish conspiracy, etc.

There are also various examples of PRR parties, like the Austrian Freedom Party and Italian Lega, that lose support after a stint in power, but bounce back in the longer run. When we look specifically at Europe, the general picture is **mainstream parties shifting** towards more culturally conservative and anti-immigration positions, instead of PRR parties moderating their stances and rhetoric. The radical right, in other words, has become increasingly normalized and ‘**mainstreamed**’, and traditional parties are contributing to this in their—**often fruitless**—attempt to ‘retain’ or ‘win back’ voters attracted to PRR ideas and policies. This, again, has more to do with electoral competition over specific issues and concrete political outcomes than with populism as such.

*The general picture is mainstream parties shifting towards more culturally conservative and anti-immigration positions, instead of PRR parties moderating their stances and rhetoric.*

**You have also studied in great length populism in the Netherlands. Dutch populism has been at the forefront of populism’s transformations these last three decades. Are there any specificities that explain the leading role of the Netherlands in producing populist parties?**

In one sense, what happens in the Netherlands fits the more general pattern in Europe. We see a rise of populism in the form of the PRR across the western part of the continent in particular. What is interesting is that, prior to 2002, populist parties were fairly unsuccessful in the Netherlands. This has changed dramatically in the past two decades: there are now four PRR parties represented in the highly fragmented Dutch parliament, partly due to defections and splits. These have a combined vote share of over 18 percent.

As in other countries, cultural issues—not least immigration and multiculturalism—have become more salient and divisive. As I described before, radical right discourse and positions have also become increasingly normalized, and for many voters PRR parties are not ‘beyond the pale’ anymore. These parties are also aided by the longstanding trend toward partisan dealignment, which means most people don’t feel strongly affiliated to traditional parties anymore. Interestingly, dealignment also facilitates competition between old and new radical right actors. This is something we currently see in the Netherlands, but also in France, between presidential candidates Le Pen and Zemmour.

What is typical about the Netherlands is the extremely proportional electoral system, which makes it relatively easy for a whole raft of political upstarts, including PRR parties, to enter parliament. Research by **Léonie de Jonge** has identified the role of (traditional) media organizations as another relevant

condition. These may accommodate the rise of PRR parties by providing them a platform and paying attention to their core issues and demands. In the Netherlands, this seems to be happening too. Radical right actors—and anti-vaccination activists, for that matter—are frequent guests on talk shows, and journalists seem anxious about being accused of aloof intellectualism, political correctness, and ‘left-wing’ bias—precisely the type of charges made against them by the PRR.

**And a last question, more conceptual. Our program is called Illiberalism Studies Program. What is your position on the term ‘illiberal’ and its overlaps and gaps with “populism”?**

This question leads us to the core of conceptual and theoretical debates about populism. Populism is frequently argued to be inherently illiberal, because it is seen to conceive of ‘the people’ as a homogeneous entity (see for instance the oft-cited [definition by Cas Mudde](#)). Following this approach, populism is inherently anti-pluralistic, as it ignores or rejects the fact that society is diverse and made up of individuals or groups with different values and preferences. While populists claim to be the true democrats who follow the ‘will of the people,’ their version of democracy may then ultimately amount to crude majoritarianism and silencing minorities. Some, like [Jan-Werner Müller](#), go a bit further and argue that populists pose a danger to democracy (and not just liberalism). In Müller’s view, populists claim to be the only legitimate representatives of ‘the people,’ and this assertion is in conflict with principles of political pluralism and open contestation that are arguably essential to democracy.

However, other scholars, especially those inspired by the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, disagree with the premise that populism is inherently anti-pluralistic, and therefore illiberal. According to them, populism is essentially a logic of political mobilization centered on a dichotomy between the people and (those in) power. It is not the case that the inherent differences between the people are cast aside in this discursive process: populists can bring together a variety of societal demands and identities, thereby linking diverse constituencies that share a grievance with power holders. While many of the scholars who follow this approach reject xenophobic and authoritarian forms of populism, they note that populism can also take more benign forms characterized by respect for minorities and progressive values. [Chantal Mouffe](#) even explicitly defends ‘left-wing populism’ as a means to challenge the neoliberal mainstream consensus as well as the far right, and to revitalize the democratic process.

In terms of where I stand in this debate, I don’t believe all populists explicitly portray ‘the people’ as a homogeneous entity, and I do think populism can act as a useful signal when elites are in fact unresponsive or corrupt. But I also think the construction of ‘the people’ makes it almost inevitable that some individuals or groups are excluded (be it immigrants, power holders, the rich etc.). It is also easier to define ‘the people’ *ex negativo*; that is, by pointing out who does *not* belong to this category. In practice, I think most populists show more or less pronounced [exclusionary](#), and therefore also illiberal, tendencies. But the real threat to liberal democratic values may lie more in the often authoritarian and xenophobic nature of such politicians, and not in their populism per se.

*The real threat to liberal democratic values may lie more in the often authoritarian and xenophobic nature of such politicians, and not in their populism per se.*

## Lenka Bušíková on Illiberalism in Eastern and Central Europe

*Originally published February 4, 2022*

**Your book, *Extreme Reactions: Radical Right Mobilization in Eastern Europe*, seeks to explain why there is strong support in Eastern Europe for radical right parties. Could you expand a little on this phenomenon? What is the role of ethnic minority communities in the growing support for radical right parties and what factors impact the level of support for the radical right from country to country?**

Support for radical right parties in Eastern Europe has increased over time, but remains, on average, lower than in Western Europe. Support for radicalized mainstream parties, such as Fidesz in Hungary and the Law and Justice Party in Poland, is, however, remarkably strong. There are many reasons for this, but I will highlight three.

First, “niche” programmatic radical right parties are a luxury of wealthy countries, often with well-developed welfare states. As a result, the radical right is lagging behind somewhat in the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe.

Second, the boundaries between radicalized mainstream parties and radical right parties are comparatively blurry in Central and Eastern Europe, where party systems are very fluid. This leaves mainstream parties more at liberty to adapt extremist positions and siphon off support for parties on the flank. Recent developments in the United States and Western Europe do, however, suggest that blurring has become acceptable in the West as well.

Third, identity politics in Central and Eastern Europe, which traditionally revolved around ethnicity, is broadening. This shift benefits radicalized mainstream parties. Inspired by the West, Central and Eastern European politicians “discovered” the danger of Muslim immigration after the 2015 refugee crisis. They blurred the refugee threat with warrior frontier Christianity and an emphasis on family values. This contributed to the politicization of the LGBTQ community, which is now framed as a threat to heterosexual families. The radical right parties that emerged in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall mobilized against ethnic groups that had resided in these countries for centuries—and, in most cases, had full citizenship rights. Over time, both mainstream right-wing parties and radical



right parties embraced new identity issues (Muslim immigration, sexual and gender rights), resulting in a fierce competition for socially conservative voters.

My book links radical right voting to the ascendance of minorities to power, the accommodation of their demands, and policy backlash. *Extreme Reactions* challenges the notion that radical right voting is rooted in xenophobia and economic uncertainty. Rather, the book argues that radical right parties are fueled by dissatisfaction with and resentment of politically ascendant minority groups. This is tied directly to the mobilization of ethnic minorities within the framework of democratic politics. Where ethnic minorities remain politically quiescent, where large mainstream parties exclude them from cabinets, or where the ethnic minority is large enough to threaten the political dominance of the majority, radical right parties fail to gain traction in the electorate.

*The book argues that radical right parties are fueled by dissatisfaction with and resentment of politically ascendant minority groups.*

Where minorities mobilize, where mainstream parties include them within ruling coalitions, and where ethnic minorities are demographically not so weighty as to constitute a threat to the majority's nation-building project, meanwhile, radical right parties find fertile electoral soil. By examining how these parties capitalize on feelings of discontent toward politically assertive minorities and the governmental policies that yield to their demands, the book exposes the volatile, *Zeitgeist*-dependent conditions under which once-fringe right-wing parties have risen to prominent but precarious positions of power.

**Your work has also focused on populism and you recently coauthored a paper with Pavol Baboš about populist leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. What novel approaches have populist leaders adopted in response to the pandemic and what do you see as the relationship between populism and radical right ideology?**

My article "Best in COVID" studies the response of technocratic populists in Czechia and Slovakia to the first wave of the pandemic. It is a study of populists in power, since both Andrej Babiš and Pavol Matovič were Prime Ministers in the spring-summer of 2020. The crisis has shown that populists are better at handling manufactured crises than real ones.

Unfortunately, the responsive nature of populist governance undermined the states' long-term ability to implement transparent, predictable, well-thought-out policies to tackle the crisis. In their quest to remain popular, populists bypassed existing institutions of crisis response and undermined their performance with ad-hoc changes and perpetual blame-shifting. Over time, this eroded public confidence in state institutions and public officials, paving the way for disastrous performance during the deadly COVID wave of winter 2020-2021.

Instantaneous responsiveness, in which politicians adapt their policies to the changing moods of the public, can sometimes be effective, as when dealing with localized issues. However, pandemic response requires long-term policy commitments and the prioritization of responsibility over responsiveness. Populists are therefore bound to fail.

Like COVID-19, populism has many variants. Once in power, populists have many tools at their disposal to mobilize the electorate; right-wing ideology is only one of these options. The Czech and Slovak populist parties in power rarely invoked vitriolic nativism during the COVID pandemic.

In Slovakia, Igor Matovič promoted minority candidates on party lists. However, his chaotic governance led to government crisis. He was forced to resign after botching the purchase of the Russian Sputnik vaccine.

Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš attempted to divert attention from COVID-related deaths during the parliamentary election campaign in the summer of 2021 by emphasizing the fabricated threat of non-European Muslims immigrating to the country. However, the strategy proved to be a double-edged sword: his party, ANO, lost power in the October parliamentary elections.

Technocratic populism, one of the variants of populism, is an ideology that weaponizes expertise for political purposes. However, it is not the rule of experts, but a system of governance in which expertise (or the illusion of expertise) is strategically used to garner public support. At the beginning of the pandemic, the public was scared and compliant, leading them to embrace the mask-wearing recommended by experts. This was a positive moment: technocratic populists and the experts were in sync. Later on, as the public grew tired of the pandemic and wanted more freedoms, populists used expertise as a shield, hiding behind experts and shifting the blame onto them.

Populism is a thin, flexible ideology. It can therefore invoke nativism as it sees fit. However, it is important to recognize that the toolkit of populism, especially when in power, is much broader, and nativist mobilization can backfire. Populists in power are very effective at targeting people's purses via selective redistribution and government spending programs, which are popular and sometimes lead to positive outcomes such as poverty reduction. Expertise, social spending, and identity mobilization are three distinct ways in which populists can mobilize voters.

*Expertise, social spending, and identity mobilization are three distinct ways in which populists can mobilize voters.*

**In an article co-authored with Petra Guasti, you *argue* that Central European countries, specifically the Visegrad Four, are marked by a series of “illiberal swerves,” evidenced by declining trust in democratic institutions and an increasingly uncivil society, among other phenomena. What do you mean by this term and how does this play out in practice? We often hear that Hungary and Poland are particularly troubling cases of weakening democratic principles in Central Europe, but what can you tell us about Czechia and Slovakia?**

Indeed, Petra and I wrote an article on the “illiberal swerve” to challenge the notion that liberal-democratic backsliding is a linear reversal. We view Central and Eastern Europe as a very heterogeneous region marked by chronic instability, rather than as a region that is uniformly descending into illiberalism. Moreover, the literature on backsliding overlooks previous episodes of resilience and the ability of many Central and Eastern European countries to mobilize for and defend democracy.

Rather than focusing on tectonic shifts, we underscore the need to pay more attention to shorter episodes of contestation. We view the sequences of electoral cycles as a series of inherently unstable liberal-illiberal pushes and pulls. The concept of swerving allows for the possibility that the commitment to democratic pluralism has weakened only temporarily. Swerving recognizes volatility and uncertainty as an integral part of democracy and better captures the diversity and dynamics of Central and Eastern European democracies. If swerving persists unchallenged over two electoral cycles, we classify it as an illiberal turn.

*We underscore the need to pay more attention to shorter episodes of contestation. We view the sequences of electoral cycles as a series of inherently unstable liberal-illiberal pushes and pulls.*

Czechia and Slovakia demonstrate the validity of the concept of swerving. Slovakia has successfully corrected two swerves. The first was associated with the authoritarian nationalism of Vladmír Mečiar (1994–1998). Mečiar was defeated by a coalition of right-leaning pro-European parties. The second major defeat of populism occurred a few months before the pandemic. After a series of anti-corruption mass protests, Robert Fico lost power. In Czechia, Andrej Babiš lost power in October 2021 to two anti-populist coalitions. As in Slovakia, the electoral campaign was accompanied by a surge in civic mobilization.

Both countries had to overhaul their economies. The economic restructuring in Slovakia was traumatic. Furthermore, large-scale privatization was marred by large-scale corruption, which undermined the legitimacy of mainstream parties in both cases. Slovakia also faced the challenge of accommodating its Hungarian minority.

In comparative perspective, Czechia and Slovakia were remarkably successful. Problems persist, of course: current and future governments must address perennially low wages, reform pensions, remedy regional inequalities, and accelerate stalled efforts to transition to a knowledge economy.

The liberal democracies in Czechia and Slovakia are permanently contested. Populists have gained, but also lost, power. At this precise moment, the quality of democracy in both countries is on the upswing. However, consistent with the notion of swerving, liberal democracy is not consolidated.

**Finally, our program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. Do you consider the term “illiberal” to be useful for researchers interested in democratic decline? What do you consider to be the connection between illiberal politics and populism?**

I am a passionate consumer of your Illiberalism Studies Program and I often direct my students to your website. I find the term “illiberal” very appealing because it gives us the ability to think about democratic decline in nuanced ways. Not all democracies are liberal democracies and not all decay is illiberal. For example, a shift from liberal to majoritarian democracy is illiberal but preserves the rules of electoral contestation. Political corruption and power grabs can undermine democracy but need not be illiberal. Red flags that indicate decay relate to efforts to strip away minority rights, including ethnic rights, the rights of small religious groups, and the right to sexual and bodily autonomy. Typically, the suppression of rights signals a shift to majority rule in order to buttress efforts to gain or retain power.

*I find the term “illiberal” very appealing because it gives us the ability to think about democratic decline in nuanced ways.*

In his famous 2014 speech on illiberalism, Viktor Orbán noted that the role of leadership is to “harmonize the relationship between the interests and achievement of individuals [...] and the interests and achievements of the community and the nation.” The link between illiberalism and populism stems from efforts to dismantle the guardrails that prevent the tyranny of self-appointed representatives of the “authentic” majority. These protections may be weakened directly using laws, regulations, and policies that de-facto strip minority citizens of their legal rights. Alternatively, critical voices can be

delegitimized via polarizing discourse that labels critics and political opponents as enemies of the people. The link between illiberalism and populism lies in efforts to suppress minority and alternative voices that challenge power.

## Yuval Shany and Mordechai Kremnitzer on Democracy in Israel

*Originally published February 10, 2022*

**Yuval and Mordechai, in a recent [article](#), you compare Israel, Poland, and Hungary, looking at measures directed at limiting the power of the judiciary and civil society. What are the main differences and similarities between Central Europe and Israel? Can we identify some ideological affinity?**

Numerous measures pursued by Netanyahu's coalition in 2015-2019 bear striking resemblance to measures adopted around the same time in Hungary and Poland in that they were part of a political effort to reallocate political power in the country, concentrating it in the hands of elected politicians at the expense of unelected officials, such as the judiciary and senior civil servants.

Such efforts were accompanied in Israel, like in other places, with populist rhetoric, juxtaposing the 'true representatives of the people' against liberal, cosmopolitan or foreign-controlled 'elites,' sharply criticizing and delegitimizing parts of the political opposition, the media, the academia and civil society groups. Among the specific legislative measures proposed by members of Netanyahu's ruling coalition one can find attempts to politicize the method for electing judges, restrict the powers of judicial review, designate foreign funded civil society groups as 'foreign agents,' shut down the politically independent public broadcasting authority and impose a code of conduct relating to political activity on Israel's high education institutions. It may be noted in this regard that some anti-liberal measures, including measures taken against NGO and 'illegal migrants,' precede the rise of political populism in Israel, and they were not regarded at the time of their adoption part of a broader populist agenda.

Significantly, however, Israel's brand of populism appears to have been less successful than its Central European counterparts. All of the aforementioned legislative proposals failed to pass or passed in a diluted manner. Their harm was thus mostly symbolic—creating a chilling effect for critics of the government—and not representing an actual power shift. Two notable exceptions—highly problematic measures that were successfully passed—are the Basic Law: Israel as the Nation State of the Jewish People, that was adopted in 2018 and underscored the identification of the state with the Jewish dominant ethnic group (resembling the emphasis on Christian values and identity in Orbán's Hungary and Kaczynski's Poland) and the 2016 Removal Law, which allows a super majority in the Knesset to depose a Member of Knesset (MK) for rejecting the existence of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state,

or espousing racism or terrorism. This latter law was broadly understood as a measure directed against Israeli Arab/Palestinian MKs.

Arguably, the limited success of Israel's populism—up until now—is attributable to the rather robust framework of democratic institutions which enjoyed enough public support to withstand the government's anti-liberal push. It may also stem from the weak ideological underpinnings of Israeli populism: Before 2015, Netanyahu himself showed a limited interest in this ideology, and his growing interest in promoting an anti-liberal agenda appears to have been linked to the corruption allegations made against him first in the media, and eventually by the state police and prosecution service (revealing a deep connection between populism and political corruption).

Some of his political allies supported his populist policies for strategic regions—out of interest in weakening the legal system's push against preferential treatment for the ultraorthodox (including, exemption from mandatory military service) and for application of some rule of law constraints on settlement activity in the West Bank. The multiplicity of political agendas behind anti-liberal measures in Israel makes it hard to discern clear ideological contours of an Israeli populist movement—notwithstanding the resemblance between the measures taken and the 'populism playbook.' What's more, Israeli populists do not typically define themselves as anti-liberal—rather, many consider themselves as liberals, genuinely concerned about threat to liberty from unelected elites or merely calling for the rebalancing of liberal values against security interests.

Another complicating factor for Israeli populism is the heterogeneity of Israeli society—including the Jewish majority—and its high level of division and polarization. Against this background, a putative claim by politicians to act as sole authentic representatives of the entire people is hardly convincing. The ambivalence displayed towards the Arab minority—delegitimization of its political involvement in matter relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict combined with increased reliance on its political support for other domestic agenda items—also has unique features which impede its perpetual designation as an 'enemy from within' against which the entire 'true people' can unite.

Still, the populist measures taken and the rhetoric resorted to do appear to have a long term negative impact on Israeli society: They erode trust in unelected state organs, such as the judiciary and the prosecution service, and negatively stigmatize central pillars of civic society, such as NGOs and the media. They also convinced large parts of the Israeli public of the view that democracy is only tantamount to majority rule without any constraints on political power.

*Populist measures taken and the rhetoric resorted to do appear to have a long-term negative impact on Israeli society.*

**Going beyond Netanyahu's figure, many observers have commented on the latest election result, seeing there a global shift to the right of the Israeli political landscape in terms of identity and culture. Would you agree?**

The Israeli political landscape is in the process of realigning itself in the post-Netanyahu era (although we should note that Netanyahu is still politically active, and remains, simultaneously, the most popular and most reviled politician in the country). Whereas the anti-Netanyahu bloc which currently rules the country has a number of right wing parties—reflecting the clear majority the right enjoys in the Knesset (72 out of the 120 seats belong to right-leaning parties), the dividing lines between left and



right are shifting from positions on the Israel-Palestinian conflict and Jewish-Arab relations inside Israel to positions on rule of law, state and religion and the embrace of liberal values (The conservative and progressive blocs currently have almost equal representation in the Knesset).

