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Vol. 2 No. 1 (2022)

Table of Contents

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Exploring the Topography of the Authoritarian: Populism, Illiberalism, and Authoritarianism GÜNTER FRANKENBERG | 1 |
| Guillaume Faye (1949-2019): At the Forefront of a New Theory of White Nationalism STÉPHANE FRANÇOIS AND ADRIEN NONJON | 17 |
| Illiberal Forces Against Democracy in Georgia ZARINA BURKADZE | 31 |
| The Transnational Networks of the European Radical Populist Right and the Beacon of Hungarian Illiberal Democracy JEAN-YVES CAMUS..... | 47 |
| The Birth of an Illiberal Informational Autocracy in Europe: A Case Study on Hungary PÉTER KREKÓ | 55 |
| State Ideology, Science, and Pseudoscience in Russia BAASANJAV TERBISH..... | 73 |



Exploring the Topography of the Authoritarian: Populism, Illiberalism, and Authoritarianism

GÜNTER FRANKENBERG

Abstract

“Democratic regression,” the “retreat of western liberalism,” the “return” or “renaissance” of authoritarianism or the “third wave of autocratization” – these are some of the many labels for diverse phenomena – or problems of authority – that plague societies in the Global North and South. Commonly, such problems of authority are specified as pathological practices of corruption or institutional defects, deviant forms of governance or pathological symptoms of representation and participation. Their semantic specification and interpretive framework are delivered by three camps – with contested, porous borders and considerable intersections and agreements – under the signifier illiberalism, populism or authoritarianism. All of them claim, each camp speaking from its peculiar vantage point, the authority to interpret the phenomena mentioned above. In this article the “properties” – advantages and failures – of the three frameworks are discussed and brought into a conversation with one another.

Keywords: Populism, Illiberalism, Authoritarianism

“... commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants.”¹

Problems of Authority

Global or local “democratic regression,” the “retreat of Western liberalism,”² the “return” or “renaissance” of authoritarianism, or the “third wave of autocratization”³—these are some of the many labels for diverse phenomena that plague societies in the Global North and South alike. These phenomena are internally related to the question of who is entitled to decide with ultimate authority about, primarily, the distribution of freedom, the recognition of identity, and the access to common goods. Commonly, such problems of authority are specified as practices of corruption or institutional defects, deviant forms of governance or pathological symptoms of representation and participation.⁴ These pathologies extend over a wide horizon and cover an uneven topography. In short, their semantic specification and interpretive framework can be divided into three camps—with contested, porous borders and considerable intersections and agreements—under the labels of *illiberalism*, *populism*, or *authoritarianism*.⁵ All of them claim, with each camp speaking from its peculiar vantage point, the authority to interpret the practices of autocratic regimes, the agendas of right-wing populist parties, and authoritarian attitudes in general.

Depending on the breadth of one’s perspective how apocalyptic one’s outlook is, the death, decay, deficits, or defects of democracy,⁶ and the corresponding upsurge of

1 Alexander Hamilton, Federalist No. 1, “General Introduction,” in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay (New York: The New American Library, Inc., [1787] 1961), 35: “History will teach us . . . that of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants.” In the following I draw on my previous work: *Authoritarianism—Constitutional Perspectives* (E. Elgar, 2020) and the introduction, co-authored with Wilhelm Heitmeyer, to *Treiber des Autoritären—Pfade des Autoritarismus im 21. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt: Campus, forthcoming 2022). I am indebted to Christopher Ellison’s thoughtful editing of the manuscript.

2 Armin Schäfer and Michael Zürn, *Die demokratische Regression* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-021-00336-0>; Edward Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism* (New York: Abacus, 2017); similarly: Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

3 Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New about It?” in: *Democratization*, 26 (2019), 1095–1113, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582020>. See Frankenberg, *Authoritarianism*, x–xi, 46–52, for further references.

4 See, for example, Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy: After the Crises* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2020); Wendy Brown et al., *Authoritarianism: Three Inquiries in Critical Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Adam Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Luce, *The Retreat of Western Liberalism*; Milan Vaishnav, “The Decay of the Indian Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 2 (March 2021), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2021-03-18/decay-indian-democracy/>.

5 See, for example, Larry Diamond et al., *Authoritarianism Goes Global* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016); Erica Frantz, *Authoritarianism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Jasper Kauth and Desmond King, “Illiberalism,” *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 69, No. 3 (December 2020): 365–405, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975620000181>; Frankenberg, *Authoritarianism*; Karin Priester, *Populismus: Historische und aktuelle Erscheinungsformen* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2007); Sheri Berman, “The Causes of Populism in the West,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 24, no. 1 (2021): 71–88, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-102503>; and Anna Lührmann and Sebastian Hellmeier, eds., “Populismus, Nationalismus und Illiberalismus: Herausforderung für Demokratie und Zivilgesellschaft,” Heinrich Böll Foundation (February 2020), https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2020-03/E-Paper_DE_2_hbs_V-Dem_FINAL.pdf.

6 For variations on the apocalyptic tone, see Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save it* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018), https://edisciplinas.usp.br/pluginfile.php/5750882/mod_resource/content/1/Yasha%20Mounk%202018.pdf; Stephen Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Broadway Books, 2018); Aziz Huq and Tom Ginsburg, “How to Lose a Constitutional Democracy,” *UCLA Law Review* 65 (2018): 78–169. See: https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=13666&context=journal_articles/, and the sober analyses provided by Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here” and Jan-Werner Müller, *What is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

authoritarian regimes,⁷ are primarily ascribed to “stress fractures” in the structures of national governance, the rule of law, or the welfare state, or to dramatic failures of democracy as both a form of governance and way of life. Other factors that come into view are the downsides of dynamic of capitalism (urbanization, deforestation, privatization of public health, and other economic “takings”), and the negative impact of globalization. Whatever cause is named, it is said to generate a widespread anxiety that matters are out of control and the system or its ruling elites are not able to cope with the problems and guarantee security.⁸ Whether theories are narrowly focused on the national context or global in scope, they principally hold *crises* responsible for giving rise to scores of attitudes and practices,⁹ aspirations and movements¹⁰ defined as authoritarian, illiberal, or populist. What is more, crises that generate a feeling of insecurity and sense of collective helplessness tend to drive people into the camps of authoritarian movements and parties, provided they promise security.¹¹

While this trinity of terms has forcefully accompanied the triumph of the authoritarian, it is neither holy nor exempt from criticism. These concepts call for further clarification and they must pass the test of whether they are not only popular but also “right” and whether they are a “good fit.” Therefore, their profiling will need to respond to the extent to which labels and interpretations such as populist, illiberal, or authoritarian address the global nature of the phenomena and also take account of their contextual specificity: whether they adequately differentiate between ideologies and practices; the attitudes and agendas of authoritarianism; and whether their conceptualization truly reflects the everyday experience of authoritarianism.

Populism

In academia, lively theoretical-methodological debates testify to the focus on and interest in categories or concepts, while handbooks¹² certify the status of a given subject matter as a legitimate field of research. Accordingly, populism has not only troubled the “outside world” but has also occupied a firm position on the research agendas of the social since the end of the Cold War. As a matter of fact, interest in it has soared, making it one of the most frequently researched topics in the social sciences generally and in political science in particular, producing a library of publications that accommodate an overabundance of diverse conceptualizations, definitions, descriptions, and explanations. Nevertheless, the concept of populism has remained

⁷ Frankenberg, *Authoritarianism*, x-xi.

⁸ Wilhelm Heitmeyer, *Autoritäre Versuchungen* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018) discusses land grabs and loss of control; Przeworski, *Crises of Democracy*, discusses democracy’s loss of credibility among a disenfranchised electorate and the rise of far-right parties; Guillermo O’Donnell, “The Perpetual Crisis of Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy*, (January 18, 2007): 5-11, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2007.0012>, describes a more or less unsatisfactory present and a future of still unfulfilled possibilities; Günter Frankenberg, “The Negative Globality of Fear” (forthcoming in 2022) deals with the loss of control generating individual and collective fears and conspiracy theories.

⁹ To provide a random sample of the crisis aspects: voter suppression and manipulation of elections in the United States by new election laws: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/crisis-democracy-us-2022/>; competing logics of democracy and the nation-state (China); restrictions on political freedom: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/democracy>.

¹⁰ On the spawning of far-right and neo-fascist movements in European countries, see Thomas Greven, “The Rise of Right-Wing Movements in Europe and the United States” (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Foundation, 2016): http://dc.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/RightwingPopulism.pdf.

¹¹ Munich Security Conference, *Munich Democracy Index 2022*, February 20, 2022: https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/MunichSecurityIndex2021_Appendix.pdf.

¹² Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.001.0001>; Carlos de la Torre, *The Routledge Handbook of Global Populism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); forthcoming: Michael Oswald ed., *The Palgrave Handbook of Populism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2022).

elusive and intensely contested. Even after many empirical studies¹³ of populist movements and parties as well as theoretical explanations of their constituencies, structures, and guiding ideas,¹⁴ the *theoretical* enterprise of populism is left unable to offer a consensual pattern of interpretation. While the conceptual combination of a popular program with an appeal to the imagined, authentic community of the people¹⁵ is prominent as a source of legitimacy, the overall picture—especially of populist attitudes—is dominated by controversial definitional “placemats” and a variety of not always compatible criteria.¹⁶ These frequently delineate a basic political stance that invokes a radical opposition to the ruling elites in politics, economics, culture, and society, though. This worldview or ideology claims for itself the right to recognize and represent the authentic will of the people in a Manichean world populated by the true, virtuous citizens on one side, and the self-serving establishment on the other. Mostly unrecognized, populists thus echo the French revolutionary Maximilien Robespierre’s antagonism of the decent people and corrupt magistrate.¹⁷

Despite these palpable conceptual obstacles, populism has remained a popular object of research, albeit guided by an indeterminate core notion. Its academic career is promoted in the social sciences by foundations and grants supporting topical projects.¹⁸ In media coverage and political discourses, populism thrives on the disdain of conceptual precision and the habit of routinely repeating what has always already been said or written. However, the evasiveness of populism is not only due to a lack of empirical research or theoretical rigor, but also to its “nature” as a collective singular and to the wide range of phenomena covered by its semantic umbrella: the label of populism can be stretched to cover movements, parties, leaders, and regimes that promote democracy (inclusionary populism) as well as those that undermine it (exclusionary populism). As a global phenomenon,¹⁹ it covers practices and programs on the more right-wing or more left-wing fringes of the conventional

13 See, for example, Donatella Della Porta et al., *Movement Parties against Austerity* (London: Polity Press, 2017); Karin Priester, *Populismus—Historische und aktuelle Erscheinungsformen* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2007); Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser/Steven M. Van Hauwaert, “The Populist Citizen: Empirical Evidence from Europe and Latin America,” *European Political Science Review* 12, no. 1 (December 2020): 1-18, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773919000262>; Anne Schulz et al., “Measuring Populist Attitudes on Three Dimensions,” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 30, no. 2 (2018): 316-26, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edw037>.

14 From the innumerable publications see only Margaret Canovan, *Populism*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), and Canovan, “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy,” *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (1999): 2-16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00184>; Cas Mudde and Cristóbal R. Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:9780190234874.001.0001>; Müller, *What is Populism?*; for further references, see Schäfer and Zürn, *Die demokratische Regression*, 59-88.

15 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983); Müller, *What is Populism?*

16 See, for example, Bruno Castanho Silva et al., “An Empirical Comparison of Seven Populist Attitude Scales,” *Political Research Quarterly*, 73, no. 2 (2020): 409-424, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912919833176>.

17 “Tout institution qui ne suppose pas le peuple bon et le magistrat corruptible est vicieuse.” (“Any institution that does not presume the people to be good and the magistrate to be corruptible is wicked.”) Source: Art. XIX of the *Déclaration* proposed by Robespierre in 1793, <https://quotepark.com/quotes/1758708-maximilien-robspierre-any-institution-which-does-not-suppose-the-people/>.

18 See Hans Jürgen Puhle, “Populism and Democracy in the 21st Century,” SCRIPTS Working Papers, no. 2, SCRIPTS Berlin, 2021, <https://www.scripts-berlin.eu/publications/working-paper-series/Working-Paper-No.-2-2020/index.html>; and Lüthmann and Hellmeier, “Populismus, Nationalismus und Illiberalismus,” with references.

19 See, for example, Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016); Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422412>; Danielle Resnick, “Populist Politics in Africa,” *Politics* (August 28, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:9780190228637.013.699>; Benjamin Moffitt, “Contemporary Populism and ‘The People’ in the Asia-Pacific Region,” in *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives*, ed. Carlos de la Torre (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), 293-316, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt12880g5>.

political coordinate system and may even include the rarer cases of centrist agendas. Demagogues and tyrants as well as racist and ethnocentric, xenophobic, misogynist and homophobic movements, popular and unpopular heads of state and regimes gather under this umbrella. No wonder then that researchers and theoreticians find it difficult to manage the vast and uneven array of data and interpretive aspects, and offer tableaus rather than profiles of populism. Still, it remains a popular, albeit highly indeterminate term.

In the constantly ballooning discourse on populism, one sometimes misses the willingness to adjust the grammar of populism more sharply to the different political levels and contexts of its application. Movements, parties, and regimes should be differentiated first, because it is fair to assume that oppositional life—worlds, party milieus and their organizational constraints—as well as governmental responsibilities shape different forms of populist programming and styles of action.

It might be helpful to reduce complexity by contrasting some of the most prevalent modalities of populism. First and foremost, populism describes a *style* of political mobilization that targets marginalized or disenfranchised groups, such as early Peronism, Chavism, or more recently the new left-wing Podemos political party in Spain. While this style may have democratic connotations even if operates in the name of an imaginary “people” as a strategy to gain or hold onto power,²⁰ it qualifies merely as raw, updated Machiavellianism, exemplified by the people’s parties in Denmark, Sweden, and Switzerland; the right-wing parties Fidesz in Hungary, Rassemblement National in France, Lega in Italy, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in Britain, and the Alternative for Germany (Alternativ für Deutschland)—not to mention former US President Donald Trump’s ruthless election campaigns in 2016 and 2020. These styles and strategies are supported by rhetoric (too often labeled populist) and worldviews, however crude, designed to activate resentment (against elites, “the system,” minorities, asylum seekers, the “*Lügenpresse*,” [“lying press”] etc.) in order to invoke an imaginary collective identity for the phantasm of the authentic people or nation.