In addition, the unprecedented participation of an Islamic party in the present ruling coalition could potentially change dramatically the future voting pattern of Arab voters (who are currently underrepresented in the Knesset), yet entrench conservative position on social justice issues, such as LGBT+ rights. In short, Israel is at a crossroads between competing cultural forces—traditional and liberal—and it is too soon to predict its future course of action.

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It may also be noted that the diversity of the current coalition militates in favor of preserving the *status quo* on most issues constituting traditional left-right bones of contention, and it remains to be seen whether and for how long it will withstand the aggressive delegitimization campaign and parliamentary trench warfare orchestrated against it by the Likud and its political allies. The fact that the left has fewer long-term options in the current constellation of power in Israel does provide however a political advantage to the coalition's rightwing components, and some of them have tried to use it in order to pursue anti-liberal initiatives (such as extending measures against naturalization of Palestinians in Israel and advocating broad personal and national security restrictions on online contents).

**Going back to your long-term research on the relationship between fighting terrorism and being a democracy, how do you assess the evolution of Israel's legal culture regarding the 'war on terror' argument?**

The Israeli legal system has long confronted the tension between democratic values and the alleged security dictates of the 'war on terror,' effectively settling for a half-way position that tends to authorize most security measures sought by the government, while insisting that they be applied with due process and some degree of restraint. This has left the court in the unenviable position of being criticized simultaneously from the political left and right.

The jurisprudential dogma on the balance between security and democratic values has been applied in recent years to new and old challenges, such as the use of lethal force in Gaza border riots, punitive house demolitions, hunger strikes of administrative detainees and release of terrorist bodies back to their families. Attempts by some judges to upset the *status quo* and challenge existing precedents on certain issues (especially, house demolitions), were largely resisted by the Court leadership, as were attempts to authorize harsher counter-terrorism measures.

The court's timidity in upholding liberal values can be explained, in part, in the hardening of positions in Israeli public opinion against the application of humanitarian considerations in counter-terrorism, manifesting itself, inter alia, in public calls to shoot to kill wounded terrorists on the scene of terror attacks. It may also reflect the persistence of security concerns in Israel in light of recent conflagration of inter-communal violence between Jews and Arabs in mixed cities in Israel (in May 2021), the spike in violent crime in the Arab sector in Israel, and the ongoing violence between Palestinians and extremist settlers in the West Bank.

By and large, it may be noted that security issues have lost their dominance in the public discourse to the political crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, and the legal issues they generated. A notable exception—bringing together security and the pandemic—is the lively legal and political debate over the utilization by the government of the Israel Security Agency for assisting it in COVID contact tracing in the early stages of the pandemic.

**Our Program is called Illiberalism Studies Program. How do you interpret that term for the Israeli context globally, and Israeli legal culture more specifically? Can we see a trend of backlashing against some forms of liberalism(s), and if, which ones?**

Significant parts of Israeli society resent liberalism on principled grounds, as they associate it with anti-traditionalism, as a challenge to the Jewish ethnic nation state project and as a cultural symbol of progressive policies which are over-sensitive to discrimination and injustice inflicted on Palestinians in Israel and the Occupied Territories. Whereas some right-tilting political movements in Israel are anti-liberal for all of the above reasons (e.g., the ultra-orthodox and the extreme religious right), others embrace only some of them.

It may be noted in this regard that many of Israeli critics of liberalism—including most members of the Likud party—do not reject liberalism in a wholesale manner. In fact, they do express support, in principle, for basic human rights and political freedoms, including progressive causes such as LGBT+ rights and gender equality, and they consider Israel part of the “global West.” Still, they consider these principles as subservient to competing values—ethnic and religious identity, security interests, national sovereignty etc.

Ultimately, Israel is a unique “case study” for global populism in that it simultaneously confronts political dynamics informed by populist methods and rhetoric aimed at concentrating unlimited political power in the hand of the political majority, while retaining a prolonged occupation which result in the deprivation of political rights from millions of individuals in the occupied territories and in the political marginalization of Israel’s own Palestinian minority. This fundamental tension between democratic principles and undemocratic practices results in a unique brand of illiberal policies that tend to be more nationalistic than populist.

*This fundamental tension between democratic principles and undemocratic practices results in a unique brand of illiberal policies that tend to be more nationalistic than populist.*

## Marco Garrido on Illiberalism in the Philippines

*Originally published March 2, 2022*

**Marco, in your book *The Patchwork City: Class, Space, and Politics in Metro Manila*, you discuss how neoliberal reforms have impacted the Philippine middle class and reshaped urban social structures in Manila. Could you tell us about your main arguments and findings?**

Sure. In the book, I argue that neoliberal economic reforms have led to the transformation of urban space in Metro Manila. Residential and commercial enclaves—typically gated and guarded—have proliferated. Meanwhile, the number and not just the population size of informal settlements has increased, and these “slums” have spread all across the city—large colonies with tens of thousands of people but also settlements of a few dozen people under bridges and in the middle of highways. The proliferation of these two kinds of spaces has resulted in a form of class segregation I call interspersation. Slums and enclaves are interspersed as a general pattern across the metro. This means that their residents are generally close to one another and acutely aware of each other’s presence. They also have substantial interactions, in the context of work mainly (slum residents are often employed in enclaves as service workers, e.g., security guards) but in other contexts as well, including charity efforts, civic association, and encounters in the urban environment. Despite these interactions, slum residents are often discriminated against as dirty and potentially criminal. Walls are built to keep them out of enclaves. Their movements within enclaves are carefully regulated. These discriminations add up. Slum residents, encountering social and physical boundaries wherever they turn, develop a strong sense of class discrimination.

In the book, I argue that the populist president Joseph Estrada politicized this sensibility. It’s not just that he declared himself an advocate of the poor—lots of politicians do that—but that he conducted himself in a way that actively negated the stigma of being a squatter and being poor. He would visit slums and embrace people without the least hesitation. He would eat with his hands and express himself in informal, often vulgar ways. I argue that this behavior resonated powerfully with the urban poor. They saw it as extraordinary precisely because they were so used to being mistreated in their ordinary, everyday lives. The book traces this arc. It connects economic liberalization with the restructuring of urban space and emergence of an intensive form of class segregation, and then connects spatial interspersation to social interactions and the experience of discrimination becoming salient, and then finally connects this experience to populism.

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**How can we correlate this democratic but also economic disenchantment with middle class' support for Rodrigo Duterte?**

A lot of the work I've done after writing the book has focused on explaining support for Rodrigo Duterte, particularly among the Philippine middle class. The middle class, including college graduates, are Duterte's leading supporters. This can seem a bit puzzling at first because we tend to associate upper-classness and education with liberal democracy. Duterte has proven himself illiberal if not anti-democratic. In addition to waging a bloody "war on drugs," he has undermined institutional checks (coopting the Congress and Supreme Court, for instance), trampled on civil liberties, and threatened the media. So why do the middle class largely support him? The answer, I think, has to do with how they've experienced democracy this last thirty years and what they've come to want from it.

The middle class have been at the forefront of efforts to reform Philippines' political institutions since the democratization movement, the People Power Revolution, in 1986. They led the anti-Marcos movement and then the anti-Estrada movement in 2001. They've been active in anti-corruption movements since. Despite these efforts to "fix" democracy, they see the same problems persist: corruption mainly but also elite impunity (the rich and powerful getting away with murder quite literally) and the empowerment of the urban poor. They see the latter as a threat to their property rights, linking the poor with informal settlement, as well as a threat to democracy insofar as the poor, in their view, favor disruptive populist candidates like Estrada. Duterte represents a different approach to fixing democracy. He represents strength, political will, and, most importantly, order. The middle class see the elite and urban poor as sources of disorder. They associate both groups with corruption. Duterte represents the promise of "disciplining" democracy. So it's not that the middle class don't want democracy or yearn for a return to authoritarian rule. It's that they're deeply frustrated with actually existing democracy and want to see it disciplined.

*Duterte represents the promise of "disciplining" democracy. So it's not that the middle class don't want democracy or yearn for a return to authoritarian rule. It's that they're deeply frustrated with actually existing democracy and want to see it disciplined.*

**In a recent article you [explored](#) how the Trump administration may have accelerated disenchantment with American democracy for Filipinos. Can we say that 'ideological affinities' between Trump and Duterte have contributed even more to democratic erosion, as well as to securitizing both country's narratives on their foreign policy?**

It's true that both Trump and Duterte emphasize the need for order, but Duterte is the real deal. Trump comes off as feckless in his affectations. Duterte makes good on his rhetoric with murderous consequences. In addition to their domestic travails (which should be seen as primary), two events have significantly accelerated disenchantment with American-style democracy. First, Trump's mishandling of the pandemic and the several hundred thousand American deaths resulting. Filipinos compared

this with China's response or with Singapore's and concluded that "liberty" was a poor excuse for incompetence. Second, the Capitol riot on January 6. Filipinos are no strangers to people mobbing the seats of government and forcefully demanding change. They're used to people contesting election results they disagree with. (There's an even an old joke about there being no losers in Philippine elections; just victors and the people who were cheated of their victory.)

What was significant about Jan 6 was that it was happening in the US, which Filipinos have reflexively taken as the picture of the kind of democracy they're supposed to aspire to. To many Filipinos, Jan 6 showed that American democracy was just as broken as Philippine democracy. They took this to mean that they would have to find their own way. It was no longer as simple as emulating democracy in America. They would have to create something new and particularly appropriate to their society. This means casting their eyes beyond the US to their Asian neighbors, particularly Singapore and China—although I think (and the surveys bear this out) that most Filipinos still want to retain some form of democracy. It's just American-style democracy has lost its luster.

**I am really supportive of your approach stressing perceptions of democracy as a disorder. Working on the post-Soviet space, it is something I have been encountering since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Could you develop on the contradictions at work and the moral dilemma resulting from it? Would you say it is typical for the Global South and for middle classes?**

Sure. In the paper you mention I make the point that the Philippine middle class in particular has developed a perception of democracy as "disorder." By this I mean that they routinely experience a contradiction between how things work and how they're supposed to work—between "valued" and "disvalued" institutions. For example, they know they're supposed to stop at red lights but observe cars regularly ignoring them. When they do stop, they're liable to be yelled at. They know they're supposed to pay this much taxes on their income, but then the tax officials want them to pay a smaller amount and settle the rest "under the table." They look around and see people breaking the rules with impunity: rich people getting away with murder, as I mentioned above, and poor people occupying their property and being supported by local government.

This experience of contradiction fuels a perception of social and political disorder. It leads the middle class to seek "discipline," or the imposition of order from above. This sensibility is what I think is behind Duterte's support among the middle class. Can we generalize beyond the Philippines? I think there's ground to do so carefully. First, I'm pointing to the growth of a middle class with a particular normative sensibility. Generally, they're committed to doing things the "right" way given their education and material interests. But then they feel forced to abide or abet practices they see as corrupt. Hence the moral dilemma and the yearning for change in the direction of "order," or bringing disvalued institutions (e.g., corruption or informal settlement) in line with valued ones (e.g., Weberian bureaucracy or property rights). Second, I'm pointing to a experience of democracy that's hardly particular to the Philippines. In brief, disorder comes to be associated with democracy. People point to greater corruption and clientelism and a bolder urban poor. In sum, this experience of contradiction, of democracy as disorder, may apply more generally to a set of middle-income democracies in the Global South—and perhaps also, as you suggest, to post-communist countries. More research needs to be done bringing the different experiences of these countries together under the same framework.

*The moral dilemma and the yearning for change in the direction of “order,” or bringing disvalued institutions (e.g., corruption or informal settlement) in line with valued ones (e.g., Weberian bureaucracy or property rights).*

**My last question related to conceptual issues. Our Program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. How do you interpret the term ‘illiberalism’ in the Philippine context? To come back to your book, how does it articulate with class—that you see as critical for the Global South than race in the US debate—being perceived as a social and culture experiences?**

the name of political order or expediency. We might also say that he’s practicing a strongman-type of rule, or that Duterte’s being a “strong leader.” That’s how his exponents describe him.

Importantly, the term illiberal is to be distinguished from “authoritarian.” What we’re seeing in the Philippines is not an authoritarian turn but an illiberal one. In other words, Duterte is not Marcos redux. He’s moved to restrict civil liberties and institutional checks but not to overturn the electoral system. Indeed, Duterte has taken his election and widespread popular support as a mandate for ruling in his particular way. He recently bowed out of the vice-presidential race out of respect for the people’s will (or so he claimed). My point is that he’s not challenging democracy *per se* or the idea of popular sovereignty; he’s drawing strength from it.

*In other words, Duterte is not Marcos redux. He’s moved to restrict civil liberties and institutional checks but not to overturn the electoral system.*

To the extent that Duterte is representative of a wider approach—and I think he is—then it’s clear that this political moment is different from the authoritarian turn in the 1960s and 1970s. Duterte, Modi, Bolsonaro, and maybe even Erdogan, Orbán, and others are not dictators in the traditional sense but something else. They enjoy democratic legitimacy in the sense of being elected and ruling through institutions, but they rule illiberally. My current research is fundamentally interested in why people, particularly in the “Global South,” have been receptive to these appeals. I’ve pointed to the growth of a middle class with a particular configuration of interests and expectations, and also to ordinary people’s experience of politics over these last few decades. Democracy has been disappointing, frustrations have mounted in no small part because of “globalization” or neoliberalism, and people are searching for better forms of governance. In short, it’s insufficient to just focus on leaders and their tactics. To understand why these styles of rule are resonating, we need to look at society, political subjectivity, and the visions of politics emerging from below.



## Steven Livingston on Democracy and Illiberalism

*Originally published March 10, 2022*

**Steven, you have been working for years on media ecosystems and their role in our liberal democracies. You recently co-edited *The Disinformation Age* in 2019 and are currently leading a project supported by Social Science Research Council/Institute for Data, Democracy, and Politics that looks at the causes of democratic backsliding. Can you tell us about the role that media, but also corporate actors and politicians themselves, have played in deconstructing, or at least weakening, some of the foundations of a democratic order? What is the role of media or the information ecosystem in this process?**

For good reason, quite a lot of scholarly attention has been paid to the role of social technologies in the erosion of liberal democracy. According to this explanation, reasoned deliberation is undermined by algorithmically amplified extremist content. The goal of social media corporations is to hold user attention, not promote reasoned debate. The best way to hold user attention is with content that, with each new recommendation, scales up in extremism. The experience of staying with content creates data that are used to create predictions of future behavior. These predictions offer a new kind of product, what Shoshana Zuboff calls *behavior surplus*. Social media corporations then sell that product to other corporations as targeted advertising opportunities.

There is considerable merit to this explanation. Extremist content is a *feature*, not a bug, of the social media business model. Yet an important part of a broader explanation missing from the singular focus on the role of algorithms in democratic backsliding is the historical, social, and the economic *context* in which the algorithms operate. Social cohesion, or the lack thereof, is the result of historical, social, and economic conditions. Variations in social and historical context matter as much as do the algorithms. Americans' *declining faith* in democracy and deep social divisions offer fertile ground. "The biggest challenge to the (international liberal) system is the domestic basis of American power," said Ivo Daalder, the president of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. "It's still the only global military power, it's still the largest economy and it's the only power that brings other countries together. The question is: Does domestic politics allow America to play that leadership role?" Variation in social cohesion, or *social capital*, matter, as does the *erosion of trust in authoritative institutions*.

To understand disinformation and its broad embrace by many Americans, and by others around the world, one must consider the sources of erosion of trust in authoritative institutions, *including science, mainstream journalism, the regulatory state*. Here again, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter contribute to the decline of authoritative institutions, perhaps especially traditional news organizations owing to the siphoning-off of advertising revenue, but they are not *singularly* responsible

for it. One source of erosion are institution's own organic failures. Military actions predicated on false claims, such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, or 20 years of war in Afghanistan ending with the Taliban in control after a hasty U.S. withdrawal, certainly did not inspire confidence in the state. Yet a complete explanation must also focus on **the rise of a bevy of libertarian thinktanks, university research programs, and astroturf organizations** dedicated to undermining science, mainstream news organizations, civil society organizations, and the regulatory state. This has been going on for decades. Donald Trump's refrain about fake news was preconditioned by decades of Rush Limbaugh and other far right commentators referring to liberal media or the lamestream media. It isn't just a matter of algorithms, politics matter, too.

*Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter contribute to the decline of authoritative institutions, perhaps especially traditional news organizations owing to the siphoning-off of advertising revenue, but they are not singularly responsible for it. One source of erosion are institution's own organic failures.*

**The liberal script is challenged by many different forces, top-down and bottom-up, at home and abroad. You have been exploring the role of religious narratives in either supporting or challenging the liberal narrative in its European version. This is an issue you explored as a Fulbright Scholar at the Centre of Excellence in Law, History, and European Narratives at the University of Helsinki. It seems there is a growing use of a 'cultural Christianity' to oppose multiculturalism. What are your main findings on this interaction between religion and (il)liberalism?**

How do we explain the stickiness of factually unsupported beliefs? An abundance of evidence tells us that **the 2020 election was very secure**. Even President Donald **Trump's own Justice Department** concluded the 2020 election was a free and fair. Yet a December 2021 poll conducted by the University of Massachusetts found that **only 21 percent of Republicans** say Joe Biden's victory was legitimate. That figure was almost identical to the results of an April 2021 poll that found **only 19 percent of Republicans** said Biden was legitimately elected. **Identical results** have been found by **media outlets** and **polling firms**. How do we explain these polling results? Other conspiracy theories are equally allergic to facts. QAnon, the idea that there is a global pedophilia ring run by Democrats and Hollywood elites, not to mention **shapeshifting lizard people**, has grown despite its absurdity. What is going on here?

Much of contemporary political communication and political psychology research is based on an information processing **model rooted in cognitive psychology**. It is fair to say that this approach understands disinformation as an individual information processing failure. Because of **motivated reasoning** and **selective exposure**, individuals fail to update factually unsound beliefs. The first is the mental habit of subtly dismissing information that runs contrary to existing beliefs and a tendency to uncritically embrace information that supports them. Selective exposure occurs when we select supportive information (such as the information found on news channels or websites) and avoid information sources that challenge existing beliefs.

This is an insightful and important line of well-established research. Yet it is limited by its tendency to focus on *individuals in isolation*, rather than as social beings in search of meaning, purpose, and

community. Reviewing the [religious iconography on display at the U.S. Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>](#) leads one to conclude that religiosity is an important vehicle for the search of meaning.

While it might be the case that Europe has been spared the same sort of religion-tinged violence as seen in the United States, in a handful of European nations religious identity has come to play a central role in shaping political *governance*. The role of the Catholic Church in [Poland under the Law and Justice Party](#) illustrates the point. And Hungary under Viktor [Orbán's leadership has even been declared a "Christian democracy."](#) Orbán has himself taken on an outsized role in American traditionalist conservative politics and intellectual circles. [Prominent television personalities](#) and [American political philosophers](#) now visit him in Budapest. A GOP-aligned political organization is [even slated to hold a conference in Hungary in 2022](#). For some on the American right, [Hungary offers a post-liberal ideal](#). Regarding Russia, historian [Timothy Snyder](#) has traced the relationship between [Putinism and the Russian Orthodox Church](#). In this way, one might argue that Christian nationalism in Hungary, Russia, and Poland is involved in the greater violence against liberal democracy. They marry state power to an illiberal Christian ethos.

The sociology of religion scholarship helps us understand the role of faith-based belief systems (based on convictions, not empirical evidence) in politics. Over a century ago, Émile Durkheim observed that religion concerns the ways a given society coheres—forms community around—belief systems. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he argues that religious belief systems are sustained by a “collective effervescence”—a shared sense of belonging to something larger than oneself. Similarly, in *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger argues that religious ideation addresses fundamental questions of meaning. Religion is the way humans adopt an orderly understanding of the world and what constitutes proper personal conduct in it. Out of this emerges an inter-subjective sense of predictable order. These understandings, though social constructed and reconstructed, are to be understood as obvious, necessary, and inevitable. They constitute the stuff of an objective reality that rests beyond our ability to change it. The same holds true of the roles each of us play in society; we are who we are, and do as we do because it is obvious, even God-given.

Which is to say that for society to work effectively, we must feel that our identity depends on playing those roles well. The internalization of expectations helps shield us against the terror of not knowing what goes with what, or what is to be expected of each of us in the next moment. During turbulent times when existing social orders are threatened by change, fears are heightened, and religious-like convictions are held to more fervently. Doing so provides: 1. Meaning, 2. Purpose, 3. Community, and 4. Ritual. *Meaning* involves universalist claims as to why the world looks as it does. *Purpose* involves a narrative about one's personal role within a given system of meaning. *Community* involves sacramental spaces where major ritualistic milestones are instantiated. One's community is an extension of kin relations; they are “like family.” *Rituals* are public acknowledgements of the sacred nature of a system of beliefs that provide meaning, offer purpose, and constitute community. They involve opportunities to send signals of devotion and loyalty to a given meaning system. Genuflecting before an altar, crossing oneself, and declaiming creeds offer examples. The challenge with belief systems that have the character of a religion is that they are not about facts or evidence; they are about faith and convictions. It seems that fact-checking and media literacy programs miss this point. This launches a new line of inquiry.

*The challenge with belief systems that have the character of a religion is that they are not about facts or evidence; they are about faith and convictions.*

**You have also worked on the role of what you call ‘digital surrogate organizations’ such as Breitbart or QAnon in the U.S. conservative mainstream. How do you explain the difficulties of classic conservatism to resist new ideational constructions coming from the far right? Are we at risk of seeing conservatism becoming illiberal, in the sense of not being able anymore to exist as a political force respecting the principles of plurality and alternance in power?**

Democracy scholars—including Nancy Bermeo, Juan Linz, to Daniel Ziblatt and Steve Levitsky—have tried to sort out the causes of democratic consolidation and erosion. Daniel Ziblatt’s research has centered on the implications of what he calls the conservative dilemma. Conservative or center-right political parties are aligned with various sorts of economic elites—landed aristocrats in some cases, *Nouveau riche* capitalists in other cases. While such an alignment provided access to substantial material resources, conservative parties are disadvantaged in thriving democracies where votes matter. According to Ziblatt, and to the political scientists who have applied Ziblatt’s model to the GOP in the United States, there are two ways to resolve the dilemma: 1. Undermine majoritarian institutions through gerrymandering and voter suppression or 2. Change the subject.

This second option involves finding ways to assemble electoral coalitions based on non-economic issues, what Ziblatt calls cross-cutting cleavage issues. These are deeply felt identity issues often involving race, gender, nationality, and religion. Promoting cross-cutting cleavage issues requires partnerships with allied organizations, what Ziblatt calls surrogate organizations. Interest groups, civil society organization, some kinds of media organizations, single issue advocacy groups, and cultural institutions such as churches are examples of surrogate organizations. They assist conservative parties promote cross-cleavage issues. The NRA, for example, is a GOP surrogate organization that promotes gun ownership without regulation. Certain cultural institutions such as churches are also understood as surrogate organizations. Historically, surrogate organizations are best understood as conventional organizations. They occupy office buildings, have a fixed leadership structure, and a fixed identity. Social media platforms present the possibility of an alternative organizational form. It is sometimes called communication as organization. They are organizational functions existing in digital space.

*This second option involves finding ways to assemble electoral coalitions based on non-economic issues, what Ziblatt calls cross-cutting cleavage issues. These are deeply felt identity issues often involving race, gender, nationality, and religion.*

The basic functions of an organization—collective action—can be realized on social media platforms. This is sometimes called connective action. The organization and execution of Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, the MeToo Movement, and the January 6<sup>th</sup> Insurrection are common examples of connective action, or collective action facilitated by digital networks. The principal difference between collective action by conventional organizations and connective action or communication as organization are costs. The principal distinguishing feature of organizing in digital space is the radical reduction in costs associated with collective action. Before the existence of social media platforms, largescale collective action required large staffs, complex logistics, and sufficiently large budgets. Thanks to digital networks, that is no longer the case.

*The principal distinguishing feature of organizing in digital space is the radical reduction in costs associated with collective action.*

What does this mean? The costs of organizing are carried by digital networks. Generally, this means organizing—collective action—can be accomplished at lower costs and in shorter timeframes. These are the advantages of digital technology. On the other hand, because digitally constituted organizations are liminal, generally leaderless, and unbound by such things like charters and mission statements—their very organic quality makes them difficult, if not impossible, to control. They lack a command-and-control authority structure. They are low cost and resilient but only partially controllable, or not at all controllable.

QAnon offers an example of a digitally surrogate organization, one that is **now attached to the Republican Party**, irrespective of the preferences of party leadership. QAnon networked morphology makes it difficult for the GOP to distance itself from QAnon and other similar far-right organizations that exist partly online. In **Nancy Bermeo's words**, it makes the it difficult for the GOP to distance itself from violence or the threat of violence. "The strength that most of the major parties in all the failed democracies lacked was what we might call distancing capacity. By this I mean the strength to distance a party and its members from acts of violence and lawlessness" (p. 238). The GOP (and other center-right parties around the world) are pulled into illiberal terrain by the nature of organizations that exist, at least partially, online. They are "digital surrogate organizations." What we cannot get to here owing to a lack of space is a consideration of how conventional organization and digitally constituted organization (such as QAnon) blend into various forms of hybrid organizations.

**Globally, how would you assess the health and viability of the "European liberal narrative"? Do you see it challenged by the pandemic situation and the public health legislations that followed? Are anti-vax, anti-lockdown, anti-sanitary passes, and anti-science the new repertoires of action for illiberal movements once their main anti-immigration narratives have become mainstreamed?**

If I were to have answered this question a week ago, I would be quite pessimistic. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has changed everything. As I noted above, uptake of conspiracy theories and disinformation occurs in a social context. Societies riven by social cleavages are susceptible to disinformation and conspiracy theories. The sources of social cleavages in Europe and the United States haven't disappeared, but they have been subsumed by the threat posed by Putin's war.

**My last question is usually about concepts. Our program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. Could you tell us whether you see any value in the use of that term compared to the more widespread notions of populism or far right?**

This is a field littered with terms. Competitive authoritarianism or illiberal democracies? Democratic backsliding or democratic recession? Populism tends to be the go-to term for American journalists and pundits but in my view lacks precision. For me, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, far-right illiberalism captures current world events. Data analyzed by V-Dem and other research institutes make it clear that most of the democratic backsliding occurs in liberal democracies being pulled into far-right illiberalism.

*For me, in the 21st century, far-right illiberalism captures current world events.*

## Andrea Pető on Gender and Illiberalism

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**Andrea, you have been working for years on gender and populism/illiberalism, and more recently on issues of academic freedom in illiberal environments. Let's begin with a broad question. In your 2019 *introduction* to the *European Journal of Women's Studies*, you mention the gendered aspect power relations. How do these relations play out in contemporary politics for the populist/illiberal cases you study?**

These two concepts, gender and illiberalism, have been recently connected in new ways, hence producing fundamentally new forms of relationality. Analyzing this connection poses various challenges as illiberalism has re-emerged as a viable and electorally popular response to the 2008 crises and its modus operandi has left academics and politicians baffled ever since. The definition of populism that can be applied to illiberalism as “thin-centered ideology” seemingly suggests that a lack of gender perspective is constituent of this novel phenomenon. As Cas Mudde has pointed out, as a “thin-centered” ideology illiberalism requires a “host ideology” such as neoliberalism, socialism, fascism, authoritarianism, or even totalitarianism—depending on the political context. However, the notion of gender and, relatedly, gender equality, also requires a “host ideology”: it can be attached to or nested into liberalism, neoliberalism, socialism, communism, nationalism; Islam, Christianity, Judaism. The convolution of different host ideologies especially within the framework of the present culture wars makes the relationship of gender and illiberalism very complex. The present form of illiberalism is a joint result of the structural failures of the European (neo)liberal democratic project, the dark legacy of European history, and the complexities of the concept of gender.

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**What are the limits of language in the study of gender? How does the English notion of gender contrast with other linguistic and cultural concepts of the topic?**

The definition of “gender” itself is multilayered, which has caused several problems and internal contradictions within progressive emancipatory politics—contradictions that were later ruthlessly and cunningly used by illiberal forces focusing on already-existing cleavages. Gender is a concept, but also a



political project, a social practice, and a theory. To make the picture even more complicated, the concept of gender itself has been used with different meanings in the literature: a substitute for biological sex in the English linguistic context, but also an analytical category to describe the social quality of distinctions based on sex (that is, the power structures in a given society between men and women, and the roles, possibilities, and constraints attributed to those being born male or female). Lastly, gender also means gender identity: a person's felt sense of identity, their (dis)identification being born male or female. These complexities contributed to the fact that "gender" became a "symbolic glue" of illiberal forces.

**You write a lot about *historical memory* and have recently launched a *podcast* on these issues. Can you discuss the ways in which memory—or non-memory—as it relates to the Holocaust affects Hungary's contemporary politics?**

The illiberal state has constructed, and operates with, a special illiberal memory politics. Implementing this memory politics, the state takes funding away from previously supported initiatives therefore destroying previous memorial practices and narratives. The translation of history and its application, as well as its identity-shaping effects, are becoming geopolitical factors. The memory of the Holocaust has special importance not only because of the universal status of the Holocaust, but because Hungary is home to the second-largest Jewish community in Europe. The government now supports only one, small, Orthodox organization with a large international network, to create an unquestionably "Jewish-looking" representation of Jews in Hungary: men with long beards, black coats, and hats. With this move, the government has established an alternative to the previously hegemonic umbrella organisation of the Hungarian Jews, MAZSIHISZ which took a stand against Viktor Orbán at home and abroad.

The second step for the Hungarian state was to create parallel historical research institutions. These institutes have no quality assurance, as they function without adhering to generally accepted academic standards: publishing often without footnotes, and hiring candidates without doctoral degrees or track records of producing relevant research. It is no surprise that the "scientific" work of these institutions is only noticed when their staff make outrageous claims.

Third, the formerly diverse Hungarian history textbook market has been reduced to one single, state-approved textbook. But more importantly, the illiberal state does not have original ideas, but what is new is both the *modus operandi* and the fact that these values are only important on the surface to obscure the real purpose: the need to stay in power. The illiberal state is an assemblage of previously existing and well-functioning ideas like nostalgia and anticommunist nationalism. It uses existing concepts, frameworks, and institutions for its own purpose. That is one of the reasons why it is so difficult, on the one hand, to detect, and on the other hand, to fight against it—because it is elusive and a hollow copy of previous existing beliefs, institutions, and values.

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**In *Revisionist Histories* you *explore* the vulnerability of Marxist, modernist, and feminist interpretations of history in the face of the rise of revisionism across the former communist world. But surely this vulnerability cuts both ways; otherwise, those interpretations would not be under siege from revisionists and reactionaries. What**

## **threats do Marxist, modernist, and feminist histories pose for present-day right-wing revisionists?**

Illiberalism and revisionism were not parachuted in without any prehistory, but they are signs of structural problems. Analyzing post-communist identities, Duncan Light **pointed out** that they are driven “by the desire to construct new post-communist identities, characterized by a democratic, pluralist, capitalist and largely Westward-looking orientation.” Today’s historical revisionism is *not* characterized by “a democratic, pluralist, capitalist and largely westward-looking orientation,” but rather by a presentation of national identity as a community of suffering and an anti-pluralist understanding of the collective. The illusion that 1989 would bring a general democratization to Eastern Europe is over. Evaluation of the communist period increasingly draws on pre-1945 concepts.

In this context, I argue that communist historiography was already a revisionist historiography and in post-communist Eastern Europe. Therefore it is of utmost political importance to analyze how this history-writing works as its anti-modernist variant is gaining in history writing. The memory of communism and the leftist tradition are omitted, forgotten, and denied, while the process of constructing “future memories” works exactly on the same principle as the revisionist, hegemonic communist writing of history. The resurfacing anti-modernism in post-communist Eastern Europe has also appropriated history in order to achieve its aims, namely to create a viable, livable, and desirable alternative. This anti-modernism goes hand in hand with a fundamental anti-modernist interpretation of history, one based on the horrible suffering of the past, but which promises future redemption.

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**Let’s now move on to the issue of academic freedom. In your article on the influences of anti-gender movements in the Gender Studies field you **write** that it is often the case that scholars are pulled into engaging with commentators who operate in bad faith. Can you talk about the value of having such discussions with anti-gender movement activists? Is it ever better not to feed the fires they wish to stoke?**

Analyzing the reactions to attacks on gender-studies scholars we can see a wide variety of responses: from fierce public debates and mass demonstrations to strategic withdrawal from public debates to renaming gender-studies centers to family-studies centers. There is no one-size-fits-all solution; it depends on the local contacts and the resources gender-studies scholars have. Gender studies as an academic discipline found its “paradoxical recognition” via the attacks of illiberal forces: never before was there such a public and scholarly interest in the work of gender-studies scholars, there have never been so many applicants for gender-studies MA programs. This is a great opportunity that will test the relationship of gender studies not only to other disciplines but also to the wider social community of knowledge production. Time will tell if the present reactivity of gender studies can be transformed into proactivity for the sake of a better science for all of us. Bridging political and scientific cleavages previously thought to be theoretically unbridgeable has led to collaborations between secular and religious political forces and academics, which have turned out to be the most promising for creating spaces of resistance to illiberal politics.

**How do you see the illiberal attempts at penetrating academic institutions or at creating new parallel institutions that promote themselves as alternatives to the liberal paradigm that dominates higher education? Where are the long-term risks and how can we fight against them?**

The European scientific infrastructure was unprepared for the emergence of illiberal science policy and illiberal academic institutions, which may look like any other scientific institutions, but in reality, are not. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that the Hungarian Accreditation Committee obtained its European license from the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) only after the Central European University was forced into exile and the two-year master's program in gender studies was stricken from the accredited study list.

These parallel institutions use the neoliberal language of excellence, competitiveness, impact, social outreach, and indices; however, they are all fraudulent and empty. The available state funding for parallel institutions seems limitless, leading to the non-illiberal state-funded institutions' further impoverishment. Faculty members of parallel institutions earn at least twice as much as state-funded faculty and furthermore have access to research and travel grants from their institutions. The abundance of national funding replaces EU/outside funding even as it renders it obsolete and suspicious. The difference between these parallel institutions and classic academic institutions is that at the former institutions, academic authority stems not from institutionalized quality assurance but from formal and informal performances of loyalty to the governing party. The lack of quality control in these illiberal parallel institutions has also led to attacks on existing systems and institutions of academic quality control in general in countries whose governments are appointing politically-reliable commissars as leaders and members of quality-assurance institutions. A further characteristic of illiberal science policy is its non-transparent hiring process in which only political loyalty counts. This policy also connects to the re-masculinization of science (reliance on male networks, context of familialism as a state ideology, etc.) and the masculinization of intellectual life.

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Science and academic research are very similar to COVID-19, they are a transnational phenomenon. It does not matter that one keeps the national environment controlled if the outside one is not controlled. The basis of science is trust in standards: if a result is flawed, then it might take millions in research money to correct that mistake. I give you two examples in which the scientific data was fraudulent. In the first case, because of politics, as the wife of the Romanian communist dictator, Mrs. Ceaușescu, was able to publish research in chemistry under her name that she did not do herself. And in the second case, it was one of sloppiness: not doing an experiment built on existing theory. In both cases, academic trust was compromised: namely that the research was actually not done and in the case of Mrs. Ceaușescu it was not done by the person who was listed as the author. Trust was breached by illiberal science. What happens in the illiberal academy in Hungary should concern Europe and the world. Different European countries are hosting and sending Hungarian researchers and students through different exchange programs. The knowledge they are producing cannot be trusted as the quality control is nonfunctional. The fraudulent system infects the higher education system of other countries as they are unprepared for this type of scientific fraud. This will cause millions of dollars of damage to the higher education and research for others.

## Ruth Wodak on Far-Right Populism and Shame

*Originally published March 17, 2022*

**Ruth, you have been working for years on populism from a linguistic and semiotic perspective—an approach that remains under-studied in the global political science-oriented discussions on populism. You recently published the second edition of your book *The Politics of Fear*, and coauthored a great **paper** on the notions of impoliteness and shameless normalization in Trump and Berlusconi press conferences. Could you delve into the concept of shameless normalization—how you measure or study the normalization process?**

Well, when analyzing far-right populism (I haven't conducted so much research and empirical work on left-wing populism) one always and necessarily has to consider both the form and content of utterances, texts, images, and so forth—that is, of semiosis. Far-right populism is NOT a matter of performance and rhetoric; there is always an ideological agenda involved. I wanted to integrate the approaches of political science and the many dimensions of ideology and history, but also to investigate how populist rhetoric is realized and how it is manifested in micro contexts: What do such politicians actually *do* beyond simply addressing their voters? How do they persuade their audience? Whom do they specifically address? How do they perform their everyday populist agenda? When doing this research, I considered and compared the last six years, because the first edition of my book, *The Politics of Fear*, appeared in 2015, with the second edition in 2021. So much has happened between these two editions!

One of the most interesting new phenomena is what I call normalization and shameless normalization—normalization in the sense that many agendas of the far right have reached the mainstream, like anti-migration, anti-asylum politics, border-politics, i.e. closing the borders for some and opening them for others, the imaginary of an allegedly homogenous people, a very conservative identity and gender politics. This is particularly true of some national-conservative parties. We were able to observe such normalization processes in Austria but also in the UK, a bit in the Scandinavian countries, and especially in the United States.

Studying normalization processes is currently particularly important because conservative parties support and integrate far-right agendas into their programs and into their election campaigns. This is the case in the UK, in Austria, and in all the Visegrád Group countries (Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland); there is almost no difference anymore between the far right and traditionally Christian

social-conservative parties, in many aspects. There still exist a few differences, but the boundaries are blurred. This has consequences: on the one hand, a far-right agenda becomes mainstreamed, acceptable, and normalized; on the other hand, the extreme right must find new agendas because some of its own programmatic issues have been adopted (that is, co-opted by the mainstream). We can observe this development, especially in respect to the anti-vaccination movement, to the Identitarian movements, the “great replacement theory,” and so on.

When I was studying this new development, I noticed another salient phenomenon, which I label *shameless normalization*. Part of this strategy consists of the violation of conventional taboos about racism, antisemitism, homophobia, sexism, and so forth. On the other hand, conversational norms and norms of etiquette are also violated. The attempt to “be authentic” and “speak like we do” and “dare say what we all would like to say, but we don’t dare say,” implies that conventions of politeness have been completely transgressed; it has become acceptable in some contexts to make misogynist and sexist jokes again, or anti-Semitic and racist jokes. And, more generally, it implies that the conventions of dialogue—How do we speak to each other? How do we listen? How do we argue?—have been basically thrown out the window.

This became apparent when investigating Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, for example. If you analyze Orbán’s speeches at the European Parliament or when he engages in negotiations and debates, he is speaking on two or more different levels. He just doesn’t answer a question he doesn’t like. He can say something which is obviously not true, and it doesn’t matter. It has now become acceptable to engage and interact with others in this way in the public sphere, in formal situations and not just behind closed doors. That led me to create the concept of shameless normalization. It comprises both the normalization of far-right agendas, but it’s also a conversational style of breaking of taboos, violating conversational maxims, neglecting all rules of politeness and of negotiation.