It is striking that these diverse populisms, which can be roughly characterized as mostly dangerous to democracy, compared to some positively corrective deviations from normal democratic standards, operate predominantly without a clear concept of constitutionalism. Therefore, they usually call up and claim to represent the “rights” of their followers (the people). Accordingly, populists invoke an imaginary community not based on a social contract or membership but essentially rooted in racial, ethnic, religious, or other identities such as white Americans, Polish Catholic patriots, ethnic Germans, or Hindu nationalists.²¹ Such “rights” do not function as defensive rights against unlawful state encroachments, but as expressions of the fantasized sovereign, common will—or nation—that overcomes the authority of politics and policies. By the same token, these “rights” supersede rule-of-law constraints and constitutional principles, particularly in the rhetoric and agenda of right-wing populist movements characterized by a “leader’s charisma, theatrics, and transgression of accepted norms”.²²

20 Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2019); Frankenberg, *Authoritarianism*, 52-63.

21 Regarding the different phantasms of class, race, ethnic, religious, and other communities, see Frankenberg, *Authoritarianism*, 226-233; Dwijendra N. Jha, *Rethinking Hindu Identity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

22 Resnick, “Populist Politics in Africa.”

Right-wing populism, which can only tentatively be classified,²³ has been described quite often as a form of authoritarianism that comes with only a “thin ideology.”²⁴ The widely-held assumption of a thin ideology can be countered, though, by the fact that populist (more precisely: authoritarian) aspirations are not only characterized by their political style and strategies aimed at gaining power; they also offer a set of ideas, a specific understanding of politics and democracy, or even a basic pattern and frame of reference for interpreting social reality that is not limited to criticism of elites and deficits of the democratic process.²⁵ Populists may not provide a complete system of ideas, a *Weltanschauung*, like socialism or fascism, or a comprehensive set of cultural beliefs that functions as a well-founded critique of particular social arrangements, like patterns of inequality or unjustified domination. However, dismissing populism because of its inevitable reference to “the people” as being merely a “thin ideology,” or referring to Robespierre’s own thin dichotomy of people and magistrate, is not nearly subtle enough of an approach to be able to come to grips with the diversity of both global and context-specific phenomena. The picture gets more intricate if one combines populist theory and practice, aspirations and descriptions, agendas and attitudes, and if one relates this combination to ideological features of populist movements: in particular, anti-elitism and anti-pluralism, the cult of direct communication between leaders and followers, strands of xenophobic nationalism, and the phantasm of imaginary commonality. This way, the description of populism gets more ambiguous and moves away from its misdirected democratic grassroots orientation. Thus, the diagnosis of “populism” comes close to accepting the interpretive offers from the camp of authoritarianism.

Finally, populism may be misunderstood as operating with a thin ideology because populist leaders and movements tend to have no patience for the present. Instead, they combine an orientation to the future with an orientation to the past. They promise to “bring back” a time of glory they claim has been lost, like England’s freedom from EU tutelage, America’s status as world power no. 1, a Germany or Hungary without an influx of refugees, a neo-Ottoman Turkey leading the Muslim world, etc.²⁶ And they promise security, progress, wealth, and “to return the scepter of democracy to its rightful owner”—the people.²⁷ Populist ideology, one might say, is not thin but going through a permanent process of becoming.

23 Anton Pelinka, “Right-Wing Populism: Concept and Typology,” in *Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse*, ed. Ruth Wodak et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2013): 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781472544940.ch-001>.

24 The “thin ideology” thesis is elaborated in the influential articles of Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541-563, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x>; and Ben Stanley, “The Thin Ideology of Populism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 1 (2008): 95-110, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310701822289>. For a different view, see Mark Elchardus and Bram Spruyt, “Populism, Persistent Republicanism and Declinism: An Empirical Analysis of Populism as a Thin Ideology,” *Government and Opposition* 51, no. 1 (2016): 111-133, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2014.27>.

25 For a critique of the thin ideology thesis, see Frankenberg, *Authoritarianism*, 54-56 and 85-91; Urbinati, “Political Theory of Populism”; and Schäfer and Zürn, *Die demokratische Regression*, 64-73.

26 Yilmaz, Ihsan. (2021). “Erdogan’s Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist.” *ECPS Leader Profiles. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS)*. February 14, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.55271/lp0007>.

27 Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell, eds., *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 219, https://www.pacedifesa.org/public/documents/21century_populism.pdf; see also Serghiu Gherghina et al., *Contemporary Populism: A Controversial Concept and Its Diverse Forms* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

Exploring the Topography of the Authoritarian

According to a series of surveys and studies that were analyzed in a meta-study by the Centre for the Future of Democracy at the University of Cambridge,²⁸ a decline in support for democracy was diagnosed in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, in Southern European countries, and in so-called maturing democracies of Latin America. While in some countries people doubted the performance of democracy as a form of government and way of life, it appears that in others the euphoria of the transition years has faded and at the same time the unresolved challenges of corruption, inter-group conflicts, and urban violence have remained unresolved. Only at first glance does it seem paradoxical that the rise of democratic disenchantment has been accompanied, since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, by a populist anticlimax: populist leaders and parties have seen their poll numbers fall and elections lost:

That populism has become discredited at a time of eroding support for democracy may initially seem to present us with a paradox. But in reality, these are two sides of the same coin. It is precisely the inadequacy of elected politicians—including, above all, elected populists—to offer solutions to the pandemic that explains why enthusiasm for democratic government has waned, and why populists have fallen from favour.²⁹

Illiberalism

As compared to the populist crescendo, the neologism *illiberalism* comes along on a quiet footing. Apart from a few exceptions in politics, the debates surrounding this phenomenon have so far remained chiefly academic. This may be due to the fact that illiberalism's conceptual dissemination is more recent and therefore probably still needs to solidify its semantic field and its status as an object of serious research. However, *illiberal* is a qualifier that has come to be more widely used within contemporary political, legal, and philosophical scholarship. For example, authors might speak of illiberal cultures and beliefs, illiberal groups and attitudes, or illiberal states and democracies.³⁰ Despite its more common usage, few in-depth discussions exist that elaborate exactly what it means for a person or group, a regime or institution, to be illiberal. Nevertheless, the methodologically varying surveys of the world of governance, democracy, and rule of law count about eighty illiberal democracies.³¹ Yet the feverish labeling activity of the social sciences may also classify them as “weak democracies,” “autocracies,” “failed democracies,” “backsliding

28 R. S. Foa et al., “The Great Reset: Public Opinion, Populism and the Pandemic” (Cambridge, UK: Centre for the Future of Democracy, January 2022), https://luminategroup.com/storage/1443/The_Great_Reset_Public_Opinion_Populism_and_the_Pandemic.pdf.

29 Centre for the Future of Democracy, “The Great Reset,” 16.

30 Bouke de Vries, “What Does It Mean to Be ‘Illiberal’?,” *Netherlands Journal of Legal Philosophy* vol. 50, no. 1 (2021): 13–21, <https://doi.org/10.5553/NJLP/000102>, with references; Marlène Laruelle, “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction,” *East European Politics* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

31 Bertelsmann Foundation, ed., *Transformation Index* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 2020); International IDEA, *The Global State of Democracy 2021: Building Resilience in a Pandemic Era* (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021), <https://www.idea.int/gsod/>.

countries,” or “democracies in decay”—depending on their development and, more importantly, on the researchers’ perspective and conceptual preference.³²

Fareed Zakaria’s article on “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” relying on Freedom House data, is widely regarded as the publication that opened the current debate.³³ It signaled a changed perception of the problems mentioned in the beginning—and distinct from the populist vision—and brought constitutionalism back in to define one of illiberalism’s failings. Zakaria basically argued that some democratically-elected regimes routinely ignore the constitutional limits of their power and deprive the citizenry of their fundamental rights and freedoms.³⁴ In other works, the emphasis has been placed somewhat more differently on the theory and regional analyses of “embedded” and “defective democracies.”³⁵ Starting from the normatively demanding concept of an institutionally “embedded democracy,” some authors examine the functional properties and stability conditions of democratic systems (beginning with the former socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe) in order to identify their defects. Defects in terms of separation of powers, political liberties, and the rule of law generally justify the qualification of “illiberal,” although elections (albeit rigged) take place. Populism’s pivotal and problematic category of “the people” is replaced by “elections” in the illiberalism camp, so it seems.

While populism, well advanced in years, well established in academia, and supported by the media, may calmly weather the storm of ever new categories, illiberalism will yet have to defend its status as a field of research. That Hungarian Premier Viktor Orbán, in his 2014 speech in Băile Tușnad (an ethnic Hungarian enclave in the heart of Romania), propagated the agenda of building an “illiberal state” within the European Union is not likely to advance the category’s academic career.³⁶ With a number of recent publications, notably the weighty *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*³⁷ and the *Journal of Illiberalism Studies*,³⁸ the discourse on illiberalism can be expected to gain momentum, but will also have to deal with a dazzling multiplicity of classifications and readings.

32 See Abraham Diskin et al., “Why Democracies Collapse: The Reasons for Failure and Success,” *International Political Science Review* 26, no. 3 (2005): 291-309, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512105053787>; Nazifa Alizada et al., *Autocratization Turns Viral: Democracy Report 2021* (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg V-Dem Institute, 2021), https://www.v-dem.net/static/website/files/dr/dr_2021.pdf; Tom Daly, “Democratic Decay: Conceptualising an Emerging Research Field,” *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, 11 (2019): 9–36, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-019-00086-2>; Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman, *Backsliding: Democratic Regress in the Contemporary World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021); David Andersen, “Comparative Democratization and Democratic Backsliding: The Case for a Historical-Institutional Approach,” *Comparative Politics* 51, no. 4 (2019): 645-663, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26663952>.

33 Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no.6 (1997): 22-43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20048274>; see also Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2003). Unlike *illiberalism*, the term *illiberal* is not new; see, for instance, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, “Der Dichter und diese Zeit“ [1906], in: *Gesammelte Werke I*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1979: 54.

34 Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” 22.

35 Wolfgang Merkel et al., eds., *Defekte Demokratie. Vol. 1: Theorie* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2003); Wolfgang Merkel et al., eds., *Defekte Demokratie. Bd. 2: Regionalanalysen* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2006); Wolfgang Merkel, “Embedded and Defective Democracies,” *Democratization* 11, no. 5 (2004): 33-58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340412331304598>.

36 See Renáta Uitz, “Can You Tell When an Illiberal Democracy Is in the Making?,” *J-COIN* 13, no. 1 (2015): 279-300, <https://doi.org/10.1093/icon/mov012>.

37 András Sajó, Renáta Uitz, and Stephen Holmes, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* (New York/London: Routledge, 2021); Lührmann and Hellmeier, “Populismus, Nationalismus und Illiberalismus”; Kauth and King, “Illiberalism”; Thomas J. Main, *The Rise of Illiberalism* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2022).

38 Published by the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University.

Exploring the Topography of the Authoritarian

The *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism* brings together in its more than 60 entries written by an even greater number of contributors a considerable plurality of theoretical perspectives and an impressive collection of diverse, illiberal phenomena: from theocracy to military regimes, from electoral democracies to those based on Bonapartist referendums, and more. Without a doubt, these will present a more multifaceted, if also more confusing, picture of illiberalism, especially since no coherent theoretical outline (which could have been provided by the editors) unites them into a single paradigm. Stephen Holmes, one of the editors of the *Routledge Handbook*, tries to carve out a research space for illiberalism by bringing to the fore the illiberal disdain of “liberal habits of tolerance, dissent, debate and openness” and hostility to liberal individualism and universalism.³⁹ András Sajó, another editor, focuses on what populist governments actually do once they are in power and activate “the totalitarian potential of democracy.”⁴⁰ As it were in the run-up, Sajó also presented at the same time his monograph *Ruling by Cheating*⁴¹—a committed defense of the use of the term *illiberalism* as a problem signifier with a profound study of governmental practices. There he examines the constitutional structures of illiberal democracies as well as illiberal phenomena in “mature,” and consolidated democracies (a distinction that is not rigorously enforced). He aspires to show that the global trend towards ‘mild despotism’ should not be flagged as authoritarianism, but as an abuse of constitutionalism in violation of rule-of-law principles, and therefore as a form of illiberalism. Clearly, Sajó has in mind the Orbán regime in Hungary; Poland’s government, dominated by Deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński and his Law and Justice party (Polish: *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, or PiS); and probably also autocrats like President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey. Sajó also tries to validate his thesis of a conservative, plebeian, and patriotic constitutional state that includes elements of the rule of law with regard to illiberal democracies in Latin America (especially Chavism in Venezuela and the government of President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil).

The definitional problem for all advocates of the term *illiberalism* as a plausible interpretative category is obvious: they have to ask themselves how to separate the conjoined twins of the liberal and the illiberal, and then disentangle illiberalism as a free-standing object of analysis and critique. One is tempted to recall the unequal brothers Cain and Abel in the biblical creation story, which, as is well known, did not end well for either of them. Cain would be, as it were, the representative of dark illiberalism which, when faced with Abel’s liberal luster of goodness, always casts a gloomy shadow. Thomas J. Main sees illiberalism defined by the fundamental rejection of liberalism due to its repudiation of democratic elections, the rule of law, human rights, and tolerance, which, of course, hardly distinguishes illiberalism from authoritarianism. In addition, Main also calls on the racist Ku Klux Klan and the reactionary movements of the alt-right and so-called Dark Enlightenment as key witnesses advocating illiberalism, although they can hardly be uniformly labeled as false prophets. Rather, they find their unity in the fact that they give in to fascist temptations. A more persuasive solution is presented by Marlène Laruelle, who orders the conceptual field by stressing several ideological components of illiberalism:⁴²

39 Stephen Holmes, “The liberal Idea,” in Sajó et al., *Handbook of Illiberalism*, 3, 4-14.

40 Sajó et al., *Handbook of Illiberalism*, xxiii.

41 András Sajó, *Ruling by Cheating: Governance in Liberal Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108952996>.

42 Laruelle, “Illiberalism.”

Günter Frankenberg

in particular, updating conservative views (nationalism);⁴³ drawing from far-right ideologies (the belief in metapolitics); and advancing a critique of, or rather a polemic against, elements of political liberalism (through anti-parliamentarism, critiques of minority rights, etc.). Moreover, Laruelle moves further away from labeling by carving out “distinct semantic spaces” wherein the term *illiberal* is or can be operationalized: “the policy/think tank world, the political sphere, and academic fields.”⁴⁴

One wonders whether illiberalism carries with it more than a problem of definition, though. It seems that both the toxic political ideology and the abusive practices of regimes labeled “illiberal,” in real life lack the very elements that permit one to dignify them as even modestly or residually constitutional democracies, in light of their grave deficiencies. In the absence of non-monitored political freedoms, guaranteed separation of powers, and working/effective rule-of-law institutions and procedures (above all, an independent judiciary), one might rather be tempted to withhold the label *democracy* or, for that matter, of *liberalism*. If this reticence seems plausible, then Orbán-, Putin-, or Bolsonaro-style “illiberal democracies” would not constitute an alternative in the end, but should rather be seen as an oxymoron⁴⁵ or false label, an opposition to procedural democratic norms⁴⁶ or ideological struggle and distorted echo of Francis Fukuyama’s erroneously anticipated end of history.⁴⁷

Many of the pertinent publications defend the label *illiberalism* to designate a sufficiently independent field of research with borders, albeit contested, over against populism and authoritarianism, and they usually refer to four criteria.⁴⁸ First, most authors define the *formalistic reduction of democracy* through elections. Second, they criticize that this reduced type of *electoral* democracy is decoupled from fundamental, *institutional* preconditions, especially from civil liberties, freedom of choice, and judicial review. Third, illiberalism is then further distinguished insofar as it *denigrates* liberal concepts of equal political freedom and civil liberties for their alleged hypertrophic individualism, and *rejects* the protection of minorities and their “decadent” way of life. Fourth, most authors accept the counterfactual self-labeling of illiberal regimes as somehow “democratic” after all.

In academic debates not focused on illiberalism, this combination of factors is convincingly cited as an abuse of democracy. Abuse consists primarily of the fact that rules and regulations, which apply to everyone else, are not observed by the government. Above all, any change of these general rules does not happen according to the rules and procedures intended for this purpose.⁴⁹ In illiberal regimes, rules that are intended to ensure a government’s accountability, such as the separation of

43 In her study of Austrian and Trumpist governmental practices and ideological features, Natascha Strobl calls this “radicalized conservatism,” which does not help to reduce the conceptual confusion. See Natascha Strobl, *Radikalisierte Konservatismus* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021).

44 Laruelle, “Illiberalism.”

45 Lührmann and Hellmeier, “Populismus, Nationalismus und Illiberalismus.”

46 Kauth and King, “Illiberalism”; and Uitz, “Can You Tell When an Illiberal Democracy Is in the Making?,” in her thoughtful reconstruction of re-constitutionalization in Hungary.

47 Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *The National Interest* no. 16 (summer 1989): 3-18, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

48 See above, Laruelle’s similar characterization of ideological components of the illiberalism ideological family (Laruelle, “Illiberalism”).

49 Sajó, *Ruling by Cheating*, with reference to Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).

powers and judicial review, do not matter.⁵⁰ Recent examples of illiberal democracies, besides those already mentioned of Orbán and Kaczyński, and the governmental practices of Erdoğan (Turkey), would include Alberto Fujimori (Peru), Evo Morales (Bolivia), Bolsonaro (Brazil), Hugo Chávez (Venezuela), and Trump (USA). Many authors consider elections, no matter how intensely manipulated, to be the umbilical cord that connects illiberalism with democracy.⁵¹

These disparate case studies, as well as the various definitions of illiberality, indicate why the concept of illiberal democracy is certainly preferable to vague and/or metaphorical notions such as semi- or pseudo-democracy, truncated or defective or hybrid democracy, soft despotism or soft autocracy,⁵² but why it still cannot easily be distinguished from alternative concepts, especially those of populism or authoritarianism. At its heart, the critique of political illiberalism primarily defends the essential rule-of-law elements (informed by Western models) as well as civil liberties and regulations of governmental powers (i.e., laws). According to one of the central arguments, laws are violated by officials and regimes who pretend to follow rules but break or circumvent them in order to gain undeserved advantages.⁵³ Limited participation and representation, immediate communication, and the administration of the public sphere hardly come into the picture of illiberalism studies. Yet these very studies would be expected to provide some information on the typical features of illiberal governance.

Authoritarianism

In contrast to illiberalism, the term *authoritarianism* is accommodated by both everyday language and the history of scientific concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*)—the former, admittedly, with meager explications.⁵⁴ Being a “contested concept,” it indisputably requires definition and delimitation, but not introduction. It outperforms populism and illiberalism as regards its age and pedigree: the history of the term goes back well before the 21st century and, via the “age of extremes” of the 20th century, dates back to the “long 19th century.” Along the way, authoritarianism has been repeatedly associated with Bonapartism.⁵⁵ Somewhat surprisingly, Bonapartism has been recently reintroduced by authors to single out the authoritarian core of protagonists described as populist, such as Donald Trump.⁵⁶

Authoritarianism shares, along with populism and illiberalism, the dual nature of being both an empirical and normative concept. As explained above, populism is assigned various attributes and a basic political stance in the academic debates,

50 Adam Przeworski, *Sustainable Democracy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Guillermo O'Donnell, “The Quality of Democracy: Why the Rule of Law Matters,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 15, no. 4 (2004): 32-46, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2004.0076>.

51 Some authors argue that this also applies to populism. See Paul Blokker, “Populism and Illiberalism,” in: Sajó et al., *Handbook of Illiberalism*, 261-279.

52 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “Elections without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* vol. 13, no. 2 (2002): 51-61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0026>.

53 Sajó, “Cheating: The Legal Secret of Illiberal Democracy,” ch. 8 in *Ruling by Cheating*.

54 The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines authoritarianism as “the belief that people should obey authority and rules, even when these are unfair or even when this means the loss of personal freedom.”

55 See, for example, Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Moscow: Progress Publishers [1852] 1937); René Rémond, *Les droites en France* (Paris: Éditions Aubier, 1954).

56 Martin Beck and Ingo Stützle, eds., *Die neuen Bonapartisten: Mit Marx den Aufstieg von Trump & Co. verstehen*, (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 2018). For a more differentiated analysis of Trumpism, see Corinna Lacatus, “Populism and President Trump's Approach to Foreign Policy: An Analysis of Tweets and Speeches,” *Politics* 41, no. 1 (2021): 31-47, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395720935380>; and Masha Gessen, *Surviving Autocracy* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2021).

which usually remain controversial in the end. Concerning authoritarianism, several levels of analysis can be distinguished, especially individual and collective attitudes, the practices and programs of social groups or movements, and the strategies and agendas of political parties and regimes. But the diverse authoritarian phenomena are categorized and registered by the interested sciences and reappraised according to their specific logic and methodology.

Reducing authoritarian complexity to the dualism of a *form of state*⁵⁷ (not based on a specific or developed ideology) and an *educational style* that brings forth the “authoritarian character”⁵⁸ would be a reasonable first takeaway from the debates surrounding authoritarianism. However, this move does justice neither to the plurality of approaches in research nor to the spectrum of theoretical perspectives on various drivers of authoritarianism, such as social disintegration, alienation, discrimination, capitalist land grabbing, globalization, migration, and religion. Moreover, the reduction is clearly not up to date with more recent theorizing and does not take into account the results of empirical studies, especially in comparative regime theory and political science.⁵⁹ It also fails to take sufficient note of both the analysis of economic processes and political consequences in authoritarian capitalism,⁶⁰ and the sociological and socio-psychological research on parent-child relationships that imply the “obsolescence of the authoritarian character,”⁶¹ along with political attitudes and gender-specific attitudes, as well as the studies of authoritarian phenomena in political and media culture.⁶²

By the same token, the analysis of authoritarianism cannot be illustrated by a Cain-and-Abel metaphor. While it does not rely on liberalism or any other antagonistic term as its *definiens*, authoritarianism still does not stand completely unchallenged and free as a label in the real world. Analysts must work through a rather formidable, more than conceptual, relationship to authority and power. Authoritarianism refers to a relationship between those in power (government office-holders, bureaucrats, and agents in formally-defined or even informal positions), party leaders, etc. on the one

57 The classical taxonomy was introduced by Juan J. Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000).

58 Theodor W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960); Peter E. Gordon, “The Authoritarian Personality Revisited: Reading Adorno in the Age of Trump,” *boundary 2*, June 15, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-3826618>.

59 Notably Barbara Geddes, “What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 115-144, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.2.1.115>; Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* (New York: Doubleday, 2020); Frankenberg, *Authoritarianism*, 33-52; Schäfer and Zürn, *Die demokratische Regression*, 59-127.

60 See, for example, Richard W. Carney, “Authoritarian Capitalism,” in *Authoritarian Capitalism: Sovereign Wealth Funds and State-Owned Enterprises in East Asia and Beyond*, ed. Richard W. Carney (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2019.1640489>; Dorottya Sallai and Gerhard Schnyder, “What Is Authoritarian about Authoritarian Capitalism? The Dual Erosion of the Public-Private Divide in State-Dominated Business Systems”, *Business & Society*, 60, no. 6 (2021): 1312-1348, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650319898475>.

61 See, for example, Bob Altemeyer, “The Other ‘Authoritarian Personality,’” in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, ed. Bob Altemeyer (Academic Press, 1998), 47-91, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(98\)60382-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(98)60382-2); Oliver Decker and Elmar Brähler, eds., *Autoritäre Dynamiken. Leipziger Autoritarismus Studie 2020* (Gießen: PsychoSozial Verlag, 2020), <https://www.boell.de/sites/default/files/2020-11/Decker-Braehler-2020-Autoritaere-Dynamiken-Leipziger-Autoritarismus-Studie.pdf>.

62 See, for example, Ezequiel Korin and Paromita Pain, eds., *When Media Succumbs to Rising Authoritarianism* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003105725>; Paula Diehl, “Rechtspopulismus und Massenmedien,” in *Großerzählungen des Extremen*, ed. Armin Flender et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2018): 87-96; Eric C. Prichard and Stephen D. Christman, “Authoritarianism, Conspiracy Beliefs, Gender and COVID-19,” *Frontiers of Psychology*, 26, no. 11 (November 26, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.597671>; Lauren E. Duncan et al., “Authoritarianism and Gender Roles: Toward a Psychological Analysis of Hegemonic Relationships,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23, no. 1 (January 1997): 41-49, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167297231005>.

hand, and those who are subjected to their power (members, followers, supporters) on the other. Depending on the theoretical paradigm, power is traditionally defined as the ability to control people and relations, institutions and events, and to command obedience; it is grounded in will, language, violence, or law.⁶³ In the social practice through which it is constituted and in which it is enacted, this relationship is always dependent on the authority⁶⁴ of the power holder and the reaction of those who enter into a relationship based on power. When authority is freely ascribed or given—out of admiration, respect, reverence, enthusiastic support, or indifferent acquiescence—it relies on recognition. And recognition constitutes a symmetrical relationship between rulers and ruled, leaders and followers, in which (according to Marx) someone is a ruler/leader because others relate to him as subjects/followers and these, conversely, believe themselves to be followers or to be ruled because the former is a ruler/leader: “For instance, one man is king only because other men stand in the relation of subjects to him. They, on the contrary, imagine that they are subjects because he is king.”⁶⁵ One could object that in terms of power the recognition of authority establishes an asymmetry again. However, it differs from a totalitarian or enforced one in that it is entered into voluntarily. Authority thus comes about without force in the social practice of mutual recognition, which may not necessarily be normatively demanding:

Authority depends on the willingness of others to listen and be persuaded. No governor has any other authority than that which others see in him. He has the very authority he is able to extract from those he wants to lead and which they are willing to award him. Authority enables governors to get others to do for them, but at the same time the governor is at the mercy of those same others for the authority he needs in order to lead. Authority, then, although appearing to belong to the governor, is really a gift from those he wants to exercise authority over.⁶⁶

In authoritarian contexts, recognition fails or is disturbed and the symmetrical relationship between those who govern and those who are governed has never been established nor destroyed. Thus, no liberal or non-authoritarian counter-image is needed to identify authoritarian leaders or regimes, authoritarian programs or attitudes. According to Max Weber, power consists of the “chance to assert one’s own will within a social relationship even in the face of opposition, regardless of what this chance is based on.”⁶⁷ Weber’s action-theoretical approach, which he defined more narrowly in relation to domination as “the chance of finding obedience for a command of certain content among tangible persons,” can be connected with the considerations on authority. Authority (*Herrschaft*) morphs into an authoritarian

63 To illustrate the wide spectrum of definitions and perspectives: Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1970); Michel Foucault, “Afterword: The Subject and Power,” in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, eds., *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London: Macmillan, 1974); and Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1921] 1978).

64 Tom Christiano, “Authority,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/authority/>; David Estlund, *Democratic Authority* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Joseph Raz, ed., *Authority* (New York: New York University Press, 1990).

65 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, [1867] 1887), vol. 1, 55, n. 22.

66 Stein Ringen, “It’s about Authority, Stupid!: Having Power Is Not Enough to Get Things Done,” *WZB Mitteilungen*, No. 133 (2011), <https://bibliothek.wzb.eu/artikel/2011/f-16675.pdf>.

67 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 28-29, 122.

regime when compliance is imposed, submission is induced by deception,⁶⁸ and obedience is compelled by threat or physical force. Authority is then based on the sheer “power to get things done.”⁶⁹ In this power to get things done (along with the desire to have such power), the asymmetry of authoritarian relations takes effect and develops a dynamic in which violence may emerge. The power to get things done can originally be legitimized by expertise (technocratic authoritarianism), democratic rhetoric (populist authoritarianism), or ideology (varieties of authoritarian regimes).

Authoritarianism suffers from its damaging kinship with totalitarianism. This suffering can be avoided by conceptual demarcation or theoretical distinction.⁷⁰ The conventional view of the intensified techniques of repression in totalitarian systems can be plausibly explained as a necessary condition of such demarcation.⁷¹ Yet, further characteristics must be added if the dividing line is to stand its ground. Hannah Arendt sees the totalitarian intensification of authoritarianism in a hermetic, totalizing ideology and terror:

The essence of totalitarian rule, then, is not that it curtails or eliminates certain freedoms, not that it eradicates the love of freedom from human hearts; but only that it locks people as they are into the iron band of terror with such force that the space of action, and this alone is the reality of freedom, disappears. . . . The iron band of terror constitutes the totalitarian body politic and makes it an incomparable instrument for accelerating the movement of the process of nature or history. . . . Terror wants to bring the processes that are in themselves necessary to a speed . . . that they could never reach without the assistance of humanity organized into one man.⁷²

Under a reign of terror, a form and practice of social control that encompasses everyone and everything and strangles every form of systemic criticism and opposition, regimes show their totalitarian face and authoritarianism morphs into the barbarism mandated by a secular religion.⁷³ A hermetic ideology, executed by terror, functions as the liturgy of this religion. Hence, totalitarian regimes are not adequately defined by their governing technique alone, but have to be recognized as agents and institutions of an “anonymous intentionality”⁷⁴ that targets the terrible phantasm of a society that is at one with and transparent to itself, in which diversity—diverging visions of the good life, clashes of interests, political pluralism—has been stamped out. A regime must shield this nightmare, this secret of the totalitarian, at any cost. Apart from institutionalizing and normalizing terror, it must grind down even the slightest questioning of the legitimacy of rule and power and declare those who dare to do so as enemies⁷⁵ and deprive them of their livelihoods and, indeed, their lives.