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In respect to the paper which you mentioned in your question: I began researching impoliteness with my colleague from Lancaster University, Jonathan Culpeper, since he’s an expert on politeness and impoliteness, and I was the expert on far-right populism and shameless normalization. We then included Elena Semino, who provided the data about Berlusconi; and we could then compare Berlusconi with Trump. I find it interesting that Berlusconi did and still does perform in a similar manner to Trump. He already staged himself as a very rich and successful businessman years ago. He’s also the owner of most Italian media and has established himself as someone who is able to violate taboos, as somebody who can say what he wants, and as *the* savior of the people.

Trump was indeed successful in staging himself as an entrepreneur, although he did have much misfortune during his life in business. Nevertheless, he came across as very successful. He was also an entertainer; both Berlusconi and Trump like making jokes and like to entertain crowds. We compared many instances and it’s obvious that Berlusconi also violated many taboos and that he did this frequently. There are the famous episodes like when he offended Martin Schulz, then president of the European Parliament. It was quite a horrendous episode, but Berlusconi then joked about it and gave a kind of

apology—the kind where he felt compelled to apologize but still somehow conceding that he had done something which was not okay. Trump did not do that.

Trump just directly and explicitly offended journalists, women, members of Congress, foreign politicians, etc. And it just didn't matter. A discursive shift occurred: a significant change in the acceptance of what is right and wrong, what is polite and impolite, what you can say, what can you cannot say, what is acceptable for whom, and how leaders can construct themselves in different contexts. This shamelessness has another relevant dimension to be considered, apart from the shift in norms and of discourse. It is found in relation to people who had been ashamed that they were unemployed, that they were not successful. The so-called, “deplorables” called out by Hillary Clinton suddenly felt spoken to and were told, “You don't have to be ashamed. You are not guilty. Someone else is to be blamed—migrants, minorities, career women, et cetera—but I will save you. You do not have to be ashamed. You can actually regain your self-esteem and recognition.”

In this way, there was another facet of shamelessness: attributing to those who had been ashamed, who are ashamed, recognition: conveying that it's not their individual problem despite the neoliberal, individualistic agenda. This seems like quite an interesting contradiction, but it is two sides of the same coin. Accordingly, Trump was very successful because he talked to these people on a conversational and equal level. People did make fun of his style, which, however, was cleverly chosen because people could understand it: “he spoke like we do.” He didn't talk down to the people, he spoke to the people and he continuously scandalized and provoked; this necessarily made the headlines. In this way, Trump could also distract from his policies and agendas and catch attention continuously. All these aspects are condensed in the concept of shamelessness.

**In your paper on “Micro-Politics of Right-Wing Populism,” you explain why we need a multi-methodical, multi-modal, and critical interdisciplinary analysis to understand far-right electoral successes. Can you summarize your main methodological and conceptual arguments? How do we combine the big picture of populism's rise happening in many countries at the same time, and each context being culturally specific?**

I think it's very important to conduct qualitative, context-dependent research. On the other hand, as you propose and I completely agree, there exist some general characteristics of the far right. Even though many researchers are not aware how far the history of the far right reaches back or that postwar far-right populism also draws on Latin American left-wing populism and on the postwar French Nouvelle Droite. Many different ideological traditions came together in different contexts and draw on different traditions. Obviously it's relevant to the development of specific far-right populist parties whether there exists a fascist or Nazi past, or not. In this way, we observe huge differences between countries where such a fascist past existed, like in Austria, Germany, Hungary, Spain, and Portugal, and other countries, which draw on other traditions.

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We can conclude that the political and programmatic agendas are dependent on such socio-political and historical contexts. Just to give an example: of course religion has played a big role in the postwar developments. But if you compare gender politics, which are currently at the center of political debates



in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Romania, and Hungary, with the debate on gender politics among the far-right in Scandinavia, you'd believe that there exist two separate worlds. There exists a strong Orthodox Christian influence in the east. Strong homophobia in Russia, Ukraine, and in Poland, where there even occurs an attempt to turn the clock back on abortion legislation and so forth. These developments are completely against EU conventions; you would never win an election in the Scandinavian countries or in the Netherlands with such agenda. It would be completely impossible. France, as you know best, is a bit different, because there exists a strong Catholic tradition. Even Marine Le Pen oscillates between pro and contra. Austria also has a strong antiabortion and homophobic tradition drawing on Catholicism.

So that's why context dependency and historical awareness are very important. Then there exist some issues which are quite general. The anti-elitism, the anti-pluralism, the ethno-nationalism you find in all far-right populist parties: there exist different exclusionary politics; moreover, a strict hierarchical leadership, the way the parties are organized, and an emphasis on "law and order" is found in all these parties.

But two more issues are relevant, which are strongly distributed in different contexts. One is historical revisionism: who do you want to refer to in the past? In Hungary, for example, suddenly historical fascist leaders become important again, like Miklós Horthy. There are statues of Horthy because everything directed against communism must, per se, be good. Going back to Nazi slogans and Nazi roots constitutes *retrotopia*, which Zygmunt Bauman has thoroughly discussed: nostalgia for a homogeneous *völkisch* past.

Another divisive topic is welfare chauvinism. In social welfare countries like Germany, Austria, and the Scandinavian countries, these parties support social welfare programs but want to keep them for "themselves." So yes, migrants can come, they can work, they pay taxes, but they don't get the benefits. So, it's basically nationalism plus socialism because the benefits are deemed to be only for "us." In some other countries, welfare does not have the same legitimacy, so far-right populist leaders are more (neo)liberal economically. That's why I have decided to look very closely at certain contexts apart from general criteria. In investigating the micro politics, I try to understand how these politicians and these parties, programs, slogans, images, and posters are used in order to convey certain messages, and then ask: Which messages? How they do that? Are they successful?

Due to the different mediums the far-right populists use different discursive-rhetorical strategies, linguistic strategies, and arguments. It is fascinating to see how very clever many of these parties were already 20, even 30 years ago, when the mainstream still came across static and traditional in their performance and image-making. I compared, for example, the way they portrayed themselves on their homepages. At that time, Heinz-Christian Strache and Jörg Haider (former leaders of the Austrian Freedom Party) were extremely skillful examples. They had very interesting homepages, created rap songs and postcards that you could download, poems, and also short films. In contrast, the mainstream parties had pictures of somebody getting on a plane, getting off a plane, shaking hands with somebody else—completely uninteresting images, very ritualized. The populist parties brought in a really interesting dynamic, also in their visual politics.

Now of course mainstream parties have caught up, but populist rhetoric did cause a significant rift in the postwar consensus. And in that way, I do agree also with Ernesto Laclau that populism brought back conflict into politics.

**You have also worked more broadly on narratives of exclusion and how the “migration crisis” has reshaped the way Europeans discuss human rights by securitizing European identity. First, could you comment on the racialization of space that we have seen these last years, from Trump’s wall at the US-Mexico border to the Israeli walls up to the more recent Polish wall at the border with Belarus—how narratives of being a fortress that needs protection are used to “otherize” those who found themselves on the other side of these walls?**

Oh, absolutely. As I said, the way some parties have been dealing with the far right is by colonizing their agendas. That means moving to the right, normalizing the agenda of the far right. In respect to exclusionary politics, it means breaking with the Geneva Convention and violating human rights, which are part of the European Charter. In the EU, the appeals of the far right to close borders, not to let others in, drawing on old xenophobic, antisemitic, anti-Roma sentiments, have come very much to the fore and are contradicting these salient postwar conventions. But they’re also contradicting the Schengen Agreement and, of course, many humanitarian conventions.

Accordingly, far-right populism is linked to welfare chauvinism—we must close the borders because these are illegal migrants who only want our benefits and our jobs. That presupposes that these are (a) not refugees but migrants, and (b) that they’re illegal. Thus, they’re presupposing immediately that migrants and refugees are criminals because illegality means they are doing something which is not legal. In migration studies, we don’t use the term *illegal*. We use irregular and irregular means, *sans papiers*; they don’t have the documents—they’re refugees. If their applications for asylum are not granted and they continue to remain in the country, only then are they “illegal.” But if they are asylum seekers and applying for asylum and waiting for a decision, they’re certainly not to be perceived as illegal.

We already conducted a study in the 1990s, analyzing the national newspapers over six years in the UK. Apart from *The Financial Times* and *The Guardian*, all newspapers were writing about illegal migrants. It didn’t matter where they came from. If they were Bosnian refugees during the post-Yugoslav wars, if they were refugees from Afghanistan or wherever, they were all regarded as “bogus” asylum seekers.

I also find the concept of “Fortress Europe” very dangerous. The Nazis used that concept during the Battle of Britain in World War II. Now it has been redefined and contextualized, but we shouldn’t forget this etymology of the term. In that way, such exclusionary racialization of space has become mainstream. This racialization implies there are certain spaces that are reserved for certain people and other people don’t *deserve* to live in those spaces or to transcend the borders. It is what Bastian Vollmer calls “*the moralization of borders*.” The idea is that some people deserve to transcend the borders and others don’t, based on specific criteria: they are rich, white, or young.

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We are thus confronted with gatekeeping processes; thus, there are spaces that are reserved for “us” and spaces that are reserved for “them.” We observe specific spaces, which are now being created for them, such as deportation camps in Libya or islands in Australia; there exist typically racialized spaces, such as the ghettos—also, historically of course, Jewish ghettos, but also the black ghettos in the United States.

We also experience that these impromptu refugee camps become small cities; they will not vanish similar to the camps in Mória and Lesbos. Basically, what has happened and is happening more and more, is a complete normalization of far-right, extreme-right anti-migration and anti-asylum politics. The EU is not able to propose a different policy because asylum policies are national. The EU can only recommend, but each country can decide on its own, just like with health policies, which are also national/subsidiary. Old stereotypes are gaining traction: for example, the antisemitic world conspiracy theory, that the Hungarian-American philanthropist George Soros is allegedly pushing Muslim migrants to Hungary. It's a very difficult narrative to construct, but it seems to work. The same was true in the United States. Again, we experience borders as racialized spaces, the Mexican-American border, and the building of walls. Securitization has become a whole industry; there's enormous amounts of money to be made.

It was obvious that every time Trump wanted to distract from some failures (the so-called “dead-cat” strategy), he would start to campaign against Mexican migrants. Such strategies, which are re-semiotized, and material practices, which are revived from darker times, remind me of a slogan of Jonathan Freedland, who said, “We’re entering an era of endarkenment.” We can only hope that there will be more egalitarian humanitarian policies in the future. For example, many experts claim that Europe needs many migrants to survive. Yet certain parts of the EU’s membership just don’t seem to care. It’s going to be an interesting and challenging time to observe if compromises are possible, or if this contradiction exists as one big challenge to the EU, because we are confronted with huge ideological and political differences, indeed with polarization—for example between Orbán in Hungary and Prime Minister Jan Asselborn of Luxembourg. We will have to wait and see.

## **Milada Anna Vachudova on Ethnopoliticism in Europe**

*Originally published March 22, 2022*

### **How profoundly is Russia's war against Ukraine transforming Europe?**

As I write this, it is already the 25<sup>th</sup> day of Russia's brutal war against Ukraine. The world is admiring the incredible resilience and determination of the people, the government, and the military of Ukraine. Yet in Ukraine thousands of civilians are dead, towns and cities are reduced to rubble, and human suffering is immense as every day the Russian military pounds countless civilian targets with missiles, artillery, and bombs.

For Europe, you could say that everything has changed and that nothing has changed—at least not yet. NATO has never been more unified in its resolve to protect NATO countries; however, NATO also appears weak, bickering about aid to Ukraine and reassuring Putin every day that it will not interfere in the conflict. Western governments, led by the United States, have imposed dramatic, unprecedented sanctions on Russia and are sending substantial shipments of military aid to Ukraine. But the sanctions are full of loopholes and the air defense systems and fighter jets that Ukraine is desperately seeking show no signs of being delivered. Germany has perhaps changed the most. It is strategizing how to end its dependence on Russian gas and is asking itself how it justified enmeshing itself economically with the Putin regime for so long. It has sent some weapons to Ukraine, ending a longstanding practice of not sending weapons to conflict zones. But for now, Germany is blocking some of the toughest economic sanctions and is still purchasing Russian gas. Also, the quantity and quality of the weapons Germany has sent so far to Ukraine have been very low. The European Union (EU) has come together with a show of support for Ukraine and a timely promise to consider Ukraine's application for EU membership. But it has a long way to go before it finds the political will again to embrace EU enlargement as one of its most powerful foreign policy tools and to put in the work to implement a pre-accession process that incentivizes high quality political, economic, and administrative reforms. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky, for all of his bravery, leadership, and integrity, cannot conjure a Europe that does not exist.

For their part, ethnopolitist and far-right parties across Europe that for years openly supported the Putin regime are now changing their positions and distancing themselves from the Kremlin and its brutal war against Ukraine. But this does not mean that they are changing their ethnopolitist and anti-pluralist appeals that vilify individuals, groups, and opposition parties they label as "culturally harmful." In Hungary, Russia's war against Ukraine may have weakened the position of Fidesz and its leader Viktor

Orban in the upcoming elections, but this may not matter given how much Fidesz has tilted the playing field in its favor over the last twelve years. In Poland, in contrast, the ruling ethnopopulist Law and Justice Party (PiS) has re-invented itself by offering very strong support for Ukraine's government and welcoming over two million refugees. While Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky has called out Viktor Orban for his support of the Putin regime, he has applauded the PiS government for its very considerable assistance. But there are no indications that PiS has suddenly adopted liberal democratic and pluralist values at home. Indeed, for years, as I discuss below, PiS has worked in tandem with Fidesz to weaken and belittle the EU and the liberal democratic European values that many Ukrainians are fighting for.

*The rest of this interview took place earlier this year.*

**You have been working for years on the role of the EU in tempering/leveraging political parties in Central Europe. Why does the EU today seem unable to stop Hungary's and Poland's illiberal moves and to prefer stability to democracy in the Western Balkans?**

In the 1990s and 2000s, scholars indicated that the EU had the ability to exert leverage over candidate states in such a way as to bolster, over time, the quality of their liberal democracy. What went wrong? This kind of leverage could only work as long as EU membership was anchored in the values and institutions of liberal democracy among its members. Yes, many EU members had liberal democracies that were deeply flawed—think back, for example, to Berlusconi's Italy—but all members identified as liberal democracies.

Also, back then, the EU was ambitious. It wanted to get bigger and stronger. For a time, EU leaders embraced democracy promotion by way of EU enlargement as the EU's most effective foreign policy tool. At the time, getting geographically and economically bigger dovetailed with the EU's growing ambitions on the world stage. I still remember how in 1999 Javier Solana explained to an American audience that Europe would soon stretch deep into the Middle East and the US would have to take notice of its geopolitical power. Today, that ambition is gone—and Hungary's Viktor Orbán has done a remarkable job leading an effort to decouple the EU from liberal democracy as a regime type. Sophie Meunier and I wrote about this in an [article](#) in the *Journal of Common Market Studies* a couple of years ago.

*For a time, EU leaders embraced democracy promotion by way of EU enlargement as the EU's most effective foreign policy tool.*

**Central European countries' economies have been deeply transformed since the 1990s, largely in partnership with international financial institutions. How do ethnopopulist movements conflate neoliberal policies and liberal democracy, discrediting the latter because of the former?**

This is one of the cleverest tricks employed by the leaders of such ethnopopulist parties as Fidesz in Hungary and Law and Justice in Poland. Taking advantage of the aftermath of the financial crisis and the harsh consequences of neoliberal economic policies, many ethnopopulists purposefully conflate these policies with liberal democracy. They argue against "liberalism" per se and signal that choosing to end neoliberal economic policies necessitates dismantling liberal democracy. This is even more deceptive than it seems because, like incumbents in the UK today, for example, they enrich themselves by lowering

taxes, by eliminating environmental safeguards, and by cutting or changing regulations to benefit their own businesses—all under the guise of helping the proverbial everyman.

Sadly, I see many scholars falling for this trick. It has become quite fashionable for political scientists, especially those trying to make a name for themselves on Twitter or shop book proposals, to make sweeping claims that citizens of Eastern Europe have “rejected liberalism.” Among the many pitfalls of this argument are two that I want to mention here. First, such arguments ignore the great variation in political outcomes across the east of the EU; the slim margins by which “anti-liberal” parties have won elections; and the ways that, as incumbents, these parties have skewed the political playing field. Second, such arguments tell us little about voters, who may vote for anti-liberal parties for quite a range of reasons, from rejection of neo-liberal policies to fear of rapid social change to welfare benefits.

*Such arguments ignore the great variation in political outcomes across the east of the EU; the slim margins by which “anti-liberal” parties have won elections; and the ways that, as incumbents, these parties have skewed the political playing field., such arguments ignore the great variation in political outcomes across the east of the EU; the slim margins by which “anti-liberal” parties have won elections; and the ways that, as incumbents, these parties have skewed the political playing field.*

**In your book *Europe Undivided*, you argue that the presence of a strong opposition to communism helped explain why Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic successfully built liberal democracies in the 1990s. Can we say that the current rise of ethnopopulism is articulated with the communist past and the conflictual memory of dissidence?**

For starters, it is incredible how the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary have convinced a fair number of citizens that the transition in 1989—as negotiated between the opposition and the outgoing communist party—was part of an elaborate hoax. PiS and Fidesz argue that the dissidents were in cahoots with the communists to preserve the system and their privileges. There are so many ways in which this is absurd, not least the fact that some of the current leaders of PiS and Fidesz took part in those pacted transitions. Reflecting on the disinformation that all too many citizens here in the US believe, we understand how political elites can use captured media and intense partisanship to spread conspiracy theories effectively. As Joanna Fomina and Jacek Kucharczyk argue about Poland, this is “the politics of parallel reality.”

Yes, we can see how the presence of a strong opposition that embraced liberal democratic values and that ended communist rule at the negotiating table helped lay the groundwork for these conspiracy theories. Solidarność leader Adam Michnik argued in his celebrated essays from prison, for example, that “communists” could not be excluded from a future democratic polity. Decades later, PiS leaders have transmogrified these values to spin an elaborate conspiracy theory that opposition leaders were traitors who colluded with the communists.

I do want to highlight that ethnopopulists are remarkably resilient in the face of hypocrisy. There are many reasons for this that center on how ethnopopulist appeals are used to vilify opposition parties and to justify the concentration of power. As I argue in my article, PiS and Fidesz deserve special mention for claiming that they need extraordinary power in order to liberate the country, finally, from communism,



even as they dust off many of the same tools for suppressing dissent that were used under communism, including censorship and shutting down civil society.

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**Our Program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. How does the notion of illiberal(ism) relate to the one you use, ethnopopulism? Where do they overlap and differ? Is “illiberal” a heuristic notion for comprehending current developments?**

This is a great question. In my mind, “illiberalism” is a rejection of liberal democracy. In my book *Europe Undivided*, I theorized a liberal and an illiberal pattern of political change in Central Europe after 1989. The two characteristics that I highlighted among the illiberal cases were the suppression of pluralism in the media and civil society, and the rejection of power limits on the part of incumbent parties. The illiberal parties that I was writing about in the 1990s and 2000s were mainly ethnic nationalist parties: they appealed to voters and justified concentrating power primarily by claiming that adjoining and intermingled nations are a grave threat.

*The two characteristics that I highlighted among the illiberal cases were the suppression of pluralism in the media and civil society, and the rejection of power limits on the part of incumbent parties.*

The ethnopopulist parties I am writing about today are also deeply illiberal, seeking to oppress independent voices and halt political turnover. The concept of ethnopopulism as I have defined it helps us understand how the two kinds of parties differ. In contrast to ethnic nationalist parties, ethnopopulist parties appeal to voters and justify the concentration of power by claiming that culturally harmful groups (such as the LGBTQ community or Muslim refugees) in league with cosmopolitan, transnational elites are a threat to the people. And while at home ethnopopulist leaders may wrap themselves in the symbols and conceits of grandiose nationalism, they rarely cast neighboring nations as a threat, in contrast to the practice of ethnic nationalist leaders in the region in the 1990s. Ethnopopulist leaders therefore benefit from much greater flexibility in choosing their friends as well as their enemies—and this is evinced by cooperation among them and with authoritarian regional powers. In this alleged struggle to save the people from the LGBTQ community, Muslim refugees, and cosmopolitan elites, for example, historical enemies—including Russia—can be embraced as friends who stand up for sovereignty and for traditional Christian values.