68 See Sajó, *Ruling by Cheating*.

69 Stein Ringen, *Nation of Devils: Democratic Leadership and the Problem of Obedience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), ch. 1.

70 Incidentally, authors who prefer to use illiberalism or populism as a foil for the interpretation of authoritarian phenomena also make such a distinction (Sajó 2021; Diehl and Cavazza 2012).

71 Linz, *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*.

72 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 714.

73 Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

74 Claude Lefort, *L'invention démocratique: Les limites de la domination totalitaire* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

75 Ulrich Rödel et al., *Die demokratische Frage* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989).

Conclusion

There is no conclusion that could settle the debate about the preferential use-value of any of the three terms presented here. All of them make sense (if properly applied) and all of them have problems. The phenomena they try to grasp conceptually and prepare for processing in theory and research are obviously as complex as their interpretation is controversial. In consequence, populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism need further clarification, and a semantic or diagnostic consensus is not likely to settle the dispute.

Ideas and their conceptual labels quite often result not from a conscious choice but from a sudden burst of inspiration. For this reason, the charm of contingency may be more productive than a stringent plan and a semantic *passe-partout*.⁷⁶ I therefore suggest that more work on the concept is indispensable to help touch up the profiles of authoritarianism, illiberalism, and populism. It would be expedient, however, especially for disciplining media jargon and political parlance, if conceptual preferences, hermeneutic options, and unsolved problems were made explicit and exposed to critique. At the end of the day, the term with the sharpest critical bite will prevail, all being well.

⁷⁶ Suffice it to say that, based on my previous work, I have a preference for the term *authoritarianism*. This does not preclude the conversation, though.



Guillaume Faye (1949-2019): At the Forefront of a New Theory of White Nationalism

STÉPHANE FRANÇOIS AND ADRIEN NONJON

Abstract

Despite being under-studied, Guillaume Faye (1949-2019) is probably one of the most central figures of the current Euro-American Identitarian movement, and a key inspiration for global white nationalism. Whether it is of “archeofuturism” or the “convergence of catastrophes”, his concepts are still widely commented on and taken up throughout the world within the far right, becoming nowadays more and more popular. His transition from pro-Arabism in the 1980s to a violent rejection of Islam at the end of the following decade is symptomatic of the evolution of the nationalist-revolutionary far right. Both biographical and analytical, this article proposes to return in detail to this major figure of today’s white nationalism.

Keywords: Guillaume Faye, France, Far Right, New Right, Archeofuturism, White Nationalism

Despite being under-studied, Guillaume Faye (1949-2019) is probably one of the most central figures of the current Euro-American Identitarian movement, and a key inspiration for global white nationalism. He holds a special place within the small world of the radical right, combining political activism, journalistic activities, and serving as an anchor for populist countercultures. His concept of “archeofuturism” has served as a rallying point for the revival of the doctrinal corpus of the French Identitarian movement, and of the Euro-American far right more broadly. Forged in the mid-1990s, his worldview is a mix of postmodern philosophy and elements from old-fashioned Western racist discourses.

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Faye's career trajectory can be divided into two major periods. He was first a member of the main French New Right cadres' school GRECE (*Groupement de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne*, or Research and Study Group for European Civilisation, whose acronym spells out the French name for Greece: *Grèce*) from 1970 to 1986 and was its second-most-prominent figure after the more well-known Alain de Benoist. At the time, he argued for a form of somewhat pro-Arab revolutionary conservative thinking. After withdrawing from political activism between 1987 and 1996 to work in the media realm, Faye returned to working as a political essayist and took up a prominent Identitarian position, asserting a very racialized discourse targeting Islam and Arab-Muslim immigration that made him a cult figure for white nationalist subcultures.

From Political Activism to the Media ... and back

Faye was born in Angoulême, a mid-sized town in southwestern France, on November 7, 1949, into a bourgeois social environment. His family leaned toward the Bonapartist right wing, an authoritarian, nationalist and social leaning.¹ In contrast to many of GRECE's founding members who came from Nazi-collaborationist families, Faye's family did not collaborate during World War II, nor did Faye himself campaign among pro-OAS² (a right-wing paramilitary group formed in opposition to Algerian independence) or old-fashioned nationalist circles. He studied at the Institut d'études politiques de Paris, where from 1971 to 1973 he ran the Pareto Circle, the GRECE association active in this *Grande École* training the French elite.³

Created in January 1969 in the south of France, GRECE was the founding act of the French New Right (Nouvelle Droite).⁴ Born from the will of the European-nationalist theorist Dominique Venner (1935-2013) to transform political militancy into a "metapolitical" struggle, the organization set out to lay the foundations of a new right-wing culture in France that would then spread throughout several European countries, as well as to the US and even Russia. It aimed at breaking out from classic, French-centric nationalism and promoting an organic and unified conception of pan-European nationalism. GRECE's hopes of deeply renewing the doctrinal basis of French nationalism were motivated by the need to compete with far-left thinking and especially Marxism, which were powerful currents of thought among French intellectuals at that time. The fact that GRECE was launched a few months after the May 1968 revolts points to the shock that the student riots produced in conservative circles.

Initially close to certain GRECE figures such as Jean-Yves le Gallou (1948), the founder of the Pareto Circle, Guillaume Faye joined GRECE a few months after its foundation and held the position of secretary for studies and research, in which he had to develop new political platforms for the organization. It was within this structure that Faye laid the first ideological stones in the foundation of his thinking. Initially in charge of economic issues, he progressively moved towards more geopolitical and identity-related topics such as European federalism or the "White nationalism" issue, publishing important theoretical texts in the New Right's main journals: *Éléments*, *Nouvelle École*, *Orientations*, *Études et Recherches*.

His first books, published in the early 1980s, were both a critique of consumer society, a rejection of art standardization, and a dismissal of the Westernization

¹ The Bonapartist right was born with the First French Empire of Napoléon Bonaparte. Napoléon's was an authoritarian, nationalist political regime, though it also pursued modernizing social policies.

² Organisation Armée Secrète (Secret Armed Organization).

³ Pierre-André Taguieff, *Sur la Nouvelle Droite: Jalons d'une analyse critique* (Paris: Descartes & C^{ie}, 1994), 205.

⁴ The expression "new right" was coined in 1979 by journalists, during the aggressive media campaign against GRECE.

of the world.⁵ One of Faye's intellectual constants was his belief—largely shaped by Alain de Benoist—in a radical differentialism: according to Benoist, the “right to difference” (initially coming from leftist and anti-colonialist thinking) should result in the rejection of any multiracial society to the point of repatriating the European emigrants and their descendants to their indigenous “civilizational area.” Faye believed that Europe had been colonized not only by immigrants, but also by American values. The resulting rejection of the United States then placed him in the nationalist-revolutionary current of the European far right, an orientation visible at that time in his geopolitical stance against the “American-Zionist axis” and his support for an alliance with the nationalist Arab regimes, in particular the Baathists.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Faye was also writing for several French right-wing papers and magazines such as *Le Figaro*, a gateway to mainstream conservatism for the New Right, and the more jet-set-oriented *VSD* and *Paris-Match*, as well as countercultural publications such as *L'Écho des savanes*. His main intellectual influences were the French philosophers Henri Lefebvre, Jules Monnerot, Robert Jaulin, Julien Freund, Michel Maffesoli, Gilles Deleuze, and Guy Debord; the German thinkers Friedrich Nietzsche, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Arnold Gehlen, Jürgen Habermas, Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies, and Carl Schmitt; the British writers Herbert Spencer and Robert Ardrey; and the American Christopher Lash.

Faye also acknowledged the key influence on his thinking of the Italian journalist and philosopher Giorgio Locchi (1923-1992), who played a major role in the elaboration of GRECE's first principles such as anti-Americanism, inegalitarianism, and a pagan conception of the world. At that time, in fact, Faye was close to the neopagan leanings of GRECE and participated in the Serment de Delphes (Oath of Delphi), an oath sworn before the Stoa at Delphi by several of GRECE's radical and pagan European militants in early 1979 at the instigation of Pierre Vial (born in 1942), GRECE's secretary general and French scholar (medievalist) at the University of Lyon III. This oath consisted of the promise that militants would fight for a neopagan European identity. Yet, contrary to some of his colleagues, Faye did not accept attempts to reconstruct a pagan theology. As he put it:

More than any other religion, paganism is at once the guarantor of the social order, of the cosmic and natural order, and the guarantor of the plurality of beliefs and sensibilities. It rests on the logic of “each in their own place,” and not on the fantasy of a chaotic universalist diversity. Its social model closely associates the notions of justice, order, and freedom, these latter being founded on discipline. It sets out from the principle that humanity is diverse and by no means destined to unify, that history is an unpredictable and endless becoming. It presumes, contrary to the monotheisms, a heterogeneous humanity made up of homogeneous peoples, the essence of the political being the constitution of the homogeneity of the City, sacralized by divinities, in which identity is absolutely indistinguishable from sovereignty. Organic and holist, the pagan vision of the world considers peoples as communities of destiny. As it is lived in Greek paganism, the notion of the City, soldered by patriotism and the common identity (reflection of divinities and of nature) is fundamental in paganism, in which the tutelary divinities have an essentially political and rooted dimension. (Faye 2001a, 116)

⁵ Guillaume Faye, *Le Système à tuer les peuples* (Paris: Copernic, 1981); Guillaume Faye, *La NSC, la nouvelle société de consommation* (Paris: Le Labyrinthe, 1984); Guillaume Faye, *L'Occident comme déclin* (Paris: Le Labyrinthe, 1984).

In the mid-1980s, Faye became marginalized by the GRECE leadership, as strategic disagreements with its main figure, Alain de Benoist, emerged. Indeed, Faye criticized the movement and its leader for their progressive abandonment of a European identity line and their silence on immigration issues in favor of Third Worldist narratives.⁶ Faye also denounced GRECE's failure to infiltrate the Front National at a time when the party was experiencing its first serious electoral successes. These criticisms resulted in Faye being forced to leave GRECE in the spring of 1987, and his broader distancing from the New Right's militancy, instead concentrating on his media activities, until his rehabilitation into GRECE in 1997 thanks to Pierre Vial's support.

During his decade-long hiatus from direct political militancy, Faye built for himself a new career in the popular culture realm. Parallel to his work for the printed press (under his own name or pseudonymously), Faye became a host ("Skyman") of a major French radio station, Skyrock,⁷ winning over many listeners with his hoaxes and provocative nature. He also participated in a general interest program on a French public station between 1991 and 1993. He further claimed to have appeared in pornographic films. Under the pseudonym of Skyman, he published three books of popular culture aimed at the general public. In *Le Guide de l'engueulade* (The guide to shouting matches)⁸ and *Le Manuel du séducteur pressé* (The busy seducer's handbook),⁹ Faye took a comic detour inspired by Guy Debord and his *Société du Spectacle*.¹⁰ His third book, co-authored with Jean-Christophe Florentin, was published under the title *Viol, pillage, esclavagisme, Christophe Colomb, cet incompris: Essai historico-hystérique* (Rape, pillage, slavery: The misunderstood Christopher Columbus, a hysterical historical essay)¹¹—a rehabilitation of the legitimacy of the European colonization of the Americas. Faye also wrote storylines for cartoons, the first of which was the graphic novel *Avant-guerre* (Prewar).¹² In the 2000s, he published other cartoons with militant storylines including, in 2002, *Chirac contre les fachos* (Chirac versus the fascists, referring to Jacques Chirac, President of France from 1995-2007).¹³

Almost becoming homeless due to drug addiction and financial problems, Faye returned unexpectedly to politics by first rejoining GRECE in 1997 and then, the year after, publishing one of his most significant books, *Archéofuturisme* (Archeofuturism),¹⁴ in a major French far-right publisher, L'Éncre (an archaic rendering of the word for *anchor*). He followed this up in 2000 with the publication of *La Colonisation de l'Europe* (The Colonization of Europe),¹⁵ a seminal essay denouncing Europe's Islamization and the dangers of non-European migration. Reintroducing such themes into far-right culture without apology, Faye subsequently gained new visibility among several groups. He participated in conferences with many figures close to GRECE, as well as with royalists, young traditionalist Catholics, neopagans, and others. In 2000, he was accused of racism by Alain de Benoist and the close associates of the latter. Both Faye and his publisher, L'Éncre, were put

6 Robert Steuckers, "Les pistes manquées de la 'nouvelle droite': Pour une critique constructive," 2011, <http://robertsteuckers.blogspot.com/2011/11/pistes-manquees-de-la-nouvelle-droite.html>.

7 He already had experience as a radio host, gained through his participation in the radio La Voix du Lézard, the forerunner of Skyrock, between 1983 and 1986.

8 Guillaume Faye and Jean-Philippe Serrano, *Le Guide de l'engueulade* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1992).

9 Guillaume Faye and Jean-Philippe Serrano, *Le Manuel du séducteur pressé* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1993).

10 Jean-Yves Camus, "Guillaume Faye, From New-Right to prophet of the racial civil war," in *Contemporary Far-Right Thinkers and the Future of Liberal Democracy*, ed. A. James McAdams and Alejandro Castrillon, (New York: Routledge, 2021), 66-77, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003105176>.

11 "Professeur Skyman" and Jean-Christophe Florentin, *Viol, pillage, esclavagisme: Christophe Colomb, cet incompris—Essai historico-hystérique* (Paris: Grancher, 1992).

12 Guillaume Faye, *Avant-guerre* (Paris: Carrère, 1985).

13 Guillaume Faye, *Chirac contre les fachos* (Paris: GFA, 2002).

14 Guillaume Faye, *L'Archéofuturisme* (Paris: L'Éncre, 1998).

15 Guillaume Faye, *La Colonisation de l'Europe* (Paris: L'Éncre, 2000).

on trial for inciting racial hatred following the publication of *La Colonisation de l'Europe*.¹⁶ Faye was ultimately banished a second time from GRECE by a federal assembly of cadres convened by Alain de Benoist in May 2000 to give the latter's condemnation of Faye the appearance of legitimacy.

After that, Faye drew closer to Identitarian and neopagan circles, contributing to the Terre et Peuple (Land and People) movement. The latter had been established by former GRECE radical and racialist member Pierre Vial, a medievalist formerly at Jean Moulin Lyon III University; Jean Mabire, a journalist and writer known for his SS hagiographies; and the Indo-European specialist Jean Haudry—all of them with close ties to a form of regionalist, neopagan neo-Nazism.¹⁷ Yet even there, Faye could not fit: he was expelled from Terre et Peuple in 2007 following the publication of his philo-Semitic essay *La Nouvelle question juive* (The new Jewish question).¹⁸ In this, in contraction with his past, Faye denounced Holocaust denialism and the anti-Semitic fads of the French far right, and pled for a strategic alliance with the “Zionists” against Islam, an alliance considered “unnatural” for a resolutely Anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi movement.

An Ideological Trajectory toward Extreme Racialism

Faye's ideological trajectory saw him switch from belonging to the national-revolutionary far right of the 1970s to a radical racialism inspired by Nazi theories. His trajectory can be traced around two key worldviews: the celebration of archaism, which goes with a neopagan cult of sexuality and call for authoritarianism; and the shift from celebrating the resistance to Americanization by Arab nationalists to a racial fear of everything related to migrants and Islam.

The cult of the archaic

Intellectually, Faye was one of the GRECE members who was most difficult to categorize. He displayed no nostalgia for anything *völkisch*. Unlike his colleagues from Terre et Peuple, Faye rejected any blood-and-soil mythology or worldview inspired by the SS and their followers. He had no interest in the theorists of traditionalism as developed by Julius Evola or René Guénon, nor in attempts at reinventing pagan cults. As he put it: “Traditions are made to be expurgated, wiped off, cherry-picked. For many of them carry viruses that are exploding today. Modernity, for its part, probably has no future.”¹⁹ By contrast, he was wont to stress that:

The word “archaic” must be restored to its true, positive and not pejorative, sense: according to the meaning of the Greek noun *archè*, which means both “foundation” and “beginning,” or “founding impulsion.” It also has the meaning of “that which is creative is immutable” and refers to the central notion of “order.” Caution: “archaic” does not mean “attachment to the past,” since the historical past produced the now foundering egalitarian modernity. Thus, any historical regression would be absurd²⁰.

16 With this book, Guillaume Faye and his publisher were each fined 50,000 francs by the 17th Paris Correctional Chamber for inciting racial hatred. Emmanuel Lemieux, “Le retour des affreux,” *Technikart*, no. 68, (December 1, 2002).

17 Camus, “Guillaume Faye,” 2021.

18 Guillaume Faye, *La Nouvelle question juive* (Chevaigné: Le Lore, 2007).

19 Faye, *L'Archéofuturisme*, 10-11.

20 Faye, *L'Archéofuturisme*, 66.

Stéphane François and Adrien Nonjon

Indeed, according to Faye,

We must not be “anti-modern” but “non-modern,” since ... the alternative to modernity cannot be the return to traditionalism and a backward-looking attitude, since the latter possess the same linear view of time as modernity, except that it is a matter of regressing and no longer of progressing, both attitudes being perfectly contrary to the spherical and dynamic view of time.²¹

It is in the ideological framework that Faye has elaborated his main concept of “archeofuturism.” He defines this concept as follows:

The point is not to succumb to classical “traditionalism,” marred by folklore and dreaming (by turning back) of a return to the past. Modernity has become obsolete. The future must be “archaic,” which is to say neither modern nor backward-looking²².

At the beginning of his career, Faye embraced the GRECE strategy of replacing the concept of races and the idea of their place on a scale superior-inferior by the notion of ethno-cultural groups all supposedly equal but forbidden to mix, based on Benoist’s ethnodifferentialism. Nevertheless, by the end of his life Faye had returned to a simplified racialism. In his last book, published in 2019, *Guerre civile raciale* (Racial civil war; published in English as *Ethnic Apocalypse: The Coming European Civil War*),²³ he prophesied a confrontation that goes far beyond simple civilizational conflict: a total war between the races from which the white man alone must emerge victorious or be annihilated. With this last book, Faye contributed to inspiring the accelerationist theories that call for accelerating racial war in order to secure victory by whites.

Faye’s work also displays a desire to bring down liberal democracy in order to confront what he called the “convergence of catastrophes” threatening Europe, as is expressed in the title of one of his works, which he authored under the pseudonym Guillaume Corvus, taken from the Latin word meaning *crow* or *raven*²⁴. Adopting a survivalist and apocalyptic tenor, “Corvus” argued that the Western countries face various perils: the “cancerization” of the European social fabric; demographic decline; the threat of a chaotic the Global South; the rise of religious fundamentalisms, notably Islamic fundamentalism; a Global North and South ethno-religious confrontation; and, lastly, the aggravation of uncontrolled pollution.

In order to avert civilizational and ecological collapse, Faye suggested that an authoritarian regime be established under the aegis of a “born leader,” a dictator, which he defined in another work not as “an oppressive tyrant, but as one who ‘dictates,’ who decides, and who rescues in emergency situations,” and who, naturally, “sets his people in movement and protects their ancestry, their identity.”²⁵ However, if there certainly is a risk of ecological catastrophe, he does not believe, contrary to the radical ecologists he dubs “naive,” that Nature itself is in danger. As he sees it, only humanity is in danger, since the Earth can recover from climatic upheaval: “The Earth (Gaya) is not ‘threatened’ by humans, who are its inhabitants; it still has several billion years ahead of it and can promote other species along the path of phylogenetic evolution; and it has undergone far worse ecological cataclysms.”²⁶

21 Faye, *L’Archeofuturisme*, 168.

22 Faye, *L’Archeofuturisme*, 42-43.

23 Guillaume Faye, *La Guerre civile raciale* (Harfleur: Éditions Petit Jean, 2019). Published in English as *Ethnic Apocalypse: The Coming European Civil War* (Budapest: Arktos, 2019).

24 Guillaume Corvus, *La Convergence des catastrophes* (Paris: Diffusion Inter, 2004).

25 Guillaume Faye, *Pourquoi nous combattons: Manifeste de la Résistance européenne* (Paris: L’Encre, 2001).

26 Corvus, *Convergence*, 201.

Contrary to the majority of his fellows, Faye was not hostile toward hypermodernity or the liberation of mores, a topic to which he devoted two books: *Sexe et idéologie* (Sex and ideology)²⁷ and *Sexe et dévoiement*²⁸ (Sex and deviance). In 1983, he wrote:

In a pagan conception of society—at the same time both libertarian and sovereign, convivial and kingly, driven by the pleasure principle as much as by the will to power—everything can coexist in an organic and *polytheist* manner: sexual asceticism, libertinism, the spirit of enjoyment, deviance, homosexuality, sapphism, sublimation, and estheticism. Each of these attitudes corresponds to a function, to an order, ones for which strict codes provide the norm.²⁹

His conception of sexuality at that point was, in his own words, fairly “liberated” or “pagan.” This stance goes sharply against the conventional moralizing discourse of the far right. It also carries within it a cultural revolution that undermines the bases of Christian morality. As he wrote:

We must return to an archaic vision of things: integrating debauchery and the “orgiastic”—discussed by Michel Maffesoli in *L'ombre de Dionysos [The Shadow of Dionysus]*³⁰—into the social order. The stronger this order is, the more the orgiastic can unfurl in its shadow, in secret, as ancient societies knew how to do it. This is simple wisdom. The “principle of order” is consistent with millions of years of laws for the reproduction of the species and the transmission of progeny, culture, and values. The “pleasure principle” must be tolerated and managed *hypocritically* because it is human and ineradicable, but without ever allowing it to become dominant, without it becoming the established order. Subaltern but in existence, according to the law of life, in a certain “social silence” ... I am for group sex, feasts, Dionysian pleasures, but only if subordinated to the *ordo societatis*, and articulated by it. ... The more powerful the social order is, the more the pleasure principle, the orgiastic, can be deployed in its shadows without harm to societal cohesion.³¹

Faye was also hostile neither to homosexuality nor to transsexualism and wrote for a homosexual magazine called *Gaie France*, in which he sometimes lauded adolescent homosexuality in the name of paganism.³²

From pro-Arab nationalism to racial fear of migrants

The most striking evolution of Faye’s ideological worldview can be found in his geopolitical shift. Faye’s first works were at once a critique of consumer society, a rejection of uniformization, and a dismissal of the westernization of the world. Indeed, in his first period of militancy, like some leftist thinkers, in particular those from the Frankfurt School, Faye believed that Europe had been colonized by American values. His ensuing rejection of the United States placed him squarely in the revolutionary-nationalist camp, though he rejected ethnic nationalism in favor of

27 Guillaume Faye, *Sexe et idéologie* (Paris: Labyrinthe, 1983).

28 Guillaume Faye, *Sexe et dévoiement* (La Fosse: Le Lore, 2011).

29 Faye, *Sexe et idéologie*, 25.

30 Michel Maffesoli, *L'ombre de Dionysos: contribution à une sociologie de l'orgie* (Paris: Librairie des Méridiens, 1982)

31 Faye, *L'Archéofuturisme*, 103.

32 Stéphane François, *Les Néo-paganismes et la Nouvelle Droite (1980-2006): Pour une autre approche* (Milan: Archè, 2008); Pierre Verdrager, *L'Enfant interdit: Comment la pédophilie est devenue scandaleuse* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013).

a pan-European nationalism. This influence cropped up in his 1980s geopolitics, one aspect of which was his hostility to the supposed “Americano-Zionist axis,” against which he suggested an alliance with Arab regimes, in particular Ba’athist ones.

The activist group formed in France today of pro-Zionist groups is pushing French governments onto the dreadful path of disagreement with the Arabs, our natural allies. In the United States, as President Assad of Syria rightly recalled—after other Arab leaders—the “Zionist lobby” has seen its aims become intertwined with the geo-strategic interest of American power: the American order, Zionist opinion groups (notably in France), and the state of Israel have powerful common interests, both geostrategic and cultural. One cannot reproach this, since it accords with the law of life. But it must nonetheless be understood that these interests run counter to the interests of the Arabs, the Europeans, and perhaps to the cause of all Third World peoples.³³

This is a key intellectual theme in Faye’s thinking: he defended a radical differentialism whereby, in order to ensure their survival as nations and civilizations, different peoples must never live on the same territory and never mix, either. In the early 1980s he even endorsed the return of non-European migrants to their own areas of origin. The aim of the right to difference is, according to him, a rejection of multiracial society on the grounds that such a society is multiracist. In this vein, he also denounced multiculturalism and what he called “ethno-masochism.” As he put it: “Cultural combat is not about the defense of all cultures, but primarily of European culture, which must conceive itself as superior.”³⁴ With these remarks, Faye barely mitigated his racism.

Upon returning to the political arena in his second militant phase, Faye inverted the terms of his discourse, expressing support for Israel and the United States against the Arab-Muslim world. He became, in short, a prominent Identitarian ideologue who asserted a violently anti-immigration and Islamophobic discourse in the name of the defense of European racial interests. The end of the 1990s saw him champion a racialism so virulent that it invited comparison with that of the 1930s: “Rootedness is,” he wrote in *Pourquoi nous combattons: Manifeste de la Résistance européenne* (Why We Fight: Manifesto of the European Resistance) about “the preservation of roots, while being aware that the tree must continue to grow. ... Rootedness is accomplished first in fidelity to values or to blood. ... It must imperatively include a founding ethnic dimension.”³⁵

Faye subscribed to a right of blood founded on the concept of nativism and urged that a natalist and eugenicist campaign be launched that would favor ethnic Europeans. He defined his ethnocentrism as the “galvanizing conviction, specific to long-living peoples, that one belongs to something central and superior, and that to survive historically its ethnic identity must be preserved.”³⁶ Thus, reprising the racial-Darwinist, national socialist theme of the “struggle for survival,” he regarded non-European civilizations as enemies to be eliminated: “It’s the law of the strongest, of the fittest, of the most stirring that always dominates. *Vae Victis*, death to the defeated, such is the law of life; and no philosopher has been born that can change this or prove the contrary.”³⁷ He concluded by stating that “European ethnocentrism is not hot air. The contribution of European civilization (relayed by its prodigal and

33 Guillaume Faye, *Nouveau discours à la nation européenne* (Paris: Albatros, 1985), 106.

34 Faye, *Pourquoi nous combattons*, 73.

35 Faye, *Pourquoi nous combattons*, 113.

36 Faye, 117.

37 Faye, 76.

adulterous American son) to the history of humanity dominates in all domains; it exceeds that of all the other peoples.”³⁸

Faye therefore made an appeal to Europeans’ “ethnic consciousness”—that is, “to the individual and collective consciousness of the need to defend the biological and cultural identity of its people, which is the indispensable condition to upholding its civilization in history and to its independence.”³⁹ The extreme violence of this overtly racist discourse is quite unique in the French context, where far-right thinkers tend to moderate their expression of racism. Taking his ideas to their logical conclusion, Faye ultimately came to the notion that non-European immigration is merely a form of colonization.

More than immigration, we must speak of mass settler colonization by the African, Maghrebi, and Asian peoples and recognize that Islam is embarking on a conquest of France and Europe; that “juvenile delinquency” is only the beginning of an ethnic civil war; that pregnancies and porous borders are both means of invading us; that, for demographic reasons, an Islamic power is liable to establish itself in France, first at the municipal level, then, perhaps, at the national level.⁴⁰

His later writings took positions directly opposed to those he espoused at the start of the 1980s, when he expressed support for a Euro-Arab alliance as necessary to counter American hegemony. He remained steadfast, however, in his condemnation of the Americanization of mores.

Americanism is a mental attitude, the consequence of Americanization, which is causing Europeans to lose their identity and sovereignty, and whose cause is the voluntary submission of the Europeans rather than “American imperialism.” Americanization is linguistic, cultural, food- and fashion-related, musical and audiovisual, and so on. It substitutes American mythologies and imaginaries for those of the Europeans.⁴¹

However, he recognized America as the “main adversary, not the *main enemy*, which is rather made up of the non-native masses colonizing Europe, of all their collaborators (foreign states or fifth columns), and of Islam.”⁴² His change in position is stark.

Faye’s Legacy: From the Alt-Right to the Russian and Ukrainian Far Right

Faye’s relations with diverse far-right groups and correspondents went back a long time. The 1980s saw his work translated into Italian, German, and Spanish, including *Petit lexique du partisan européen* (Brief lexicon of the European partisan),⁴³ a work which was coauthored with two fellow militants, the Belgians Pierre Freson and Robert Steuckers. His articles were also published in translation in the German and Italian versions of the two main GRECE journals, *Éléments* and *Nouvelle École*. During this early period, Faye participated in university conferences in Greece (the “Athens conferences” organized by Jason Hadjinas between 1982 and 1985) and Belgium (on Euro-Arab relations, at the University of Mons in 1985). Even during

38 Faye, 118.

39 Faye, 78.

40 Faye, 20-21.

41 Faye, 55-56.

42 Faye, 57.

43 Guillaume Faye, Pierre Freson, and Robert Steuckers, *Petit lexique du partisan européen* (Esneux: Eurograf, 1985).

his decade out of political activism, his books and articles continued to be translated and commented upon by European militants—as well as by some American activists who would come to belong to the movements known collectively as the alt-right.