**In your research on ethnopopulism in Central Europe, you looked at the racialization of the immigrant “threat.” Is this securitization process a bottom-up process, a top-down one, or both at the same time? What roles do a declining birth rate and emigration to Western Europe play in this anti-migrant xenophobia?**

I argue that the process has been both bottom-up and top-down. Ethnopopulist appeals built on xenophobia and race may resonate especially strongly with citizens as a result of their existing attitudes

and experiences. In East Central Europe, these attitudes may have been preserved and exacerbated by communism; after all, for four decades the region was closed off from the rest of the world. But the explanatory power of post-communism is limited, since around Europe we see many other countries where anti-immigrant appeals have a great deal of traction in domestic politics, including Austria, Italy, and France.

In any case, bottom-up pressure is only part of the story. Central Europe offers an opportunity to study a dramatic top-down process. Ethnopolulist parties have weaponized and racialized the claim that certain immigrants pose a cultural—even civilizational—threat. Tens of thousands of workers from eastern neighbors come to work in the Visegrad states every year, yet their presence is hardly debated at all. It is not the “white,” “Christian” economic migrants whose presence is politicized and weaponized, but the possibility of “dark-skinned” and “Muslim” refugees and migrants arriving, even in small numbers. Ethnopolulist leaders have also seized the opportunity to delegitimize domestic opponents and international institutions by claiming that these actors are championing the wellbeing of Muslim migrants at the expense of ordinary people.

*It is not the “white,” “Christian” economic migrants whose presence is politicized and weaponized, but the possibility of “dark-skinned” and “Muslim” refugees and migrants arriving, even in small numbers.*

You raise two fascinating questions about demography and outmigration. We are already seeing how low birth rates in East Central Europe and high levels of outmigration lead to economic demand for workers. Sadly, I expect that the current situation will last for some time: white migrants will come in large numbers because they are needed by the economy, while dark-skinned migrants will be kept out—and the “threat” they allegedly pose will continue to be a potent political tool. Again, this is not only the case in the east of the EU. In Italy, for example, the large numbers of Albanian migrants who have arrived over the last three decades are generally left in peace, politically speaking, while the arrival of Muslim migrants continues to be politicized by Lega, the Brothers of Italy, and other parties.

## Joshua A. Tait on American Conservatism

*Originally published March 30, 2022*

**Joshua, you work on U.S. conservative intellectual traditions. In a recent [Twitter thread](#) you offer that the right's power will remain potent for the next couple decades—at least. Can you describe the forces and strategies that the contemporary right has at its disposal to maintain its salience?**

Normally, as a historian I work backwards in time, but my work has had an extra salience in the present political moment, and contemporary politics has inevitably informed how I see some aspects of the American right. In this case, I was projecting forward, which is a dangerous thing to do. But it seems to me we face potentially massive disruptions over the coming decades as we feel the impacts of climate change, aging populations, and automation. It seems likely to me these trends will create enormous challenges for governments as they balance economic growth, welfare provision, and immigration from countries substantially disrupted by climate change.

To me, the Right, both in the United States and elsewhere, has the sort rhetorical and intellectual tools to craft a compelling argument to certain segments of the population in the face of insecurity and transformation. The combination of disruption, transformation and pain creates the conditions where right-wing, often illiberal discourses of heroism, golden age and the threatening Other creates real meaning for some, even as it draws boundaries around communities. If our projections about the future are correct, there will be plenty of space for defending cultural homogeneity and strong borders, a discourse that narrows the scope of welfare or a jingoistic populism, for instance.

**You recently [wrote](#) in the *Bulwark* about the history of American conservatives venerating European strongmen. Today, this is exemplified by the American right's adulation of Victor Orbán, but this sentiment has historical roots with a similar fondness for Spanish dictator Francisco Franco. Can you talk about the ideological exchanges that are taking place and have taken place historically between American conservatives and European far-right politicians?**

I probably wouldn't use the word "venerate," although some of the recent commentary from people like Tucker Carlson has come close to that level of celebration. There is excellent work about trans-Atlantic crossings on the far right, like Joseph Fronczak on American fascisms. But my research has primarily

been about the sorts of conservative intellectuals who have sought to legitimize right-wing positions in the fundamentally liberal United States. To that end, for these U.S. intellectuals Europe was and to some extent still is a repository of pre-liberal or post-liberal ideas and practices—whether that’s a Catholic conservatism like Francisco Franco or Portugal’s Antonio Oliveira Salazar (who has also experienced something of a revival in conservative circles) or a conservatism more rooted in national identity, like Orbán.

*For these U.S. intellectuals Europe was and to some extent still is a repository of pre-liberal or post-liberal ideas and practices*

Unlike during the Cold War era, when support for Salazar, Franco and strongmen beyond Europe had an anti-communist component, today conservatives are mostly focused on domestic conflicts. To this end, European strongmen fulfil several functions: they improve morale by demonstrating the viability of illiberal or conservative politics; they highlight liberal hypocrisy by contrasting their treatment in the media compared to left-wing dictators; and they can provide practical and intellectual lessons. I’m not sure Franco paid much attention to American conservative supporters beyond material and political aid during the Civil War and in helping make diplomatic gains during his later years. But he wasn’t actively supporting or drawing on American conservative intellectuals, in part because they were too smalltime to be particularly relevant. Today, it appears Orbán, some Polish politician-intellectuals and even pre-Ukrainian invasion Russia have expended efforts to win support from the American right, which is of course now a far more powerful media machine than it was in the 1950s and 1960s. For instance, we see Orbán meeting conservative intellectuals, funding others and attending and hosting conservative conferences.

**You write that columnists for National Review used to describe the “existential conflict between communism and Christendom.” Is there a similar feeling of solidarity with radical reactionary views today? How are references to Christendom instrumentalized to create a sense that conservative values are under threat?**

Some American conservatives do feel the need to defend illiberal European strongmen on historic grounds. In the Cold War era, American conservatives, as [Austin Clements has shown](#), defended Franco as representing Christian civilization against communism: to them, the choice between Franco and the Spanish Republic was a choice between an occasionally thuggish but essentially Christian leader and Stalinism.

Today, Rod Dreher and others defend Orbán as standing against corrosive progressive liberalism. Obviously the stakes are not as high today—no one serious is worried about literal Stalinists. But there are clear echoes in the type of solidarity the nationalist American Right feels toward Hungary and to a slightly lesser extent Poland. Part this trend, I think, is a result of the felt experience of the decline of conservative Christian cultural strength, especially on questions of the family and sexuality and its replacement, in their view, with a dominant progressive worldview and social class.

The idea of Christendom maps uneasily on to the United States, which while it has a strong tradition of Christianity and civic religion, has tended to avoid claims of Christendom owing to its primarily Protestant religiously diverse history—although you do hear an echo in “Judeo-Christian culture.” This has been less true of Catholics. In the 1930s through 1950s, many of the everyday pro-Franco Catholics

belonged to a thick Catholic subculture. To them, attacks on the Spanish Church resonated as an attack on their church—the universal Catholic Church.

We’ve seen these subcultures decline tremendously over the past seventy years, both in the United States and in Europe. In fact, the strength of the broadly Christian civic culture in the United States and its reflection in law has declined significantly across the board. So much so that it’s not clear to me American Orbán supporters necessarily think in terms of Christendom, but rather a broadly “traditional” worldview in which Christian (or orthodox religious) motifs combine with appeals to Western and democratic values, against a demonized progressive enemy characterized by secular, progressive and (in their view) elitist attacks on everyday people.

For some of the American intellectuals involved in a perceived defense of Christendom, such as Patrick Deneen and C. C. Pecknold, I would suggest that Adrian Vermeule, Harvard law professor, and in particular his reading of Ryszard Legutko and the “*liturgy of liberalism*,” has been an instructive framework for defining progressive liberalism in threatening terms and becoming a convincing explanation of events like the much-talked-about Drag Queen Story Hour.

To elements of the American Right, it’s a sort of slow-motion civil war by stealth, and that fact justifies many things, including support for Orbán as someone willing to wield the state against progressivism in the name of the Christian West. Orbán becomes for them a model for potentially turning around the culture war by transforming electoral successes into political defenses of traditional norms and hierarchies. This has been a change, I think, at least in the willingness of parts of the American Right to say, well, yes, we can legislate morality. It’s a strategic shift in response to the Left’s dominance in major cultural centers and the perceived failure of movement conservatism that has prioritized economic conservatism or legal originalism but has proved either incapable of defending conservative cultural mores or actively abetted their legal defeat. Trump’s election suggests at a basic level there is some popular support for an American illiberal politician, and the extent to which much of the conservative intellectual apparatus has either justified Trump or sought to coopt him shows how potent this undercurrent was before 2016 and how potent it will be going forward.

*Orbán becomes for them a model for potentially turning around the culture war by transforming electoral successes into political defenses of traditional norms and hierarchies.*

**The right has a history of borrowing certain ideas from the left when it suits their electoral and policy strategies. You recently have *described* Tucker Carlson’s anti-consumerist stance as bearing some resemblance to Bernie Sander’s own policy ideas. What could future conservative economic and monetary policy look like if anti-consumerist or anti-capitalist ideas gain more traction within the Republican Party?**

For all the talk in the wider political discourse about a populist and anti-capitalist turn on the Right, the manner that enters GOP policy will I think be relatively limited. As I’ve argued, there is a long-held, but minority view in conservative intellectual circles casting doubt on the positive effect of capitalism on society. These conservative intellectuals point out capitalism’s corrosive impact on communities and values, even if they remain broadly pro-market. In the history of American conservatism, this perspective was intellectually defeated and subsumed into the pro-market conservative “fusionism”—think Ronald Reagan—that has dominated the American Right since at least the 1970s. Both intellectually

and politically, in terms of donors, voters and the right-wing policymaking landscaping, I think we're unlikely to see a real uptick in policies that rein in markets or mitigate the effects of capital movement and inequality.

Instead, I think the Right's anti-capitalist rhetoric is going to manifest in ways connected with broad nationalist or illiberal projects. For instance, the turn against the *Wall Street Journal's* open borders policy is linked to anxiety about the solidity and social cohesion of the American nation and a vision of what it means to be American that is uncomfortably racialized. Likewise, a national industrial strategy is linked both with an idealized vision of America's industrial history and the white working class's role in it, as well as the geopolitical challenge of confronting an assertive China. In cases where the Republican Party or members of it, like Missouri's Senator Josh Hawley, have indicated willingness to use the state to regulate sectors, it tends to map on to right-wing grievances, such as toward Silicon Valley and social media. This is not to say these areas don't need creative policy reform, and I think there is real pain experienced as a result of things like the decline of American manufacturing and the opioid epidemic.

*The Right's anti-capitalist rhetoric is going to manifest in ways connected with broad nationalist or illiberal projects.*

But I would argue these policies are agreeable areas of state intervention in the market as a result of the Right's broader cultural projects that involve shoring up the Right's base rather than markers of the Right's serious questioning of capitalism. For a while, parts of the capitalist-critical Right have drawn on readings of the late socialist historian Christopher Lasch. What they like about Lasch is his criticism of the pieties of modern liberalism, which he critiqued from an Old Left perspective. Lasch critiqued liberalism because it was capitalist. His right-wing admirers critique capitalism because it is liberal.

**At the onset of the pandemic's arrival in North America, you wrote about the rhetorical tactics used by the conservative media and political establishment to cast doubts on the danger presented by COVID-19. How has this evolved with the Biden presidency? Can similar uses of misinformation being framed around 'just asking questions' be seen in other policy areas?**

I think we can say that for a large sub-section of right-wing voters, the Trump years entailed an entrenchment of a right-wing media ecosystem. Of course, the creation of a conservative counter establishment and media has been a long-term project of the American Right that has always been critical of what we now call the mainstream media. The earliest issues of the conservative magazine *National Review* attacked bias in the *New York Times*. But the Trump years and the perceived negative treatment of the president by the mainstream media and the converse pro-Trump right-wing ecosystem has led to levels of media polarization and siloing that are unprecedented in modern American history.

The barriers to entry are lower than ever: anyone can open a Twitter account, make YouTube videos or start a podcast and the field is close to unregulated. Even cable news channels are far cheaper than they once were. In such a fractured market, there are real incentives to hew far to the right. Not to mention, we've seen how easily right-wing social media can fall prey to state-sponsored disinformation campaigns that magnify polarization.

The rhetorical device of "just asking questions" really works in this media for a couple of reasons. For one thing, it's the type of device that works well on television where a host can affect a serious tone and raise



a series of questions and move on before the viewer critically analyzes them. More importantly, merely questioning absolves the asker of responsibility for facticity, plausible alternatives or accountability. To say, “I’m just asking a question,” gives the asker deniability about the implications of the question, even if those implications are clear to the viewer. This is clearly one of Tucker Carlson’s preferred methods. It also lets the asker get away with knocking holes in an argument without systematically refuting it.

Thirdly, asking questions allows various actors on the Right, or even the same one, to attack positions from multiple angles without committing to one. Just asking questions can hold quite contradictory and conspiratorial coalitions together when influencers let themselves just ask questions about liberal and progressive policies and ideas, rather than committing to an alternative. Finally, the real impact of “just asking questions” as I’ve gestured at here is to muddy the waters of the public discourse—to create such epistemological uncertainty that people can be manipulated for political purposes. As Timothy Snyder argues, and Hannah Arendt before him, this is a cynical, nihilistic strategy deployed by authoritarian and even totalitarian regimes. It has no place in a liberal democracy.

*The real impact of “just asking questions” as I’ve gestured at here is to muddy the waters of the public discourse—to create such epistemological uncertainty that people can be manipulated for political purposes.*

It’s ironic, since conservatives have always prided themselves on being the party of reality. You’d hear these clichés bandied about—Margaret Thatcher’s “the facts of life are conservative,” or Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.” The voting base of the American Right is increasingly disconnected to reality, living in a world of self-reinforcing discourse that is pulling the conservative establishment with it—although world events like the Russian invasion of Ukraine may have cut through in important ways. But an unrealistic Right is an irresponsible Right, and we know responsible conservative parties are important for creating and sustaining democracy.

## **Tomás Gold on Illiberalism in Latin America**

*Originally published April 7, 2022*

**You have been working on illiberal movements and populism in Latin America. In your article “[The Rise of the Contentious Right](#),” co-authored with [Alejandro Peña](#), you talk about the ways in which historically right and left parties relate to constituents. Can you talk about these linkages and how they may affect populism in South America in ways that are different than North American or European examples?**

It has become common for social movement scholars to state that we need more studies of right-wing, conservative, or illiberal movements. In our paper, we argue that this problem is even more salient in Latin America due to two main reasons. First, most academic work has centered around democratization processes and resistance to neoliberalism, where social movements are understood as bottom-up sources of democratic innovation. And second, the progressive political experiences that took place in many Latin American countries during the last twenty years (the so-called “left turn” or “pink tide”) led to a fertile ground for the study of how this democratic impulse could be institutionalized or at least incorporated into political parties’ realm of activity. As a result of these trends, we know a lot about how movements supply leftist parties with a web of social and organizational networks that create resilient modes of collective association “from below.” However, we lack a framework to understand how right-wing parties relate to social movements, and how this relationship affects their political strategies and positioning more generally.

In this sense, and to respond to your question, I think that the way in which right-wing parties use contentious political strategies in Latin America depends upon their variable capacity to mobilize core constituencies, which are not the same as in North America or Europe. In these regions, the right has historically been successful in mobilizing grievances at the grassroots level, and this is partly what explains the current ascendance of far-right political figures. In Latin America, conservative parties have traditionally relied on corporatist arrangements with elite interest groups or top-down mechanisms of influence and therefore had significant difficulties in constructing popular coalitions after the democratic transitions of the 1980s. As a result of these top-down and mediated linkages with their constituencies, we do not count with many studies explaining when and how rightist party elites engage in contentious politics.

*In Latin America, conservative parties have traditionally relied on corporatist arrangements with elite interest groups or top-down mechanisms of influence.*

The main puzzle we faced with Alejandro was to explain why right-wing party elites were collaborating with grassroots activist groups in Argentina and Brazil towards the end of the ‘left turn’ and how they were doing so. The two cases were relevant because strong left-wing parties had ruled both countries for more than a decade, and then major political victories against these incumbents had been preceded by a series of mass protests led by tech-savvy conservative activists, who had a central role in coordinating protests at the street level. The article traces the relation between these activist groups and party elites during several years, showing how the latter came to learn the benefits of social media by rallying with their constituencies in the streets and synchronizing strategies with the former. On the one hand, rallying in the streets helped party leaders to develop linkages with middle- and upper-class constituencies who were discontent with the ruling of the left. On the other, it ‘forced’ these elites to engage with cyberactivist groups to better coordinate their public actions.

The article finally shows that the outcome of these interactions depended upon the strategic capacity of activists to position themselves at the center of the public debate and the structuration of the party system in each country. The Brazilian case was marked by an increasing visibility and legitimacy of the main activists compared to traditional party leaders, which, together with a more fragmented party system and open electoral system, contributed to their easy recruitment by new “far-right” peripheral parties—which would become part of Bolsonaro’s coalition. The Argentine case presented the opposite pattern, in which activists’ limited public engagement and weak mobilization structure, added to a closed-list electoral system and limited party fragmentation, limited opportunities for creating a new movement party, and thus isolated activists from party politics.

**Part of your work focuses on the central role of social media in rallying different political campaigns, ranging from the feminist movement #NiUnaMenos to middle-class constituencies in Argentina and supporters of illiberal populist Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. In this sense, how does online activism translate to offline action?**

One of my long-term interests has been the interactive nature of what I would call the ‘online’ and ‘offline’ spheres. Most studies assume some type of relationship between online activism and offline political action, although scholars tend to focus more on this relationship at the individual level (i.e., voting behavior) than at the organizational level (i.e., activist groups, political parties, etc.).

In my work, I have tackled this gap by explaining how political activists develop skills that allow them to have one foot in each world, and therefore translate resources, strategies, and credentials from one to the other. For example, in a paper co-authored with Rocio Annunziata, we studied the origins of the feminist movement #NiUnaMenos in Argentina. We show that the deliberations over how to coordinate the first protest events to stop femicides, or the debates over how inclusive the framing about domestic violence should be, were conducted offline, on a face-to-face basis. However, activists’ strategies involved both traditional grassroots actions in the street and digital media-based activism on Twitter and Facebook. Similarly, in our paper with Alejandro on the Contentious Right, we show how Brazilian cyberactivist groups leveraged their strong online presence to negotiate their entry into electoral lists of minor parties, ultimately becoming national representatives.

In my opinion, what these examples illustrate is that rather than a general move towards social-media-based protest, the strategies of contemporary political actors' straddle online and offline spheres of action. Scholars are conducting a lot of exciting research on how populist leaders leverage social media in their favor, although how the logics of social media are then translated into offline political behavior and strategies are unclear and still open to debate.

*Rather than a general move towards social-media-based protest, the strategies of contemporary political actors' straddle online and offline spheres of action.*

**Which differences do you see between how populists in Argentina and Brazil use social media to appeal to niche interests of underserved constituencies? Is there a 'populist' social media realm?**

Well, the case of Jair Bolsonaro fits well with virtually any definition of 'populism,' and his rapid ascendance has been linked to social-media-based strategies, which targeted particularly low-income voters. There is ample evidence that Bolsonaro used the popular messaging app WhatsApp, as well as Facebook and Twitter, to spread misinformation during the months leading to his election. We also know that sharing this biased news induces political polarization across voters, increasing the likelihood of voting for a radical party leader like him. This mechanism has been identified in many countries and is far from exclusive to Brazil or Latin America.