With his return to politics in the second half of the 1990s, Faye's notoriety abroad grew. Between 1998 and 2006, he sought to mend his relations with the Identitarian circles born from GRECE and the revolutionary-nationalist web. He participated in meetings and conferences organized by the militants of the concept of Eurosiberia, a sort of federal empire that would bring together the peoples of the white race in Europe, part of Russia, and North America. The meetings were organized in Spain in 2005 and Russia in 2006. In Spain, Faye came together with neo-Nazi figures: the Italian Gabriele Adinolfi; the Germans Pierre Krebs, who translated his work into German for publication in the 1980s, and Andreas Molau; and the Spaniard Ernesto Milá. In Russia, he again crossed paths with Pierre Krebs; the Spaniard Enrique Ravello; two French former members of GRECE, Pierre Vial and Yann-Ber Tillenon; the Greek Iephterios Ballas; the Ukrainian Halyna Lozko; and the Russians Vladimir Ardeyev, Anatoli Ivanov, and Pavel Tulaev, who launched a so-called raciology school.⁴⁴

The goal of these meetings was to set up a transnational organization to defend the “future of the white world,” namely the Council of Native European Peoples, which brought together splinter groups from Germany, Austria, Flanders, Wallonia, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Russia, Serbia, and Quebec. In his speech at the International Conference on the Future of the White World, held in Moscow in June 2006, Faye proposed an alliance between Eurosiberia and all the peoples of white European origin. This is what he called the “notion of the North.” The crucial task, for him, was to create “ethnospheres”—that is, “ensembles of territories ruled by ethnically similar peoples.”⁴⁵ This notion revolved around the idea that there was a “biological root of a people and a civilization, [on which] its ethnic base rests.”⁴⁶

He was then to become an important figure of so-called National Westernism, an idea later taken up and discussed on the alt-right website counter-currents.com.⁴⁷ In light of this white supremacism, it is hardly surprising that Faye came around 2006 to participate in the meetings of the white-supremacist magazine *American Renaissance* founded by Jared Taylor, who is also the leader of the New Century Foundation and managing director of *The Occidental Quarterly*.⁴⁸ Yet the 2007 publication of *La Nouvelle question juive* provoked a split with Faye's former friends, many of whom were highly anti-Semitic; the European revolutionary-nationalists and the Identitarians who had been involved in GRECE considered him too “Zionist.” Faye's stances were seen as insufficiently hostile to Israel or Judaism, thereby alienating him from Holocaust deniers and traditionalist Catholics. While the book produced splits, however, its philo-Semitism also opened the door to support from radical Jewish associations in France and the United States who argue for stronger ties between Israel and the West in the face of threats from Palestine or Iran.⁴⁹

44 Atheney, 2006. “Giyom Fay v Rossii,” <http://atenev.ru/old/rus/hronika/FayelnRussia.htm>; Arnold, Richard and Romanova Ekaterina, “‘Budushchee belogo mira’ analiz odnoy mezhdunarodnoy konferentsii v Moskve v 2006 godu,” *Forum noveyshey vostochnoevropeyskoy istorii i kul'tury*—Russkoe izdanie [Russian edition], no. 1, 2015, <http://www.ku-eichstaett.de/ZIMOS/forum/inhaltruss23.html>.

45 Faye, *Pourquoi nous combattons*, 119.

46 Faye, 128.

47 Greg Johnson, “Project Septentrion: The Last Line of Defense,” <http://www.counter-currents.com/2010/08/project-septentrion/>, 2010.

48 For example, one of Taylor's books in French translation is *L'Amérique de la diversité: Du mythe à la réalité* (Paris: L'Âncre, 2016). On Taylor's arguments, see Russell Nieli, “Jared Taylor and White Identity,” in *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy*, ed. M. Sedgwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). Taylor is an unusual figure within the alt-right movement, as he is not an anti-Semite. Several conservative Jewish authors have given talks at American Renaissance conferences.

49 James A. McAdams and Alejandro Castrillon, Alejandro, ed., *Contemporary Far-Right Thinkers and the Future of Liberal Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003105176>.

This same period saw a growing number of translations of Faye's works, especially those with violently anti-Islamic content. The most significant works of his second period, post-2007, were published in English by the London-based publishing house Arktos Media, operated by Daniel Friberg, a radical Swedish editor with links to the alt-right. These included *Archeofuturism* (in 2010), *Why we fight* (2011), *The Convergence of catastrophes* (2012), *Sex and deviance* (2014), *The Colonization of Europe* (2016), *Archeofuturism 2.0* (2016), and, lastly, *Understanding Islam* (2017).⁵⁰ This rapprochement with the American far right was cemented with the publication of his last, posthumously-published work, *Ethnic Apocalypse: The Coming European Civil War* (2019). Faye died on March 7, 2019, the day before its publication. The book contains a preface by Jared Taylor. In 2020, the same publishing house released a previously unpublished collection of short stories by Faye titled *Nederland*.

Faye's rejection of Islam and Arab-Muslim immigration found an audience in the United States, where the far right has been prejudiced against the Islamic world since September 11, 2001. Furthermore, it is important to note that, despite GRECE's overt shows of anti-Americanism, both Benoist and Faye did read American thinkers, including Paul Gottfried, Raymond Cattell, Arthur Jensen, Donald Swan, Wesley George, Roger Pearson, Kevin MacDonald, Robert Griffin, Samuel Francis, Jared Taylor, Michael O'Meara,⁵¹ and others. These readings have given rise to a reciprocal exchange of intellectual reference points and discussions—and indeed, at the turn of the 2000s, the American far right began discovering these European thinkers and borrowing their arguments. Lastly, Faye's arguments have been discussed on the left by *Telos*, a journal of the American New Left. However, if Faye shares some points of reference with this movement (for example, Jürgen Habermas, Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger, and others), he diverges from it on the question of power, and obviously on the question of racism.

If Faye was wont to discuss shared issues with American militants, he has also taken sides with Russia on several occasions. As mentioned earlier, at the invitation of the Identitarian militant Pavel Tulayev, the leader of Athenaeum, an organization known for its links with the splinter groups Synergies Européennes and Terre et Peuple, Faye held a series of talks in Moscow and St. Petersburg in 2006 together with the Breton autonomist Jean-Pierre Tillemon and his steadfast supporter Emmanuel Leroy.⁵² In addition to promoting his main works at the International Fund for Slavic Literature and Culture and at the University of St. Petersburg Institute of Complex Social Research, Faye met with various figures from the Russian ultra-right wing, such as the then Duma deputy for the nationalist Rodina Party, Andrey Savelyev; activists from the National Sovereignty Party of Russia (NSPR); and the leader of neopagan neo-Nazi movement "Solstice," Artyom Talakin.⁵³

Seeing his theories favorably received in a space he deemed crucial, Faye, emboldened, multiplied his collaborations with Russians. In 2007, these collaborations led to the translation into Russian of two of his works and to the release of a new pamphlet, *A Frenchman's View of Russia*, which he promoted at the Europe Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences.⁵⁴ This work enshrined his pro-Russian orientation. Presenting himself as a Russophile, Faye provided critical insight into French images of Russia upon evoking, as part of his "political program," the difficulties that the Russian Federation had faced after the fall of the USSR. Apart from the necessity of establishing a domestic policy and an economic revival to contain China's power,

⁵⁰ These books have also been translated into other languages: Spanish, German, Italian, and Czech.

⁵¹ The pseudonym of Michael Torigian, who devoted a small book to Faye: Michael O'Meara, *Guillaume Faye and the Battle of Europe* (Budapest: Arktos, 2013).

⁵² Atheney, "Giïom Fai v Rossii."

⁵³ Atheney, "Giïom Fai v Rossii."

⁵⁴ Atheney, "Kruglyi stol s uchastiem Giïoma Faia," 2012, <http://atenev.ru/old/20121019.htm>.

Faye pleaded for the rebirth of Russia with his concept of Eurosiberia, which he revamped and renamed Euro-Russia.

If this new version of a continental empire seems scarcely different from the one initially conceived in *Archeofuturism*, it is nevertheless characterized by a particular geopolitical realism and Russo-centrism.⁵⁵ For Faye, the West ought no longer to view Siberia as a simple exploitable geographical space, but rather as the historical subject of a state belonging “to the same genetic, ethnic, and civilizational layer.”⁵⁶ Taking a stance against the multiethnic and Eurasianist dimension of ultranationalist Russian philosopher Aleksandr Dugin’s vision for Eurasianism, Faye suggested breaking out of NATO’s encirclement by forming a strictly defensive and independent continental political-military alliance between Russia and Europe. As the initiating powers, France and Russia ought to agree at the outset to a continental nuclear “protection pact,” which should eventually supplant the “shrinking American umbrella.”⁵⁷ This claim is in keeping with the geopolitics of the New Right, which sought to promote a Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis as a vector of hegemonic stability. Faye even promoted the idea that the United States actually supported Islamists and the Islamic State. In 2015, he reiterated this position in another article published on his site, “J’ai tout compris,” (“I’ve got it all figured out”) asserting that Putin is Europe’s “only serious ally” against the Islamic State.⁵⁸

Like the vast majority of the French far right,⁵⁹ Faye also became a supporter of Vladimir Putin and his policies. It is in this context that, starting in 2014 (around the time of the Ukrainian Euromaidan Revolution), he began justifying Russia’s approach in the international arena. In contrast to the Identitarians, who adopted a chiefly local outlook—framing the Ukrainian conflict as an excuse for the “Eurocratic Union” to avoid solving its own internal problems—Faye pursued an internationalist outlook that viewed the Anglo-Saxon powers as waging a battle against Russia and obliging “subjugated” European nations to participate.⁶⁰

If his anti-Americanism compelled him to reprise the narrative—widespread among the far right—that the 21st-century “color revolutions” of Eastern Europe and Eurasia were directed by the CIA, his desire to see a powerful Europe independent of the United States is at the core of a discourse founded on Putin’s supposed Gaullist heritage based on sovereignty and non-alignment. Part of the spirit of 1966 where France and the USSR renewed a peaceful diplomatic relationship, claimed by a fringe of the French political and intellectual landscape,⁶¹ Faye had no qualms about comparing Vladimir Putin with General De Gaulle on his blog, arguing that the Russian president “defends a Gaullist vision of Europe and the world, and of the

55 For more details about Faye’s geopolitical thoughts on Russia see Mark Bassin, “Geopolitics or Ethnopolitics? Guillaume Faye, the European Far Right, and the ‘Russia Problem,’” in *Contemporary Far-Right Thinkers and the Future of Liberal Democracy*, ed. A. James McAdams and Alejandro Castrillon (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 103–119.

56 Guillaume Faye, “Euro-Russie: Bases concrètes d’une future confédération impériale.” *Ateney*, 2007, <http://ateney.ru/old/frans/fro22.htm>.

57 Faye, “Euro-Russie.”

58 Guillaume Faye, *Comprendre l’islam* (Paris: tatamis, 2015).

59 Nicolas Lebourg, *Les Extrêmes droites françaises dans le champ magnétique de la Russie* (New York: Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs and Foundation Open Society Institute, 2018), available at: https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/articles_papers_reports/the-french-far-right-in-russias-orbit.

60 Guillaume Faye, “Pourquoi la Russie a raison.” *J’ai tout compris: Blog de Guillaume Faye*, 2014, <http://www.gfaye.com/pourquoi-la-russie-a-raison/>; Faye, “La russophobie: Stratégie US contre la France et l’Europe, 2014.” *J’ai tout compris: Blog de Guillaume Faye*, 2014 <http://www.gfaye.com/la-russophobie-strategie-us-contre-la-france-et-leurope>.

61 See, for example, Hélène Carrère d’Encausse, *Le Général De Gaulle et la Russie* (Paris: Fayard, 2017); Frédéric Pons, *Poutine: Au cœur des secrets de la Russie moderne* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2014); and Yannick Jaffré, *Vladimir Bonaparte Poutine* (Paris: Ed. Perspectives Libres, 2014).

sovereignty of Russia.⁶² He would go even further and portray Putin as a providential figure able to guarantee a “third way” for continental Europe. He thus brushed aside the criticisms leveled at Putin in the West:

Putin exasperates the intellectual, political, and media hyperclass because he defends Identitarian values, because he casts European societies as decadent, because he adopts the same positions as the Conservative Revolution, because he wants his country to reclaim its international rank. Cardinal sin. Of course, Russia is no terrestrial paradise (are we?) but to present it as a dictatorship led by a new Nero who is wrong on all questions amounts to disinformation of the most thoughtless kind.⁶³

A supporter of Russia until his death, Faye shared his analyses with Russian media outlets and agencies, such as RIA Novosti, on several occasions. He voiced support for the campaigns that Russia was undertaking abroad, such as its annexation of Crimea on March 18, 2014:

In the view of the Kremlin and Putin, the Crimea historically belongs to Russia: it has a Russian-speaking majority and is home to part of the fleet. Putin wants to reset Russia within the borders not so much of the USSR as those of Catherine the Great's Russia, of the Russian Empire, whose ambitious defender Vladimir purports to be. So what? Clearly, Vladimir Putin wants to appear among his people as the one who could bring the Crimea (formerly Russian) back to the mother country and could restore Russia's international power.⁶⁴

Faye has played a critical role in promoting Russia as part of the dreamed-of White Europe among the far right in France. In return, the yearning for the notions of Eurosiberia and archeofuturism among Russian far-right movements demonstrates this influence on his ideologies. But this influence has proven far weightier on the ethnic Ukrainian far right. Notwithstanding his pro-Russian stance, Faye's theories have been commented on and utilized as part of the Azov Corps National Party's Intermarium project.⁶⁵ Its intellectual leader, Olena Semenyaka, acknowledges Faye as an important influence,⁶⁶ his *Archeofuturism* having provided a springboard for her theory of a “fourth industrial revolution” in Europe founded on new technologies and the *archè*, as well as for building an Identitarian alter-Europe.

Conclusion

In the latter part of his life, Faye became an important thinker within the Identitarian movement. News of his death was received with sadness in the French Identitarian realm (Jean-Yves Le Gallou, Les Identitaires, Boris Le Lay, TV Libertés, Riposte Laïque, Richard Roudier, and so on) and among its Anglo-Saxon counterparts who had translated much of his work, in particular the alt-right (Arktos Medias, Greg Johnson, and so on). Even the *Éléments* blog, though still close to Alain de Benoist,

62 Guillaume Faye, “Poutine: Le De Gaulle russe ?” *J'ai tout compris: Blog de Guillaume Faye*, 2014 <http://www.gfaye.com/poutine-le-de-gaulle-russe/>.

63 Faye, “Pourquoi la Russie a raison.”

64 Guillaume Faye, “Pour le rattachement de la Crimée à la Russie?,” *J'ai tout compris: Blog de Guillaume Faye*, 2014, <http://www.gfaye.com/pour-le-rattachement-de-la-crimée-a-la-russie/>.

65 Established on October 16, 2014, at the base of the Azov Regiment, the National Corps is an ultra-nationalist party that claims to have around 10,000 members. The National Corps is led by Andriy Biletsky, the former head of the paramilitary group Patriot of Ukraine, and is active in Ukrainian society thanks to multiple initiatives: training camps (*Azovets*), a militia (*Natsional'ny Druzhyny*), and cultural and political clubs (such as *Plomin*).

66 Semenyaka, Olena, “Interview with Olena Semenyaka,” 2019.

Stéphane François and Adrien Nonjon

featured homages to Faye from his former comrades.⁶⁷ In fact, Guillaume Faye, beyond his provocateur's image, remains an important intellectual of the global white-nationalist scene, having rid himself of his neo-Nazi tinsel. His transition from pro-Arabism in the 1980s to a violent rejection of Islam at the end of the following decade is symptomatic of the evolution of the nationalist-revolutionary far right following the war in the former Yugoslavia.⁶⁸

With what some of his fellow travelers would call a "rocket spirit," Guillaume Faye has been able to shake up genres both through provocation and radical convictions. Sometimes eschatological, sometimes utopian, his complex and madcap thinking is nevertheless global. As we have seen in the United States as well as in Russia or in Ukraine, it transcends existing far-right political and geopolitical divides. Although officially disowned by GRECE and its leaders, Guillaume Faye has acquired in France the status of an icon among the younger generation of Identitarian activists, who see him as the prophet, if not the harbinger, of contemporary white nationalism. Unlike some far-right authors like the French novelist Jean Raspail or the British Union of Fascists leader Oswald Mosley, Guillaume Faye was never so popular as after his death.

⁶⁷ Éléments (blog), "Guillaume Faye par ceux qui l'ont connu," 2019, <https://www.revue-elements.com/guillaume-faye-par-ceux-qui-lont-connu/>.

⁶⁸ Stéphane François & Nicolas Lebourg, *Histoire de la haine identitaire: Mutations et diffusions de l'altérophobie* (Valenciennes: Presses Universitaires de Valenciennes, 2016) <https://doi.org/10.4000/questionsdecommunication.11656>.



Georgia's Illiberal Forces: Political Polarization against Democracy

ZARINA BURKADZE

Abstract

This article explores how illiberal forces are structuring in Georgia and what this evolution reveals about the weakness of Georgia's democratic institutions and liberal values. The analysis starts with a discussion of how political polarization creates the context for illiberal groups to undermine democracy. Drawing on theoretical and empirical inquiry, I suggest the causal mechanism of how weak democratic institutions enable the emergence of illiberal groups through a personalized party system. Then, I address the lack of genuine democratic commitment on the part of Georgia's main political actors. Further, I probe for the movements that are gradually changing the grassroots dynamics by promoting conservative values, and their ties to Russia. The concluding section discusses the politicization of gender issues and the polarization of political space as two concomitant trends that frustrate the search for democratic consensus in Georgia.

Keywords: Georgia, Georgian Dream, Saakashvili, Illiberalism, far right, democratization

Introduction

Political polarization, especially in non-democratically consolidated countries, provides fertile ground for illiberal groups to spring up. Often, these divisions revolve around liberal and conservative values and serve in the pursuit of power.¹ Electoral campaign seasons intensify these effects for several reasons. The socio-economic conditions of voters structure their political preferences. Political parties and leaders target a large swath of the electorate and the nature of their political campaigns can play a polarizing role. Finally, the costs of losing can be a decisive factor in mobilizing the most active and alert supporters.²

Recent developments in the Georgian political system demonstrate these general patterns. Illiberal forces are gaining momentum in Georgia, a country usually presented as the most advanced in terms of democratic reforms in the post-Soviet space.³ The most visible and culminating results of this illiberal tendency were violent acts committed against the LGBT+ community and journalists during the Tbilisi Pride on July 5, 2021. Fifty-three journalists were injured, and a cameraman died several days later after his hospitalization. His death sparked controversy as the Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that it was caused by a drug overdose. These incidents spurred counterdemonstrations of the pro-Western forces, critical media, and the opposition. The reluctance of a supposed liberal government to go tough against illiberal groups and their violence signals a crisis of democratic projects in Georgia.

In this article, I seek to identify the domestic and external sources of Georgia's illiberalism and study the dynamics by which these illiberal groups rise. I argue here that the prime suspects in permitting illiberal forces going against democracy are threefold. First is the fragmentation of political space among ideologically diverse political parties and groups. Second is the decision of ruling political elites to use illiberal groups in order to insulate political opponents and by doing so ensure their own political survival. Third, the impact of these two domestic conditions allows Russia to support illiberal groups and thereby indirectly challenge Western democratizing efforts.

Illiberal Groups and Gatekeeper Democracy

The concept of illiberalism is often equated with authoritarian forms of governance and describes the qualities of defective democracies⁴ or transitional regimes, which fall within the “gray zone” between democracies and authoritarian regimes.⁵ The term *illiberal democracies* was first coined by Fareed Zakaria to denote political regimes that may hold free and fair elections, yet bring to power authoritarian leaders who are

1 Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, “Is Polarization a Myth?,” *Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (April 2008): 542–55, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381608080493>.

2 Alan I. Abramowitz and Walter J. Stone, “The Bush Effect: Polarization, Turnout, and Activism in the 2004 Presidential Election,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 2, (June 2006): 141–54, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5705.2006.00295.x>.

3 Medet Tiulegenov, Eitan Tzelgov, Valeriya Mechkova, and Staffan I. Lindberg, “Georgia: A Country Report Based on Data 1900–2012,” V-Dem Country Report Series, no. 3, October 2013, https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/cro03_georgia_v10.pdf.

4 Wolfgang Merkel, “Embedded and Defective Democracies,” *Democratization* 11, no. 5 (December 2004): 33–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340412331304598>.

5 Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 1 (January 2002), <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0003>.

corrupt and unresponsive towards their citizens.⁶ The varieties of illiberal regimes include electoral autocracies, competitive autocracies⁷ and hybrid regimes.⁸ Unlike Dahl's polyarchy (also designated as liberal democracy), illiberal regimes cannot constrain executive power and guarantee complete judicial independence. Under these circumstances, civil and political liberties may be infringed and accountability avoided.⁹ At the more grassroots level, illiberal groups push for changing the status quo in favor of conservative values, have undemocratic attitudes, and strive for ideological homogenization of the polity.¹⁰ They oppose minorities on the ground of ideological differences and demand cultural and political equivalence between the nation and state.¹¹ This quest for homogeneity is not exclusively defined on ethnic criteria, it also includes acceptability of cultural norms such as xenophobia and homophobia.

Post-soviet states including Georgia qualify for the title of illiberal regimes at different points in time. Although Georgia is viewed as an electoral democracy, fundamental elements of liberal democracy such as strong civil and political liberties, party systems, and an independent media and judiciary remain difficult to achieve. In 1994-2003, Eduard Shevardnadze eliminated barriers to media freedom and political opposition as well as extensive civil and political liberties, yet these liberalizing trends occurred without genuine grassroots democratization and his regime was regarded as one of unstable authoritarianism.¹² International democratizing pressures and domestic de-legitimization¹³ resulted in the Rose Revolution in 2003 that ousted Shevardnadze from power.¹⁴ But even the reformist team brought by the Rose Revolution and particularly then-President Mikheil Saakashvili, who was elected by an overwhelming majority of the vote cast (almost 97%), failed to become liberal leader. New economic policies and the fight against petty corruption did strengthen the performance and legitimacy of the government. But the series of reforms, which aimed at modernizing different arenas of the polity, did not translate into democracy.

On the contrary, Saakashvili's United National Movement created a dominant party system; oppressed critical media, nongovernmental organizations, and the opposition; and co-opted the Georgian Orthodox Church to win the electoral support of conservative voters. The Church maintained all its privileges. Saakashvili announced that he always supported the decisions of the Patriarch and the Holy

6 Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (November-December 1997): 22-43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20048274>.

7 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

8 Larry Jay Diamond, "Thinking about Hybrid Regimes," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2, (April 2002): 21-35, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2002.0025>.

9 Michael Coppedge, John Gerring, David Altman, Michael Bernhard, Steven Fish, Allen Hicken, Matthew Kroenig, Staffan I. Lindberg, Kelly McMann, Pamela Paxton, Holli A. Semetko, Svend-Erik Skaaning, Jeffrey Staton, and Jan Teorell, "Conceptualizing and Measuring Democracy: A New Approach," *Perspectives on Politics* 9, no. 2, (June 2011): 247-62, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592711000880>.

10 Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-8, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511492037>.

11 Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996); Dankwart A. Rustow, "Transitions to Democracy," *Comparative Politics* 2, no. 3, (1970): 337-63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/421307>.

12 Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 22.

13 Jon C. Pevehouse, *Democracy from above: Regional Organizations and Democratization* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1-67, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511491078>.

14 Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 177-211.

Synod.¹⁵ Such internal dynamics contradicted declared foreign policy goals of Europeanization and NATO integration. These illiberal trajectories enabled skeptical countries within the European Union to justify their decision of rejecting Georgia's Membership Action Plan (MAP).

Saakashvili's government had announced Euro-Atlantic integration as a top foreign policy priority. In 2006, Georgia started Intensified Dialogue on Membership Issues with NATO.¹⁶ Seventy-seven percent of Georgian citizens supported their country's integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the plebiscite conducted on January 5, 2008.¹⁷ After the Russo-Georgian War in August of 2008, the competitive-authoritarian potential of the regime weakened, and the opposition started to build a new coalition, the Georgian Dream, under the leadership of the oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili. Before the parliamentary elections of 2012, the release of the prison tapes depicting the torture of inmates at different Georgian penitentiary establishments sparked public outrage, and Saakashvili admitted his electoral defeat. The period of cohabitation between President Saakashvili; the Georgian Dream parliamentary majority; and its prime minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili, lasted for a year.

The second instance of the peaceful transfer of power happened when Giorgi Margvelashvili won the presidency in 2013. The new coalition government included ideologically-competing parties. But these positive changes transforming Georgia into an electoral democracy were stalled by a number of political decisions made by the Georgian Dream. The party has used illiberal methods to silence the opposition and critical media, including using law enforcement and security officers to blackmail opponents and in extreme cases to follow with legal disputes.¹⁸ The Georgian Dream also engaged in institutional conflicts with President Giorgi Margvelashvili and used harsh methods to disperse anti-occupation demonstrations against the visit of a member of the Russian Duma, Sergei Gavrillov. Furthermore, the Georgian Dream government neither took adequate measures to protect pro-democratic forces from the violence of newly-emerged far-right groups, nor to disrupt their Kremlin connections.¹⁹

Georgia's trajectory appears to be consistent with the theoretical suggestions regarding illiberal regimes and leaders. Drawing on empirical and theoretical reviews, I suggest here a causal mechanism of how illiberal groups may evolve and undermine democracy.

Illiberal groups emerge from the institutional weakness of the political system, when the key stakeholders exert political influence through a personalized party system. Such an institutional setting encourages them to develop illiberal networks and politicize sensitive issues to mobilize supporters. In this article, I explain why illiberal groups are, what are the domestic and external sources of their illiberalism,

¹⁵ "Mikheil Saakashvili Supports the Patriarch," October 20, 2021, <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/449089>.

¹⁶ NATO Offers Intensified Dialogue to Georgia, September 21, 2006, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_22173.htm?selectedLocale=en.

¹⁷ Presidential Ordinance #657, November 23, 2007, <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/96046?publication=0>. See also the concluding protocol of the plebiscite on NATO integration, <https://cesko.ge/ge/search-results/singleview/9004608-2008-wlis-5-ianvris-plebiscitis-shedegebis-shemadjamebeli-oqmebi-3339>.

¹⁸ "Rally against Sex Tape Blackmail," Civil.ge, March 19, 2016, <https://civil.ge/archives/125370>; "Freedom House Releases Nations in Transit Country Report for Georgia," Civil.ge, November 5, 2017 <https://civil.ge/archives/126387>.

¹⁹ "Letter addressed to the Government of Georgia by EU Heads of Mission on the Pride related events of 5 July and their follow-up," July 15, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/georgia/101804/letter-addressed-government-georgia-eu-heads-mission-pride-related-events-5-july-and-their_en.

how they rise, and why and how the struggle between illiberal and liberal groups results in issue politicization and polarization of the political space.

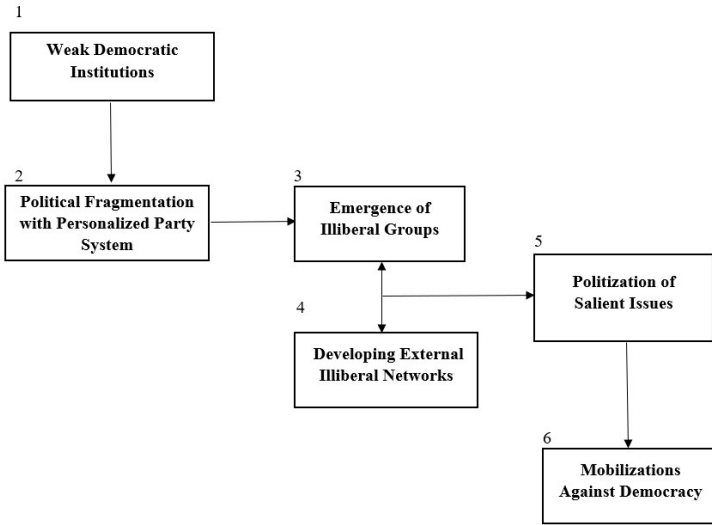


FIGURE 1. Political origins of illiberal groups (created by author)

Domestic and External Sources of Illiberalism in Georgia

The rise of illiberal forces in Georgia has domestic and external causes. Following the peaceful transfer of power after the 2012 parliamentary elections, the political space became more pluralistic. The dominant party system transformed into a two-party system, opposing Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream and Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement. The ruling Georgian Dream contained ideologically eclectic political factions that gradually broke from the coalition. In 2014, the first cracks appeared between Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili and Defense Minister Irakli Alasania of the Free Democrats. Later on, the speaker of the parliament, Davit Usupashvili, disagreed with the party leadership on core issues of judicial reforms. The coalition dissolved because of internal struggles and due to the Georgian Dream neglecting the recommendations of Western partners to be consistent and transparent during judicial appointments.