Having said this, I would be wary of reducing this type of dynamic to the exercise of populist politics for two reasons. The first one is that most political parties and leaders now use social media to appeal to different constituencies. In fact, while some 'digital parties' (i.e., *Podemos* in Spain or *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italy) have captured significant scholarly attention, I would argue that most—if not all—political parties are adjusting their organizational structures to embrace digital media in one way or another. In a new paper co-authored with Alejandro Peña, which is currently under review, we show the virtues of understanding digital affordances as an organizational face of political parties rather than a specific party type, and then outline a typological framework for approaching the relation between what we call the "party-in-the-net" and more traditional party bureaucracies and functions.

In this piece, we discuss the affinity between right-wing populist leaders—who enjoy high intra-party influence and visibility—and low-influence but functionally-aligned party cadres, such as active cores of followers, cyber-members and trolls. However, we also note that their success in establishing this type of vertical social-media-based coalition will depend not only on political skill but also on environmental factors that narrow or expand the possibilities for partisan digital innovation. In this sense, I would say that the use of social media affordances by populist leaders is also heavily influenced by their relationship with traditional party structures and 'external' institutional arrangements, and therefore does not only depend on their strategic use of digital platforms.

Relatedly, the second reason I would be wary of identifying a distinctive 'populist' social media realm is that populist leaders often exploit digital spaces and vocabularies that pre-exist them. The case of Jair Bolsonaro is paradigmatic in this respect. As part of my doctoral dissertation, I have been studying the political role of free-market think tanks in the Latin American region. My preliminary findings on the Brazilian case show that these non-governmental organizations shifted the meaning of basic political categories constitutive of the 'common sense' of many Brazilians. Most of these think tanks

and activist groups built a significant digital presence and ended up merging into the political coalition that impeached Dilma Rousseff and drove the PT (Worker's Party) out of power. This is not to say that Bolsonaro's disinformation strategies are irrelevant to explain his electoral triumph. However, I would argue that the vocabulary and basic narratives on which Bolsonaro's campaign was based preceded him and were part of a long-term effort to generate a new hegemony of free-market and conservative ideas in Brazil. Similar arguments have been made by other scholars studying Brazilian politics, such as [Camila Rocha](#) or [Rodrigo Nunes](#).

*The vocabulary and basic narratives on which Bolsonaro's campaign was based preceded him and were part of a long-term effort to generate a new hegemony of free-market and conservative ideas in Brazil.*

A similar process is also taking place in Argentina with the ascendance of Javier Milei, a right-wing party leader who portrays a mix of conservative and free-market ideologies and has become one of the few—if not the first—elected congress member explicitly raising the flag of libertarianism in the country. A good part of his electoral strategy has been social-media based, although the vocabulary and frames he relies upon preceded him and can be traced to the influence of free-market organizations and intellectuals who generated fertile ground for them to grow.

In these cases, I would argue that new vocabularies and narratives fostered by civil society organizations paved the ground for populist leaders, and digital media played a central part in this process. The same can be said of the rise of Trump and many other far-right populist leaders across the globe.

**You have written about contentious politics as a fixture of South American politics. What factors enable actors with potentially disparate political goals to come together beyond being anti-incumbent? What role does anti-partisanship play in current protests?**

Many scholars have noted that populism feeds from people's disenchantment with mainstream political figures. However, populism is only one of many possible outcomes of this disenchantment because mainstream political actors also react and try to channel people's demands for change. The question is under what conditions are they more likely to be successful, and how they manage to do it.

This connects to your question, because it is usually easier for activists to come together against a specific political figure or issue than constructing an alternative political project. In other words, it is easier to protest current elites and blame them for the country's economic misfortunes than to create a new political party that proposes an alternative economic model. This generates a tricky situation, where many people disenchanted with political elites are willing to mobilize against them but do not have a clear roadmap of how to translate this collective power into a political project.

*It is easier to protest current elites and blame them for the country's economic misfortunes than to create a new political party that proposes an alternative economic model.*

In my work, I argue that during these contexts of generalized anti-incumbency or anti-partisanship, it is easier for political elites to fill in their shoes and either 'co-opt' or redirect protesters' demands in their favor. When I arrived at the University of Notre Dame I was already studying this phenomenon in [Argentina](#) and [Brazil](#). However, through conversations with Professor [Ann Mische](#) we became

more ambitious and started a joint project to explain how political elites react to contentious anti-partisanship across several countries. We found that despite most scholars consider autonomist or anti-partisan movements politically marginal because they do not want to engage with political elites that they consider corrupt, old, or unrepresentative, party elites still tend to use anti-partisanship to reposition themselves vis-à-vis their competitors. I think this underlines the need to study not only how populist leaders ascend to power, but also ‘negative cases’ in which traditional political elites are able to leverage anti-partisanship in their favor and therefore shield political institutions from them.

**Our Program is called Illiberalism Studies Program. Do you use the term ‘illiberal’ and how do you relate it to populism? Do both notions partly overlap, and what ‘illiberal’ can bring to our conceptual discussion?**

As **you have discussed**, the term ‘illiberalism’ is based on the negation of another tradition, namely ‘liberalism.’ As such, I think it is helpful to highlight the fact that both left- and right-wing populist leaders tend to seek political strategies that undermine liberal democratic regimes. However, I also think the use of the term poses a risk insofar the relation between populist leaders and economic liberalism is not always of opposites, but rather of complementarity. In this sense, the notions of ‘illiberalism’ and ‘populism’ overlap when referring to political institutions but are far from synonymous when referring to the ideological background of their coalitions or populists’ economic policies when in power.

*The use of the term poses a risk insofar the relation between populist leaders and economic liberalism is not always of opposites, but rather of complementarity.*

I think this is an interesting feature of contemporary right-wing populism, which should be further studied. For example, while we know that left-leaning populists in Latin America and Europe have tended to reject free-market fundamentalism, right-leaning populists often embrace radical versions of economic liberalism. That is the case of contemporary leaders such as Bolsonaro in Brazil, Modi in India, and Orbán in Hungary. Similarly, many of the free-market reforms of the 1990s in Latin America were conducted by leaders that have been categorized as ‘populist,’ such as Alberto Fujimori in Perú and Carlos Menem in Argentina. In these cases, the category of ‘illiberalism’ seems to be less valuable insofar it obscures how populist political coalitions often rely on actors that embrace some version of economic liberalism.

Rather than posing this as a conceptual limitation, I see it as an exciting and fruitful area of research. What is the relation between political illiberalism and economic liberalism? How can neoliberalism become institutionally embedded through populist policies? How does illiberalism as a ‘thin-ideology’ relate to other ideologies such as libertarianism? I find these questions fascinating.



## Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter on Illiberalism and Reactionary Democracy

*Originally published May 11, 2022*

**Aurelien and Aaron, in 2020, you published a reference book, *Reactionary Democracy. How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream*. Let's begin by discussing a methodological and epistemological question. In your book, you write that "we do not believe objectivity in research can be achieved... we take sides." Can you talk about the importance of subjectivity in research regarding the far right and how you incorporate that need to take a side in your book?**

In our work, we try to both challenge the privileging of objectivity and apolitical neutrality *and* defend the subjective and political. For us though, this is not merely a choice between two equal positions, but an analysis of the ways that 'objectivity' is used to legitimize political, and specifically reactionary, arguments and identity positions *and* delegitimize critiques of these and power as 'subjective' or about 'identity' coming from often particularized and minoritized positions and experiences. This is particularly acute around race, gender and sexual identities. Related to this epistemological position, we also believe that you cannot be objective about racism and other forms of inequality and injustice and the claim to be so is itself political and wrong.

As such, our approach is based on critical research on standpoint and positionality. In our view and experience, claims of objectivity tend to obscure power relations and the ideological underpinnings behind the research undertaken. Hegemonic positioning is thus often thought of as 'objective.' For our book, this was crucial as one of the criticisms we make is about the way liberalism has been positioned in a normative manner and portrayed uncritically as an objective force for good and a bulwark against the far right and reaction, even though a simple historical analysis shows that the picture is much more nuanced. Unpacking and making visible the inequalities core to the current hegemony demonstrate clearly how its normative status is both political and problematic, particularly as reactionary forces are rising.

*One of the criticisms we make is about the way liberalism has been positioned in a normative manner and portrayed uncritically as an objective force for good and a bulwark against the far right and reaction.*

Our argument is not to dismiss the good that has been achieved under liberalism, but to critically evaluate the position from which its defense emanates, to whom this good applies or does not, where it has come from, and equally whether it has come from liberalism itself or through its ability to evolve and absorb political demands, both progressive and reactionary. The SCOTUS leak about the overturning of *Roe v Wade* is a very good example on several levels. Most notably, the ways in which researchers who study politics and claim to be objective have treated 'both sides' in the reactionary culture war as equal, thus ignoring the radical imbalance of power in the face of it, particularly for those at the sharp end of such developments. We have witnessed racialized, working-class women whose interests, interventions and activism are often dismissed as being subjective and about identity, something which has legitimized reactionary positions.

It is also fascinating to see many still blame this development on some kind of force outside of the hegemony. Trump and his legacy are a great culprit as his election was always portrayed as some sort of freak accident. Yet we believe this is the wrong approach as there is far more to Trump and his legacy that makes them very much part of our current hegemony, than makes them a radical alternative to it.

*There is far more to Trump and his legacy that makes them very much part of our current hegemony, than makes them a radical alternative to it.*

**The book makes a strong point on the need to rethink how liberalism and far right are articulated, stating that “we must challenge and move beyond the hegemonic idea that liberalism and racism are antithetical.” Can you explain how liberalism, racism, and fascism are related and how (or even if) we can decouple the concepts from one another?**

This links to the previous point. We argue that it is doing a disservice to the positive sides and potential of liberalism to portray it uncritically as an unquestionable force for good. As such, we are told that it must be protected from fascism of course, but also from criticism and its failure to confront and address decisively various forms of oppression such as racism which remain embedded in practice (including through illiberal measures as witnessed by the rise in securitization).

Many of the rights that we take for granted today and cherish as democratic and progressive achievements were not won by liberal forces, but against the liberal elite of the time. It was movements opposed to the liberal settlement who forced change through and made it impossible for liberal elites not to budge and accept them. Even today, as we detail in the book, it is liberals platforming the far right and treating it and anti-racists as equivalent, opposing immigration (even if projected onto the 'left behind'), and fighting a culture war against identity politics, trans rights and anti-racism not just in the name of liberalism, but as a way of resisting change to the system.

As **Domenico Losurdo** noted, it is liberalism's flexibility which has allowed it to remain hegemonic. This is key as what changed through the pressure of progressive movements and politics, could just as well swing back towards reaction and this is very much what we are seeing currently. What is most concerning for us is not just the rise of reaction, but the failure in many mainstream circles to understand that this rise could not have been possible without the mainstream's collusion. If we are to fight reaction, racism and the resurgence of fascist politics, we must challenge the mainstream and liberalism and open up to radical progressive alternatives, if only as a corrector to the status quo, something the mainstream elite no longer even seem to be open to. They would much rather, it seems, position the far right (or

‘populism’ as they often call it) as the only alternative to liberalism, instead of risking radical progressive change. This is a very risky gamble as we witness the opposition to fascism and reaction waning as a result of decades of mainstreaming.

**You also delve into the liberal-racist tendency to celebrate the high achievements of individuals who belong to minority or otherwise oppressed groups. How does this shifting of focus from systems to individuals enable the far right? Related to it, how the ideas of ‘liberal Islamophobia’ and free speech relate?**

This builds on what [Eduardo Bonilla-Silva](#) terms liberal and colorblind racism and what he, [Alana Lentin](#), [David Theo Goldberg](#) and others have linked to the myth of the post-racial society. The individualization of racism has made us see racist acts as happenstance, as freak incidents which have apparently no ties to the wider hegemony and system. Similarly, it has made us celebrate individual progress as signs that we had overcome racism. Obama’s election was greatly symbolic and allowed reactionaries to legitimize a backlash as if ‘whites’ were now those at the sharp end. This has served to erase historical power imbalances and allow reactionaries to diminish and deny structural and systemic racism, push false equivalences and construct anti-white racism as a phenomenon. We see this most acutely in the All Lives, Blue Lives, and White Lives Matter responses to Black Lives Matter and more recently in the anti-[Critical Race Theory](#) movement and campaigns. It has also allowed those within the liberal camp to ignore their participation in ongoing structures of oppression (‘but we said All Lives!’) and look good in comparison to the illiberal far and extreme right.

This false dichotomy has been used by some on the far right to push racist narratives back into the mainstream under a liberal, post-racial, veneer which emphasizes culture and religion as opposed to race. This is what we discuss more precisely when we explore the liberal and illiberal articulations of racism and [Islamophobia](#). Concepts which were once thought as progressive such as free speech or *laïcité* (secularism) in France were harnessed by reactionaries to racialize and reject certain communities on the basis that they are not compatible with *our* liberal way of life. Since these articulations could easily stand against the more extreme, biological, illiberal articulations, it allowed them to act as if they were actually against racism or at least not racist by comparison. What is shocking is how easily many in the mainstream have been convinced this is the case and accepted deeply racist policies to be implemented—think of the various liberticidal laws against Muslims passed over the years in France and Europe more widely.

*This false dichotomy has been used by some on the far right to push racist narratives back into the mainstream under a liberal, post-racial, veneer which emphasizes culture and religion as opposed to race.*

**The book explores the three-step process by which far right views are mainstreamed. Can you develop on how mainstream conservatives adopt and normalize salient ideological points elaborated by the far right? How can we fight against this trend?**

What we argue is that if we want to understand and counter the mainstreaming of the far right, we need to look beyond the far right and even the right more generally. Too often, we tend to look at the mainstreaming of the far right with the far right as sole or main agent, and the mainstream (and liberal democracy) as the vulnerable target. So much so that it even adopts and adapts far right ideas and narratives to see off the illiberal threat. Our argument is that there can be no mainstreaming without

the agency of the mainstream. Therefore, what we try to highlight in the book and more recently in **our work with Katy Brown** is that we must take a longer view of the process and ensure that we do not let mainstream actors off the hook. We must hold accountable these actors with a privileged access to shaping public discourse and therefore a serious democratic responsibility—at present, we tend to let them pretend that they are simply reporting (bringing us back to the objectivity issue) or responding to what ‘the people’ want as if they have no power to shape the agenda. This is incredibly naïve and yet somehow it has worked and played a key part in the mainstreaming of the far right. Thus, we need to challenge these, as well as the platforming of the far right and its ideas, and liberal racism which all play a significant role in mainstreaming.

*Our argument is that there can be no mainstreaming without the agency of the mainstream.*

**Last but not least, where do you see the forces that are shifting politics to the right internationally? Do you consider the term ‘illiberalism’ can capture this shift, and offer another perspective than the notions of far right or populism, or does it obscure the roots of the problem?**

Illiberalism as a concept or label can be useful in our opinion, but it has limitations and implications as we discuss in the book and our wider work. It is not enough to point to illiberalism if we are to seriously tackle the root of the issue as it can serve as a distraction or displacement from the problems within liberalism, which it can serve to reinforce or excuse in the name of fighting illiberal extremism.

We have witnessed a resurgence in illiberal and extreme politics as some have felt emboldened by the mainstreaming of the far right, including under the banner of and in defense of liberalism, and this needs to be taken extremely seriously. However, we cannot let ourselves be reassured by the illusion that evil is outside and can simply be kept out. Various forms of oppression continue to be core to our liberal system and shape the lives of those who live within it. While they are generally rendered invisible, recent events have shown that we cannot expect liberalism in and of itself will prevent the return of incredibly reactionary politics as it can clearly accommodate them. Therefore, we need to explore systems of oppression within liberalism and liberal societies and dismantle them. This may be through reform, but we cannot ignore the ways in which reform, like progress, has been used to protect the system historically. As such, it is imperative to remain open to exploring other alternatives. We need to (re)imagine these and re-ignite debates about what democracy should mean beyond its current reactionary iteration.

*We cannot let ourselves be reassured by the illusion that evil is outside and can simply be kept out.*

## Rada Iveković on Nationalism and Social Transformations

Originally published May 19, 2022

**Rada, you have been an acute observer of our societies' transformations for decades. I would like to begin our discussion by looking at Russia's war against Ukraine. How does the paradox of Russian attempts at (or claims to be engaging in) de-Nazification in Ukraine square with its tacit support of authoritarianism in its own space and in the wider context of its international affairs?**

It looks like a paradox, but it is not illogical **within the framework** of the general *confusionism* of our times and the corresponding loss of landmarks in knowledge and political orientation. It is an epistemological conundrum. Everyone is logical within his or her own framework, and possible readings are multiple. The paradox is rather the following: throwing allegations of nazism—an extreme *nationalist* ideology—at others, and then being nationalists of *another nation* in return!

In Putin's highly inflational jargon, "nazi"—a general term used to demonize others—now includes Ukrainians, the west, and the EU. Toward "the west," he has developed a kind of excessive, postcolonial-like language full of simplistic invective and simple labels. In the Yugoslav war of the 1990s, Serbian and Croatian nationalists called each other fascists (*ustashe* and *chetniks*, respectively) after the conflicting local quislings of the Second World War, who had collaborated with the nazis. By doing so, nationalist Serbs and nationalist Croats played out a remake and a replay of WWII. Putin too is staging a remake of WWII, which involves renaming it "The Great Patriotic War" (a renaming elaborated through propaganda and the reshuffling of education and of the nationalist narrative throughout his whole time in power) and presenting it as Russia/the USSR liberating Europe singlehandedly. The transposition of these names to the present flattened the historic and temporal dimension. By claiming de-nazification and defense, or that *the others* are fascists (or nazis) and that we must fight them for our lives, the architects of such accusations do the following:

- 1) They refer to the glorious past and make it the blueprint for the future (the Soviets lost some 25 million people in the Second World War and shared the victory over historic nazism)—thus stopping history and putting World War II values first, which should make "us" great again.
- 2) They stick to a *binary system of values* and thinking—it is "us" against "them," which alone can ensure "our" supremacy—and fabricate *an official and exclusive line of history*. We shall win, the narrative goes, by repeating the pattern of a sealed official history. It is a recipe that is "guaranteed" success, believed by a majority of Russians now, but this may change.

3) They restructure and rename past history (“the Great Patriotic War” instead of “World War II”) and shape the future in the same vein. This is **not specific to socialism** or even post-socialism.

Also, by saying that Russia defeated fascism in World War II, Putin is illogically qualifying the victors *nationally*, but the enemy *ideologically*. Actually, Putin is doing what others have done throughout history and around the world: reinterpreting history. The conventional time scheme itself is thereby disrupted, leading to greater confusion and depoliticization. In his speech on May 9, 2022 (the day celebrating “Russian” victory in World War II) at the military rally in Moscow, Putin said: “Russia has resisted aggression *preventively*, as a precaution.” The United States has done the same in Iraq, on the false pretext of the presence of weapons of mass destruction. “Nazism” is one such false pretext and justification, no matter how much sympathy for German occupation there might have been during Stalin’s deadly implacability in Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

*By saying that Russia defeated fascism in World War II, Putin is illogically qualifying the victors nationally, but the enemy ideologically.*

Curiously, the indelible value of anti-nazism and antifascism was reconfirmed some 40-50 years after World War II, at the exact time when *the legitimation of diverse socialist regimes through antifascism and anti-nazism has faded* with the “end” of the cold war and generational change. But Second World War antifascism was exhausted simultaneously in the west and generally. This *transnational historic threshold* (the end of the cold war) in 1989 had been jointly prepared by “east” and “west” since the 1970s. Upon the fall of the Berlin Wall, the west fell into the trap of neoliberal triumphalism (“we are the best”) despite Gorbachev’s readiness for understanding and negotiations; this is not unlike Putin’s belated anti-nazi triumphalism (“we are the best”) today.

This coincided with the sudden visibility of globalization, the hardening of neoliberalism, and the appearance of an *epistemological collapse* (before a much-needed future reconfiguration) characterized by cognitive uncertainty, plural values, “fake news” and general disorientation, although still permeated with western hegemony.

It is revisionism, but based on partly plausible *beliefs*. The interpretation that Ukrainians are really Russians is a *possible* historic scenario, with a *politics of history* involved. Why is it “possible?” Because the concept of nation remains vague and has many definitions.

The same is true of language: Ukrainian can be seen as a separate language (this is how many Ukrainians view it), but it can also be seen as a dialect of Russian, since there is no linguistic difference between a language and a dialect; the distinction is merely political. Linguistic secession accompanies political and territorial secession. The language and national culture narrative become instruments of war. Immediately after the Yugoslav civil war in the 1990s, distinct dictionaries of the Serbian and Croatian languages, hitherto considered one language, appeared. National academies, exercising linguistic violence and purism, became the guardians of national languages. This policy achieved distinct standardizations of the now mutually hostile official languages in the Yugoslav space. Four languages derived from Serbo-Croatian now compete, and more may yet appear. The same process is occurring in

Ukraine between Russian and Ukrainian. People still understand each other across fences and speak the same language with variations, but are **blamed** for this by nationalists and the authorities.



Both Russia today and Serbia in the 1990s deny being at war, while nationalist Serbia today identifies with Russia, assuming the same victim's posture. But what is incomparable between the two cases is the scale and the general and worldwide danger of war, since Russia is a nuclear power. The Yugoslav war (like in Ukraine and Russia, partly civil and partly a war of aggression) was much smaller in scale, but it could be said that it was foundational for the European Union (EU) as it is today. Indeed, it appears to have "contaminated" Europe, if not the entire world, with the virus of new nationalisms.

**Moving outside the current context of the war, you wrote in the Journal of Post-Colonial Writings that "Almost the whole Arab world is ablaze as a result of colonial history, of European irresponsibility, of serial wars in Western Asia due to western politics." Can you discuss the Western reticence to recognize its complicity in these political crises? And how can Western states overcome the political hurdles to recognize their responsibility to refugees and asylum seekers?**

Maintaining hegemony is not easy. It requires constant physical and *epistemic* violence against history and memory through the mechanism of universalizing ("our") concepts, cultures, ideas so as to save our good conscience and make us blind to the damage we produce—since "our truth" is the only one allowed. First of all, it necessitates that a *dominant single story*—in this case a western one—be universalized. (All cultures have a universalist pretense, although not all are successful in imposing it; luckily, all are *reciprocally incomplete* and therefore check each other.) Although we do need some universalism (for example, the universality of humankind regardless of race, gender, etc.) and although all universalities are made up of many particulars, *ideological universalism* tends to be abstract and therefore exclusive.

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The universal associates itself too easily with hegemony and domination, so it needs control, although it cannot and should not be abolished. Within the arrogant western reticence to recognize complicity in political crises, we might see an over-exaggerated survival instinct, as in Putin's phrase about a pre-emptive war on Ukraine. At war, though not only then, aggression is regularly disguised as defense. This happens through words and interpretation as warmongering, followed by feats of arms. Again, this is not specific to the west, but is probably a general feature of modern societies. I number among these not only western capitalist societies, but also socialist and post-socialist societies. In this sense, they all *respond* to the same pattern. I am not sure how we can overcome this state of affairs unless we deeply modify our societies and political regimes. We are still very far from that. States alone (much less western states) cannot do this, because they are part of the problem.

**You also wrote about the contemporary formulation of nationalism born in the wake of the end of the Cold War. Can you explain how nationalism today looks different than nationalisms of the 19th century and the decolonial period? What are the global implications of contemporary nationalism at both the national and international levels?**

Around and after the end of the cold war (1989), many thinkers theorized the end of the nation and hopefully of nationalism too, including in the construction of the EU. That was wishful thinking.

Although it mutates, the concept of nation is a modern one; it is common to the two versions of western modernity—capitalism and socialism—and distinguishes modern formations in Europe from the *ancien regime*, the Church, royalty, and the feudal economy and society. In mid-17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, this was called the Westphalian system.

But within this, there is no single understanding of the nation or its link to the state. There are many scenarios, especially as the figure of the nation, of the modern state, and of borders proliferated around the world through modern colonial history. The nineteenth century indeed fostered the appearance of modern European nations and—in a continuation of the colonial enterprise—the nations and independent states of the Americas. In the latter, the nation and the state were constructed on the foundation of the earlier exclusion and/or extermination of the local population, so they were only partly independentist and their independences were fashioned by upper classes of creoles or immigrants. These forms, too, must be counted.

The decolonial period—which occurred, for Africa and Asia, mainly in the 1960s (with India two decades earlier)—produced *reactive anti-colonial and independentist popular nationalisms* where whole populations fought for emancipation and independence. The difference from today's new nationalisms is abyssal. Most of the latter are exclusive or, when "inclusive," are inclined to subsume their neighbors, called "others" and enemies. Minorities are unwelcome, immigrants rejected, racism now uninhibited, and misogyny invigorated. Plural societies with diverse nationalities are not on the agenda. Historical examples of such plural societies are not limited to empires such as Austro-Hungary or the Ottoman Empire; the Non-Aligned Movement was a tremendous force in the 1960s and 1970s, giving much hope to the emerging nations and states of the Third World.

**Let us turn now to one of the central issues: gender. What is it about the fall of communism that led to the re-masculinization of Soviet-bloc states? Did this necessarily come at the expense of women's rights that were won during the period of communist rule? How is gender at the heart of reactionary politics? What do anti-women backlashes around the world tell us about the future direction of global politics?**

I don't know exactly what you mean by the fall of communism; i can only talk about the historic fall of socialist countries in 1989, a historic fact. In the latter case, it was these states' restoration of (by then) neoliberal capitalism that led to their re-masculinization and re-patriarchalization, whether they had been within or outside the Soviet bloc. There is deep-seated machismo and systemic misogyny in both capitalism and socialism. In some cases, as in Yugoslavia, post-Yugoslav countries, and now Ukraine and Russia, a general militarization through war has produced the current re-patriarchalization. But again, this is hardly a socialist or communist specificity.

*Parallel to the advancement of legislation regarding women in prosperous countries, we have a multipolar backlash against women from all sides, on all fronts, and in most if not all countries.*

The fall of socialist regimes was calamitous for women: all women-specific human rights were either threatened or directly abolished in post-socialist countries, so they had to fight all over again to regain them. In socialism, although the society was equally patriarchal, women's formal rights, right to abortion and to their own bodies, divorce, working rights, equal salary, education, health, etc., were at least *defended by legislation and the state*. And what is happening elsewhere? See the threat of abolition

of the right to abortion in the US (which was decriminalized in 1973) pending a new decision by the Supreme Court; the closure of schools, imposition of the *burqa*, loss of freedom of movement, and job losses affecting women in Afghanistan; the systemic femicides in many countries, including Mexico; and the abduction of girls and women in Nigeria and elsewhere. Even in France, one woman is killed every 2.5 days by a man *because* she is a woman, and the same is true in other “democracies.”

The mistake is thinking that these systemic features are exceptional. They are not; they are constitutive. We must see them within a larger framework that comprises societies, political systems, and the constant wars that our societies and states are producing. Parallel to the advancement of legislation regarding women in prosperous countries, we have a multipolar backlash against women from all sides, on all fronts, and in most if not all countries. The hunt against women is open again. Some women’s human rights, if not all, are endangered. The historian [Dubravka Stojanović](#) explains:

“[Patriarchy and nationalism] are inseparable. Nationalism sees the nation as an extended family, as a blood relationship of its members in which there must be intelligible roles. [...] I am ready to go so far as to say that nationalism was invented as a means of maintaining patriarchy, as well as a means of gaining power, strengthening it, preserving it... [...] [M]aintaining the patriarchal order was one of the strong motives for the disintegration of Yugoslavia, because within closed national constructions this social order is far easier to maintain than in a complex multi-ethnic, multi-confessional community. In essence, it poses a constant challenge to a closed society and a patriarchal matrix.”

Yes, it is all at the expense of women’s rights because these are the issues on which it is easiest to bargain—it doesn’t cost the menfolk anything, and it may help them “advance” and compromise on other fronts. Women’s rights have always been unstable. We are in a critical period on this front, because patriarchy has been deeply challenged everywhere, though in different ways. Gender is indeed at the heart of reactionary politics at all times (remember the Inquisition and the historical witch-hunt mainly against women? It still exists). Global politics, animated by men, is busy on so many other fronts that women’s condition seems unimportant.

The question is complex, because pro-women politics has to interact with many other priorities: with *care* needing to be taken into account at the local and global level; with reproductive work (carried out by women worldwide, and unpaid) being recognized, reconnected to, and its value calculated in relation to productive work; with environmental and climate planning; with utter poverty and inequality in many places; with north-south inequality between states, etc.

The thing that seems to me most urgent to start with is: how can we stop self-destruction and serial wars all the time and on every continent? One of the main obstacles remains the binarism in thinking. I would start thinking from there, and it seems to me a *women’s* but universal priority. Is it possible to exclude the death drive? This may be counter-intuitive, counter-factual, and untheorizable, but aren’t most women inclined to reject the death drive that affects menfolk?

The gratuitousness of violence—in peace and at war—against women and the vulnerable generally is linked predominantly to males and what they understand as their “culture.” So resisting and escaping violence and war would imply civilizing men specifically, within a framework of civilizing all, including

women who count on manly violence as a system and who bring up boys. All of that requires a thorough change in the international order, too.

*I thank Goran Fejić for patiently providing comments on this interview as usual.*

1 There have been comparable cases. In West Bengal, Subhash Chandra Bose, the Indian nationalist commander who fought the British occupation, is still celebrated as Netaji ("dear/respected leader"), although to this end he joined Japanese fascists in Burma and paid allegiance to nazi Germany, before ultimately failing militarily. Anti-colonialism was more important than anti-fascism.

## Seyward Darby on Women and Extremism

*Originally published May 31, 2022*

**Seyward, in *Sisters in Hate*, you discuss the “soft power” that women bring to the hate movement. What are the different ways women’s soft power contributes to the hate movement and white supremacy? And how does women’s involvement help reproduce the social order of these groups?**

White women play many roles in the hate movement, and a key one is helping make the scene and its ideas seem righteous and palatable, even innocuous. As symbols and as leaders, white women are vessels for delivering the lie that white supremacy isn’t only, if at all, about violence and marginalizing people who don’t agree with the movement; it’s about family values, tradition, and caring for one’s own. Their presence screams: If “nice white women”—daughters, mothers, sisters—are involved, how bad can it be? This is a façade, but a powerful one. Women are also necessary for the hate movement’s societal aims, most importantly white, heterosexual marriage and procreation. Without them, the social order that the movement espouses could not exist. Hate cannot survive on men alone.

**There is a very long history regarding the desire to control women sexuality. How does this play into women’s roles in reactionary movements?**

Bear with me while I explain some mental gymnastics: The hate movement is a hyper-sexist space, where women are seen as the physically and analytically “weaker sex,” and where violence against women isn’t uncommon. But it is also a space where sexism is manipulated into a virtue, where women are told that being wives and mothers is their biological and racial destiny. Not only that, in embracing these roles, they’re told that they are uniquely positioned to “save” the white race from annihilation. Put another way, white nationalism pretends that being a wife and mother at the expense of all else is glorifying, political, and a matter of societal survival. By ultimately doing little, and living comfortably within those restrictions, women in the hate movement are told they are doing the utmost. Their wombs may be tools, sure, but for the propagation and protection of a superior race of humans. What kind of woman, white nationalists ask, wouldn’t want to play their part in building a better future with their bodies?

**The three women who are the main ‘actors’ of your book had, or have, significant online presences. The internet offers those in the hate movement a significant organizing and radicalizing tool. How do white supremacist women use the internet? Is that different**

**to how men use it? What are ways that policymakers and activists can respond to the pernicious use of the internet by white supremacists?**

I hesitate to generalize too much about online trends, because they are ever-shifting as technology evolves, platforms rise and fall, and racist influencers find safe haven in different pockets of the internet. Still, I think it's fair to say that white-nationalist women tend to use the internet to promote hateful ideas under the glossy veneer of white femininity. They project a sense of normalcy and palatability to their followers, and invite other white women watching/listening to join them, be like them, partake in a sisterhood. What they have is attainable, they insist—the power, the beauty, the friendship—if you say and do the right, racist things. And going a step further, once you're in the fold, you will find a platform for saying and doing things for the good of a whole race, *your* race, and for supporting the warriors fighting (that is, committing racist violence) to protect your well-being. I think often of what Lana Lokteff, one of the subjects in my book, said in a 2017 speech: "A soft woman saying hard things can create repercussions throughout society. Since we aren't physically intimidating, we can get away with saying big things."

*White-nationalist women tend to use the internet to promote hateful ideas under the glossy veneer of white femininity. They project a sense of normalcy and palatability to their followers, and invite other white women watching/listening to join them, be like them, partake in a sisterhood.*

Tackling the internet's role in propagating hate is important, of course, and it starts with tech companies putting ethics over profit, reining in hate speech, and countering disinformation *far more robustly* than they are now. But the internet didn't create white supremacy. It's just the latest vehicle for the ideology's promulgation. Tackling hate requires comprehensive action by government institutions, private entities, and individuals. For lack of a better word, it requires getting interdisciplinary about the problem, involving every sphere and sector in this country, from schools to tech companies to the halls of Congress.

**These three women have a connection to religion and rituals of different kinds whether it is an embrace of Christian-inspired "TradLife" or a rejection of Christianity in favor of Nordic paganism. How does the promise of Christian kindness play into both explicit and implicit racism? And do you see any connection between people's need for ritual and the appeal of white supremacy?**

If American history tells us anything, it's that Christian kindness is a useful cover for hateful ideas. We've seen religious leaders, churches, believers, and entire faiths espouse racism in the name of God. But cruelty is still cruelty if it's delivered with a smile and a blessing, or justified in the name of the divine.

There is absolutely a connection between people's need for ritual and the appeal of white supremacy. It's hard to witness, say, the people in Charlottesville carrying lit tiki torches and chanting in unison, with fervor on their faces, and not think that public ritual is utterly integral to the movement. The hate movement is filled with people who want to simultaneously feel empowered and as if they're part of something bigger than themselves. It's rife with performance, symbols, even costumes, KKK robes and hoods being the most obvious example. Even the worst acts of violence are theater of a kind, intended to signal the depth of one's commitment and to inspire other believers. Hate is a social bond. It demands an audience.



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**You quote one of your subjects, Lana Lokteff, towards the end of the book as she says, “When women get involved a movement becomes a serious threat.” Can you talk about how this rings true in the post-January 6 world? You mention that discussing women in the hate movement is somewhat of a taboo. How can we overcome this taboo to appropriately address the problem?**

Women are often written out of history, and the history of hate in America is no exception. The idea that white supremacy is mostly a bastion of “angry white men” is false. Just because they aren’t the ones picking up assault rifles and massacring people of color—and, look, that *can* happen—doesn’t mean white women aren’t sustaining features of hate in America. To assume otherwise is to be in denial about hundreds of years of history, in which white women have done terrible things in the name of whiteness. It is to ignore the fact that women participated in the January 6 coup attempt, as boots on the ground, as organizers, and as funders. We overcome this gap in the discourse by adopting a more nuanced, accurate understanding of white supremacy and what it requires to flourish, and by using that understanding to guide media coverage, policymaking, and so much more.

## **Tanja A. Börzel and Michael Zürn on Liberalism and the Postnational Liberal International Order**

*Originally published June 2, 2022*

**Tanja and Michael, you work on the liberal script and its contestations. How do you see Russia's war against Ukraine impacting the field of liberalism? Some, like Francis Fukuyama, seem optimistic about liberalism getting re-energized because of the war. Do you share that optimism, or are you more cautious?**

Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine is not a backlash against NATO expansion encroaching on Russia's security interests. What renders Ukraine a security threat to Putin's regime is its progressing democratization. Putin's demands to revoke Ukraine's prospects for NATO membership and to unwind the country's military, political, and economic relationships with Europe and the United States violate Ukraine's right to collective self-determination not only regarding which allies to choose but, more fundamentally, which script to follow. The United States, the European Union, and other Western states have been united in standing up against Putin, helping Ukraine defend its freedom to choose. This Western unity has silenced contestations of the liberal script within liberal societies. However, the economic costs of the war and the sanctions against Russia are likely to fuel the grievances authoritarian populists have successfully mobilized in the past.

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Precisely because the war is no strategic move to ensure Russian security but an imperial war that violates the most fundamental principles of the international order, the global phalanx of liberal democracies has closed ranks like we have not seen in 20 years. The defense of democracy and the Ukrainian people's right to self-determination seems to take precedence over national interests. Global goods such as peace and the integrity of borders are upheld. And some of the international organizations that were thought to be moribund suddenly seem quite agitated: first and foremost: NATO, the European Union, and even the United Nations.

Finally, we see an overwhelming reaction from civil society—even the sports federations and some companies with a strong involvement in Russia are joining in. So, the liberal international order, as it is known, is still alive. The Iraq War, the annexation of Crimea, and especially the outright slaughter in Aleppo and other places in Syria have weakened this order more than the attack on Ukraine. It is fundamentally true that order, and generally any norm, is not shaken by a violation of the rule but only by the lack of an appropriate reaction to a breach of the norm. Murder does not challenge the norm that one should not kill. Only the shrugging acceptance of homicide kills the norm. In this sense, the outcome of this war may lead to a re-energizing of global governance. But it creates only a window of opportunity for that; this opportunity must also be used.

**You write in your article “Contestations of the Liberal International Order” about the opposition to what you term the postnational Liberal International Order or LIO II. This is not the first time there has been a challenge to the Liberal International Order (LIO). How is opposition to LIO II different today? How would you explain the failure between the expectations of the post-Cold War era and what the LIO II has been able to deliver?**

Indeed, the contestations have a lot to do with the internal problems of the global governance system that emerged after 1989. Therefore, our argument constitutes an account that centers on the endogenous dynamics of LIO contestations. We argue that the postnational features of LIO have produced their own contestations. This argument resonates with the notion of a neoliberal turn of international institutions that prompted a change in the distribution of wealth, driving the backlash against LIO by liberal states that were crucial in creating and sustaining this order. But we also see contestations by democratic and authoritarian governments of societies in both the Global North and the Global South that benefited from the global redistribution of wealth in the last decade but feel excluded from decision-making in international institutions and complain about the double standards that have characterized the implementation of the rules. It is these deficits within the LIO that have produced contestations.

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More specifically, we argue that the end of the Cold War saw a systemic shift from the liberal post-Second World War international order of liberal multilateralism (LIO) to a post-Cold War international order of postnational liberalism (LIO II). LIO II has not only been rules-based but openly pursued a liberal social purpose with significant authority beyond the nation-state. While postnational liberal institutions have helped increase overall well-being globally, they worked in favor of Western societies and elites and regularly violated the principle of treating like cases alike. It is these institutional features of postnational LIO II that are contested. They led to legitimization problems, which explains both the current wave of contestations and the strategies chosen by different contestants.

**In the same working paper, you describe four strategies for contesting liberalism: pushback, reform, withdrawal, and dissidence. Can you briefly explain and perhaps provide an example of each?**

We argue that the strategies contestants choose are determined by a combination of two factors: their position toward liberal authority and their relative position in the contested institution. The first factor is actor preferences regarding liberalism. While some contestations are directed against the specific

exercise of liberal authority (rejection of the exercise of authority), others defy the mere existence of liberal authority (rejection of authority itself). In the case of LIO II, this distinction refers to the question of whether an international authority in place is rejected as such, or whether its practices (decisions and decision making) are what is being challenged.

The second factor refers to the degree to which an actor has the power to shape the decisions of an institution that holds liberal authority. Institutional influence consists of a formal layer that refers to its material capabilities and the institutional rules an actor can draw on to affect decisions. This also involves an informal layer, which describes the extent to which the actor is part of background talks prior to decisions, or is stigmatized as a troublemaker that needs to be regulated, as opposed to an order-maker that regulates others.

The combination of preference and power leads to four different strategies. Pushback describes a strategy to reduce liberal authority from the inside. For years, Russian President Vladimir Putin has been contesting the liberal intrusiveness of the European peace and security order in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe or the Council of Europe, seeking a return to a more Westphalian order based on the equal sovereignty of states, their territorial integrity, and non-interference in domestic affairs (ironically then, Putin's war against Ukraine violates precisely these principles).

Actors that are dissatisfied with the way authority is exercised but accept liberal authority in general should opt for reform if they can make their demands for change heard within the institution. Examples are LGBTIQ+ rights which many liberal states have introduced. In contrast, outsiders that see little chance to change how liberal authority is exercised are likely to opt for the withdrawal. This can take the form of "counter-institutionalization," that is, the creation of new liberal authorities without necessarily leaving the existing ones. Countries with limited power like Greece opted for another form of withdrawal by simply disregarding the EU's authority by not complying with EU laws that the country deemed too costly. Finally, we use dissidence to refer to the strategy that aims at the destruction rather than the reduction of liberal institutions because actors reject any liberal authority but lack the power to defy it. Putin's war in Ukraine is a violent form of dissidence.

**Do you see the backlash against globalization essentially as a cultural or an economic issue? How are both interrelated and feeding each other?**

The backlash needs to be seen in the context of a new cleavage between liberal cosmopolitans and authoritarian nationalists (communitarians). There is a tendency to describe the GAL-TAN (Green-Alternative-Libertarian versus Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist) difference as the cultural dimension and the difference between Right (markets) and Left (state intervention) as the economic one in the current political landscape. This view is based on an abbreviated view of cleavage, in which economic and cultural attitudes are always interrelated. Cleavages bundle socio-economic positions, socio-cultural orientations, and political convictions so that they reproduce and reinforce each other. If these dimensions are not bundled, it is not a cleavage.

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Neither can the protectionist attitude of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) voter be attributed solely to the economic positioning of the voter nor to the rejection of the foreign. Similarly, neither can the human rights commitment of a German doctor solely be attributed to her job security in the case of migration nor to her cultural openness. Only when the socio-economic, socio-cultural, and socio-political dimensions of a cleavage are considered together can we understand the new social formations that are developing.

**Michael, in early 2021 you discussed the failure of the United States, and to a lesser extent the EU, to protect their citizens against the pandemic compared with the relative success of countries like China, Japan, and South Korea, and explain that difference as being due to some of the specific failings of the state in matters connected to data privacy. A year on, what does the pandemic's latest chapter and the illiberal backlash in countries like the United States and Canada signal for the future of liberalism, especially as it relates to our relationship with Big Tech?**

The financial crises in 2008 and especially the migration of millions of Syrians in 2015 have in effect strengthened the authoritarian populists. I argued that this is because crises expose the weaknesses of democracies. Two of these weaknesses are the lack of accountability of many non-majoritarian institutions, which make the relevant decisions in a crisis, and their difficulties in effectively tackling problems of global origin. The COVID and the Ukraine crises, however, weakened the authoritarian populists. On the one hand, the emphasis on the gut feeling of the leader and the rejection of expertise are responsible for many COVID deaths in Brazil in the United States. At the same time, the Ukraine war has laid bare the ideological affinity and the financial dependence of some authoritarian populist parties. In the long run, these crisis-induced chances for democracies will, however, work only if they can remedy their weaknesses. The inability to tax and regulate Big Tech is one of them.

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**Tanja, in one of your papers, you explore the different strategies and responses to the view that Europe is a “Christian” continent and not a place for refugees from countries with another cultural background. When migrant-phobic policies are parroted by liberal politicians such as Hillary Clinton, when she said that the European left needed to address the concerns of right-wing fears of immigration, does that pose a threat to the larger democratic order? How can politicians and journalists avoid fanning the fires of cultural wedge issues while still addressing them?**

Migration and asylum are at the core of the new cleavage, which counters liberal ideas of Europe embodied by the values of the Enlightenment, such as human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and a market economy, with nationalist and xenophobic ideas of Europe based on an essentialist interpretation of the continent's Christian heritage.

The massive influx of refugees in 2015 made the extension of the EU's liberal authority visible and felt in the member states. Euroskeptic populist forces on the radical right of the political spectrum have exploited this cleavage to challenge core principles of international refugee law, not only contesting the EU's liberal authority but a constitutive part of the liberal orders of its member states. Their preferences

and power divide member state governments and prevent them from agreeing on how to move forward with the common asylum and migration system.

At the same time, the member states are stuck with the status quo, as any attempt to renationalize asylum and migration or to dismantle the EU's liberal refugee regime altogether requires unanimity. The failure of the member states to arrive at and comply with common European solutions has emboldened the calls of populists to restore the sovereignty of the member states as the most effective way to protect citizens against financial markets, migration, civil-rights activism, or terrorism. The exclusionary, anti-pluralist, and xenophobic nature of such demands poses a threat to the democratic order of liberal states.

Research shows that accommodating populist governments and parties that contest the EU and its policies by appealing to illiberal, nationalist ideas of Europe as a fortress against globalization and foreign cultures has only strengthened them. Liberal institutions have to deliver, though. To tackle the challenges of migration, the EU has to reform its common asylum and migration system. This requires unanimity, giving populist governments a veto. Amidst millions of Ukrainians seeking to escape the war, Poland might abandon its opposition to sharing responsibility for asylum seekers and refugees in the EU. Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán will never come around. Member states that prefer national unilateralism over cooperation on and compliance with EU policies and institutions should be given the opportunity to exit parts of the EU, such as Schengen, the Eurozone, or the European Research Area. Putting a price tag on contesting the fundamentals of the EU as a liberal community of law might help unite the "reformers," the "withdrawers," and the "push-backers" among the member states behind principles of solidarity, liberty, and humanity against the populist "dissenters."

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**And a last conceptual and terminological question: our program is called the Illiberalism Studies Program. Where do you see the heuristic value of the term illiberalism compared to the more widespread use of populism or far right?**

Illiberalism is a good concept for bringing many different contestations of the liberal script together. For some purposes, this is certainly useful. We seek, however, to avoid the dichotomy of liberalism and illiberalism by using scripts as a generic concept that allows us to capture liberal orders in their temporal and spatial varieties as well as non- and illiberal alternatives. The value-added is threefold. First, we can understand and capture alternative scripts in their own right and not only as an antipode to the liberal script. There is a long tendency to conceptualize authoritarian regimes as the absence of democracy. We believe, however, that most political systems have their own normative foundations, whether we like them or not. Scripts allow us to grasp these foundations in an unbiased way. Second, there may be alternative scripts that combine liberal components in different ways and, therefore, cannot be labeled as illiberal. Finally, some illiberal contestations come in the name of liberal principles such as "freedom" or "the will of the people." In the context of our project, we, therefore, seek to avoid the binary of liberal vs. illiberal.



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## Bruno Tertrais on Geopolitics and the Past

*Originally published June 9, 2022*

**Bruno, you have published *The Revenge of History (La revanche de l'histoire)*, a book devoted to the role of the past in today's world. Do you see the "return of the past" as an unavoidable element of globalized societies in which everything is or seems to be immediate?**

Yes, that is a major reason. When things spin around you, you need something to which to anchor yourself. We had twenty years of rapid globalization, from the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the opening of China to the financial crisis of the early 2010s, resulting in massive flows of people, goods, services, and data. Added to that was the now-constant flow of instant information and images. We can discuss whether history is "accelerating," but there is an impression that it is. This has triggered identity crises around the world. The past is a mooring.

But it is also a "revenge" in the sense that just like individuals, states that have not come to terms with their past, or that have tried to push it under the rug, are inclined to be imbalanced. And they may be more inclined to repeat the same mistakes. One might say that countries, just like individuals, can suffer from neuroses... There is a kernel of truth in Santayana's dictum that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," although it is incomplete: it is one thing to remember the past, it is another to look it in the face and grapple with it. I prefer Winston Churchill, who wrote "those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

**How is this "revenge of the past" connected to the notion of geopolitics? The past is not only about time, but also about space, correct? Why does territory matter in the nostalgia tsunami we are witnessing around the globe?**

The past serves not only as an identity-building device, but also as a justification for a political project. Territory matters in three different ways. First, territory is "home." Globalization and the rise of the info-or data-sphere reinforce the need for individuals and nations to feel territorially anchored. Second, acquiring territory—whether "lost" or "new"—is the most visually impressive instrument of imperialism. Third, territory is also about resources. Retreating from a globalized world means ensuring that you are less dependent on foreign countries for gas, for oil, for rice, for wheat. And resources may include population: for Russia, the annexation of Crimea meant that two million more people became citizens.

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I would distinguish between what I call “sick empires” and “healed empires.” Russia, China, and, to a certain extent, Turkey have not come to terms with their pasts. Russia is even actively rewriting its past, to the point that one recalls the old Soviet trope: its past has become “unpredictable.” Meanwhile, former Western empires, from Belgium to Japan, have been able to “heal.”

**Where do you see similarities and divergences in the ways that Putin’s Russia and Xi’s China are using their respective pasts to claim the right to revisit their status on the international scene?**

First, they both use founding myths—with the help of history and archeology—to sustain their territorial claims on land and at sea, from Crimea to the South China Sea. While they are not (yet?) totalitarian regimes in Hannah Arendt’s sense, their national narratives now come uncomfortably close to those of the 20th century. One cannot help but recall that in 1935, the Nazi regime created the *Ahnenerbe*, or Ancestral Heritage, a scholarly department devoted to hunting down and publishing archaeological evidence of the purity and superiority of the Aryan race and its past settlement in much of Central and Eastern Europe.

The second way they use the past is through the claim of having been “humiliated by the West.” Russian claims are essentially about the recent past—that is, the late 20th century and the “lost decade” of the 1990s. Chinese claims are more about European colonialism of the 19th century.

Other differences relate to the nature of these neo-empires (Russia is an inclusive country, whereas China represses minorities) and their expression (China mostly makes maritime claims and, throughout the world, relies mostly on economic power).

**Russia’s war against Ukraine is entirely framed as analogous to the Second World War. For their part, Ukraine and many Western observers also use historical analogies to denounce Russia as repeating Nazi Germany’s crimes. Why do we need to refer to the past to make sense of events today?**

We need the past to make sense of the present, and also, obviously, to justify ourselves—including, in the cases of Russia and Ukraine, to mobilize national populations. There is no better time than war to do so.

Russia has referred to the past ad nauseam. In 2014, Putin described Crimea as the cradle of the country. Today, references range from the old Kievan Rus’, allegedly the predecessor of Russia—although it is in fact the polity that also gave birth to Belarus and Ukraine—to Catherine the Great’s New Russia (the South-Eastern part of Ukraine) to, of course, the fight against Nazism. The May 9 parade was a reminder that, under Putin, the “Great Patriotic War” has replaced the Leninist revolution as the most important event to commemorate—even as the Kremlin has suppressed memories of Stalinism by dissolving Memorial. That is, of course, an approach straight out of the Orwellian playbook: dictatorships control

the present, which allows them to control how the past is taught, which in turns influences the nation's culture and thus its future.

*An approach straight out of the Orwellian playbook: dictatorships control the present, which allows them to control how the past is taught, which in turns influences the nation's culture and thus its future.*

Ukraine consolidates its national identity by referring to the heroic times of the Hetmanate and the Cossacks—even though they often acted as mercenaries who would fight for Poland or Russia as well as Ukraine. The irony is that Ukraine could now turn the myth of the Great Patriotic War against Russia...

**Is it possible to rebuild a *récit national* that would be meaningful today but still forward-looking, not backward-looking?**

Most major Western countries—in particular those with an imperial past—have their history wars, and France is no exception. I propose to distinguish the *récit national* (a useful narrative) from the *roman national* (a debatable fiction). Granted, this distinction is not always clear-cut.

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In France, we used to teach children about “our ancestors the Gauls.” It’s obviously a myth or a half-truth. Myths may be useful for national cohesion—just as the Ukrainians of today like to think of Cossacks as their ancestors—but this one goes a trifle too far. Or take the baptism of Clovis: this too was taught in all French schools as a fundamental step in the existence of France, even though Clovis was no more “French” than he was “German.” Also debatable is the idea that Charles Martel, by defeating the Arabs at Poitiers, singlehandedly halted the Islamic invasion of Europe.

In the end, there remains a difference between an embellished fact and an outright lie or fantasy—such as, say, when Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov rehashes an old conspiracy theory according to which Hitler was of Jewish ancestry. So the *récit national* is, for me, something in between such nonsense, on one end of the spectrum, and a history that seeks to do away with all the founding myths of a nation, on the other end.

My preference is to emphasize those key moments of national history that have both symbolic and real significance, such as, for France, the battle of Valmy, the creation of mandatory schooling by Jules Ferry, the law of separation of Church and State... or the defeat of 1940, a national trauma if ever there was one. But what matters the most is teaching pupils how to think critically.

There are many ways to cope with the past, including with national traumas. A good example at one end of the spectrum is South Africa’s famous “Truth and Reconciliation Commission.” At the other end is Spain’s “Pacto de Olvido,” the Pact of Forgetfulness. There is no good or bad way; it depends on cultures and moments. We constantly need to fine-tune and find the right balance between never forgetting the past and living a life that is free of the burden of the past, failing which we risk getting stuck in a time warp.

**How is the past connected to the rise of populism and illiberalism? Could you discuss the terminological overlaps and gaps and why you think insisting on the past is a more relevant prism?**

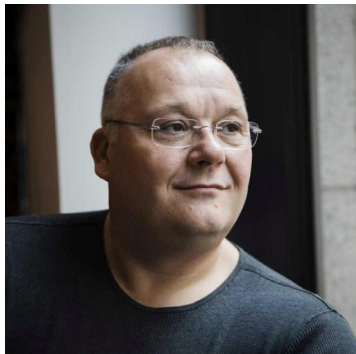
There is an intense debate about the origins and causes of populism and illiberalism, and that may be partly because they are flexible and rather vague notions. The economic context generally matters, but not always. I believe they are most often about identity, and identity is always connected—one way or another—to the past.

## Biographies



**Jean-Yves Camus** is a Senior Fellow at the Center for the Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) and the Director of the Observatory of Political Radicalism at Foundation Jean Jaures. He also sits on the Scientific Board of the Délégation interministérielle pour la lutte contre le racisme, l'antisémitisme et la lutte contre l'homophobie (DILCRAH). Prior to this, he was the research director at the European Center for Research on Racism and Anti-Semitism (CERA) in Paris. He is the author of seven books in French about the Front National and the Radical Right in France, including *Les roits nationales et radicales en France* (1992, with René Monzat); *Le Front national, histoire et analyse* (Éditions Olivier Laurens, 1996), *Le Front national* (Éditions Milan), and *Extrémismes en France : faut-il en avoir peur ?* (Éditions Milan, 2006). He has edited *Les Extrémismes en Europe* (La Tour d'Aigues, éditions de l'Aube, 1998). Additionally, Camus has published scholarly articles and opinion pieces on the Front National, the Radical Right, anti-Semitism, and racism

in France and has contributed to many edited volumes in English, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and other languages. With Nicolas Lebourg, he recently co-authored *The Extremes Rights in Europe* (Harvard University Press, 2017).

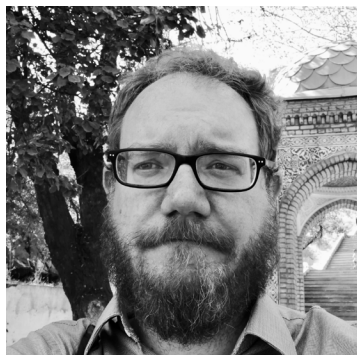


**Cas Mudde** was born in the Netherlands, where he gained his M.A. and Ph.D. in Political Science at Leiden University, under the supervision of the late Peter Mair. Before moving to the US in 2008, to join his wife, he held tenure-track positions at Central European University (Hungary), the University of Edinburgh (UK), and the University of Antwerp (Belgium). Before coming to the University of Georgia in 2012, he held temporary positions at the University of Oregon, University of Notre Dame, and DePauw University. He has also held visiting positions at Berlin Social Science Center (Germany), Charles University (Czech Republic), University of Amsterdam/Free University Amsterdam (The Netherlands), Academia Istropolitana (Slovakia), James I University (Spain), Malmö University (Sweden), Cornell University, and Rutgers University (US).



**David Lewis** is Associate Professor of International Relations in the Department of Politics at the University of Exeter. Before joining the University of Exeter, David held academic posts in the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, and worked for the International Crisis Group in Central Asia and in Sri Lanka. He has written extensively on politics and security in Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus, and on different aspects of international relations and peace and conflict studies. His books include *The Temptations of Tyranny in Central Asia* (Hurst, 2008) and *Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020). His recent research has been on the rise of illiberal ideas and authoritarian practices in global politics, particularly in relation to conflict management and peace-making.





**Noah Tucker** is a program associate at George Washington University's Elliot School of International Affairs Central Asia Program and Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council Eurasia Center. He was previously Executive Editor for the *Not in Our Name* film and television series, the first region-wide project designed to prevent violent extremism in Central Asia through community dialogues in areas most directly affected by recruiting to Syria. Noah has worked as a consultant on multiple collaborative projects for government, academic and international organizations to identify the way social and religious groups affect political and security outcomes in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Recent publications include "*Terrorism without a God: Reconsidering Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization Models in Central Asia*" (GWU Central Asia Program September 2019). Noah has worked on Central Asian issues since 2002—specializing in religion, national identity, ethnic conflict and social media—and received an MA from Harvard in Russian,

East European and Central Asian Studies in 2008. He has spent some six years living and working in in the region, primarily in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and works in Russian and Uzbek. He most recently conducted fieldwork on reintegration efforts for returnees from the Syrian conflict in Uzbekistan in March-May 2020.



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with E. Berger); *The Politics of Fear. What Right-wing Populist Discourses Mean* (Sage, 2015; translated into the German, Russian, Bosnian, and Japanese); *The discourse of politics in action: 'Politics as Usual'* (Palgrave, revised 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2011; translated into the Chinese); *Methods of CDS* (Sage 2016, with M. Meyer; 3<sup>rd</sup> revised edition, translated into the Korean, Spanish, and Arabic); *Migration, Identity and Belonging* (LUP 2011, with G. Delanty, P. Jones); *The Discursive Construction of History. Remembering the German Wehrmacht's War of Annihilation* (Palgrave 2008; with H. Heer, W. Manoschek, A. Pollak); *The Politics of Exclusion. Debating Migration in Austria* (Transaction Press 2009; with M. Krzyżanowski); *The SAGE Handbook of Sociolinguistics* (Sage 2010; with B. Johnstone, P. Kerswill); *Analyzing Fascist Discourse. Fascism in Talk and Text* (Routledge 2013; with J E Richardson), and *Rightwing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse* (Bloomsbury 2013; with M. KhosraviNik, B. Mral). See <http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/profiles/Ruth-Wodak> for more information.

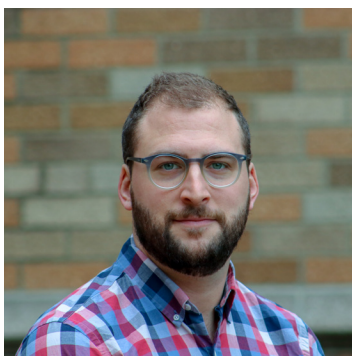


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