The ruling party itself used two methods that we can qualify as illiberal against its defectors. First, the law enforcement agencies initiated several lawsuits against the government's former allies, especially Irakli Alasania and his team. Second, the members of the Georgian Dream who disagreed with the party leadership decisions and eventually left the coalition suffered reputational damage from the release of surveillance tapes. No organizers were held responsible for spreading these

materials.²⁰ This selective justice and breaching the right to privacy indicate the weakness of Georgia's democratic institutions.

The Georgian Dream then decided to use far-right movements as a counterweight to its main opponent, the United National Movement, and lowered the election threshold to 5% in order to create the conditions for small radical-right parties to enter the Parliament. Noteworthy in this respect are the results of the 2016 parliamentary elections, in which the Georgian Dream received 48.68% of the proportional vote (guaranteeing it an overall majority of 115 seats in the parliament), the United National Movement 27.11%, and the radical right-wing Alliance of Patriots of Georgia 5.01%, just above the threshold.²¹ The Alliance of Patriots of Georgia's leader, the journalist Irma Inashvili, a vice-speaker of the parliament, had provided the Georgian Dream with prison tapes that largely skewed the election results in favor of Bidzina Ivanishvili's ruling party in 2012—her election then looked like returning a favor. Yet, following the 2020 parliamentary elections, the Georgian Dream invalidated the terms of office of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia for boycotting the Parliament. Irma Inashvili claimed that her refusal to perform her parliamentary duties was aimed at improving the electoral laws, including introducing criminal liability for the abuse of administrative resources during the elections.²² She attempted to cooperate with the government and the opposition without compromising the political identity that eventually marginalized her. The members of the Alliance of Patriots then joined the European Socialists—a paradoxical alliance given that the latter claim a leftist ideology. One of the leaders of Inashvili's party, Nato Chkheidze, joined the United National Movement. These trajectories show that Georgian political parties do not have a clear values system or ideological orientation, and that they adapt their political behavior to whatever will bring results from a short-term perspective.

The leading role of the Georgian Orthodox Church

The Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia is another driver of illiberal values in the country. Opinion polls suggest that the Church is the most trusted institution: 79% of those surveyed view it as essential in forming national identity.²³ This credibility derives from the Church's role played in the history of Georgia when guarding its statehood against enemies. In 1917, the Georgian Orthodox Church regained its independence from the Russian Orthodox Church, and at the end of the 20th century it defied Communist rule. In 2002, the government of Georgia signed a concordat with the Church to recognize its merits and granted it tax, economic, and other privileges.²⁴ Leading the Church thus means being an influential veto player

20 Giorgi Lomsadze, "Georgia's Sex-Tapes Politics Returns: An Explicit Video of a Prominent Lawmaker Has Hit the Internet amid a Rift in the Ruling Party. Georgians Are Asking Why This Keeps Happening," February 5, 2019, <https://eurasianet.org/georgias-sex-tapes-politics-returns>; Claire Bigg, "Georgian Female TV Host Takes Bold Stand in Face of Sex-Tape Scandal," 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-sex-tape-scandal-grigolia/27622049.html>.

21 "Summary Protocol on the Final Results of October 8, 2016 Parliamentary Elections of Georgia," Central Election Commission of Georgia, 2016, <https://cesko.ge/geo/static/2448/archevnebis-shedjameba>.

22 "Boycott Ended Because the Key Requirement Was about the Electoral Amendments," March 12, 2020, 1TV, <https://itv.ge/news/irma-inashvili-boikotis-redjimi-davasrulet-radgan-chveni-mtavari-motkhovna-saarchevno-sistemis-cvilebas-ukavshirdeboda/>.

23 "Future of Georgia: Survey Report," Caucasus Research Resource Centers of Georgia, 2021, p. 23, https://crrc.ge/uploads/tinyince/documents/Future%20of%20Georgia/Final%20FoG_Eng_08_04_2021.pdf; "Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Georgia," February 2021, Center for Insights in Survey Research, International Republican Institute, p. 57, https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_poll_presentation-georgia_february_2021_1.pdf.

24 "The Constitutional Decree of the Parliament of Georgia on the Approval of the Concordat (Constitutional Agreement) between Georgia and the Georgian Autocephalic Orthodox Church," October 22, 2002, <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/41626?publication=0>.

in Georgian society and politics, and managing an important source of wealth that allows it to buy spiritual and political power.

The Church is divided between its conservative and liberal factions. The fact that the health of Georgian Patriarch Ilia II is unstable exacerbates struggles within the ecclesiastical institution for the position of the patriarchy. The will of the patriarch concerning the interim leader of the Church will be made public only after his death. The Church's bylaws enable an interim patriarch to invite its Extended Council within two months to elect a new Patriarch from a list of three nominees.²⁵ So far, the *locum tenens*²⁶ of the Georgian patriarch is Shio Mujiri, who studied at the Moscow Theological Academy and openly backs illiberal forces. In his most recent addresses, Shio Mujiri blamed the LGBT+ community for challenging the nation, using ideological and moral pressures against the majority, and inciting violence. He has also stressed that the Church never excludes sinners if they repent of their sins, but normalizing adultery is unacceptable. In the same appeal, he requested the government to adopt a law prohibiting the insult of religious and national feelings.²⁷ Furthermore, he did not attempt to reconcile the Georgian Dream and the United National Movement following Saakashvili's arrest—quite the opposite: he declared that “biblical canons did not urge us to forgive everyone and everything.”²⁸ Georgian authorities brought charges against Saakashvili. The violent dispersals of November 7, 2007, and May 26, 2011 demonstrations are notable. On June 28, 2018, the Tbilisi City Court sentenced Saakashvili in absentia to eight years in prison for ordering the beating of Valeri Gelashvili, a member of the Georgian Parliament from the Republican Party.²⁹ Recently leaked state security service files show the close contacts of Mujiri with a pro-Russian businessman, Levan Vasadze, and his uncompromising approach towards Western diplomats when discussing LGBT+ community protests. Based on these files, Shio Mujiri understands well that appealing to such sensitive gender issues and holding counterdemonstrations tilts public attitudes to the advantage of Russia.³⁰

The fight between both liberal and conservative factions culminated when Archpriest Giorgi Mamaladze was arrested in 2017 while going to visit the patriarch in Germany, accused of an attempt to poison him. The police discovered cyanide in his luggage after he reached the passport control, but the collection of evidence occurred in breach of procedural laws.³¹ According to the report of the Office of the Public Defender, the state authorities failed to allow the defense team its right to collect evidence, and the government authorities, including the prime minister, neglected the presumption of innocence.³² Inside the Church, the eparch of Chkondidi backed the archpriest and

25 “Bylaws of the Georgian Autocephalic Orthodox Church,” September 18–19, 1995, <http://www.orthodoxy.ge/samartali/debuleba.htm>.

26 That is, the interim patriarch-designate.

27 Preaching of Shio Mujiri, Patriarchal *Locum Tenens*, Bishop of Senaki and Chkhorotku, July 5, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfUnw88F7Q>.

28 Shio Mujiri, Interim Patriarch-Designate, Bishop of Senaki and Chkhorotku, October 17, 2021, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31515027.html>.

29 Court Pleaded Guilty Mikheil Saakashvili, June 28, 2018, <https://tcc.court.ge/ka/Decision/mixeil-saakashvili-sasamarTlom-damashayed-cno>.

30 “How the Church and the Government Attempted to Cancel the 2019 Pride,” Leaked files of surveillance, September 22, 2021, <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/673301-rogor-tsdilobda-mtavroba-eklesia-2019-clis>.

31 “Report on the case file of the archpriest Giorgi Mamaladze,” EMC, 2018, <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/emc-is-shefaseba-dekanoz-giorgi-mamaladzis-sakmeze>.

32 “The Monitoring Report on “the so-called cyanide criminal case,” Public Defender of Georgia, November 15, 2017, <https://ombudsman.ge/geo/akhali-ambebi/saxalxo-damcveli-ew-cianidis-saqmis-monitoringis-angarishs-aqveynebs#>.

contradicted the patriarch, but was expelled by the Synod³³ Soso Okhanashvili, the chief bodyguard of the patriarch, and son-in-law of Metropolitan Dimitri Shiolashvili as well as nephew of Patriarch Ilia II, argued that Archpriest Giorgi Mamaladze was innocent. He testified before the prosecutors about the transgressions happening inside the Church. But pressures from the Church's conservative faction were high and he had to resign from his position and leave for Ukraine.³⁴

The government stands with the Church's conservative mainstream: it lets this conservative wing regularly abuse state-sponsored privileges offered in exchange for support during elections. The government annually grants substantial financial support, gifts lands and properties to the Church, and in the 2021 state budget, assigned 25 million Georgian lari (US \$8 million) to the Church.³⁵ The conservative wing is led by Chorbishop Iakob Iakobishvili, who claimed that former Prime Ministers Giorgi Kvirikashvili and Giorgi Gakharia, as well as Minister of the Interior Vakhtang Gomelauri, were convincing him to assist in removing the patriarch in favor of Shio Mujiri, as well as getting Archpriest Mamaladze to plead guilty in the imputed crime. Chorbishop Iakob Iakobishvili openly claimed his responsibility for physically attacking Petre Tsaava, the archbishop of Chkondidi, because of his revolt against the Patriarch.³⁶ Chorbishop Iakobishvili works closely with Chorbishop Theodore Chuadze, who represented the Church at the inauguration of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow in 2009 and met President Putin in 2017.³⁷ He is also allied with Shorena Tetrushvili, a personal aid to the Georgian Patriarch.

A famous female figure within the Church without any official status, Shorena Tetrushvili influences the clergy and has a close connection with the nun Natalia, a biological sister of Patriarch Ilia II. Carefully avoiding the media, Tetrushvili's rare appearances have included at Mamaladze's trial as the law enforcement authorities granted her the status of victim to represent the patriarch.³⁸ The Church's conservative forces openly called for violence against the LGBT+ community and backed radical right movements in their attacks on the 2021 Tbilisi Pride. For instance, some priests justified different forms of physical assaults against the Pride activists who had posters supporting the LGBT+ community and propagated values that contradicted the Church's norms.³⁹

33 "The minutes of the proceedings of the Holy Synod," The Patriarchate, October 2019, <https://patriarchate.ge/news/2554>.

34 "The Deal between Giorgi Kvirikashvili and the Bishop," Formula News, January 2020, <https://formulanews.ge/News/18672>.

35 Beka Chedia, "The Georgian Orthodox Church as a Political Actor in Uncertain Times," October 2021, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/the-georgian-orthodox-church-as-a-political-actor-in-uncertain-times/>; State Budget of Georgia, 2021, <https://www.mof.ge/images/File/2021-bijeti/27-07-2021/combinepdf.pdf>.

36 "Interview with Chorbishop Iakob Iakobishvili," TV Imedi, November 24, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etXon-pBXCc>; "Accusations of Chorbishop Iakob Iakobishvili," October 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vo4us5sCJBo>.

37 "The Bishop of Akhaltsikhe and Tao-Klarjeti, Theodore (Dimitri) Chuadze," August, 2020, Ifact, <https://bit.ly/3OGt9oK>.

38 She appeared at Mamaladze's court hearing because Tetrushvili was recognized as victim of the act allegedly committed by Mamaladze. The same act was pronounced by law enforcers directed against the patriarch, but since he could not be moved often due to health conditions and his status, his aid Tetrushvili was recognized as victim. However, the authorities further claimed that the assassination of Tetrushvili was also considered, as he did not allow others frequent access to the patriarch.

39 "Who Supports and Who Goes against the Tbilisi Pride?" Radio Liberty, June 30, 2021, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31334344.html>.

Grassroots illiberal movements and their foreign ties

The Church is not the only actor in this burgeoning right-wing sphere. Several right-wing movements have emerged in recent years. More openly political is the Georgian March, a non-parliamentary ally of the Alliance of Patriots, founded in 2017. Bringing together neo-Nazi and xenophobic groups, it proclaimed itself a political party in July 2020 and elected Sandro Bregadze, a former Georgian Dream member and a deputy minister, as its party leader.⁴⁰ The targets of its aggressive actions are immigrants of Iranian and Turkish origin, LGBT+ community members, liberal groups of pro-Western political orientation, and independent journalists.

Radical right-wing groups such as the Georgian March and Georgian National Unity (National Socialist Movement) have regularly organized counterdemonstrations to disperse anti-government protests. One of the emblematic examples was the police raid of the Basiani nightclub in May 2018 to supposedly prevent drug crimes. Basiani symbolized the proximity of Georgian and Western cultures and was associated with the success of modernizing reforms. Young people protested by holding a rave dance party in the streets. Giorgi Gakharia, then interior minister, apologized and called for an end to the demonstrations, stating that it would be difficult for the police to prevent clashes between radical right and liberal groups. Georgian National Unity, led by Giorgi Chelidze, created punitive forces to use against liberals during demonstrations and called for taking ownership of the political agenda.⁴¹ The Georgian March actively used social media to disseminate defamatory and threatening messages against its opponents. It targeted the journalists and media outlets affiliated with the former ruling party, the United National Movement.

The Georgian Dream inconsistently responded to the actions of the Georgian March and Georgian National Unity and detained some of the latter's members only after the organization set up vigilante patrols to expose the crimes of immigrants. But the ruling party, Georgian Dream, has been divided on the issue, and some of its conservative members expressed readiness to post bail for the arrested activists of the Georgian March.⁴² In 2021, the same movements destroyed the offices of the Tbilisi Pride and the Shame Movement that formed to protest against the Russian occupation of the secessionist provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and burned the EU flag. Earlier in 2019, the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia and its leader, Irma Inashvili, organized anti-American demonstrations in front of the US Embassy after attacking former State Department officials at the Tbilisi International Conference.⁴³

A myriad of conservative social movements were also organized within civil society in recent years. Their leaders often have direct or indirect connections to Russia. This is the case, for instance, with Dimitri Lortkipanidze, a member of parliament from the United Opposition in 2008 who then tried, unsuccessfully, to become a public defender. Lortkipanidze chairs the Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center.⁴⁴ The Center offers free Russian language courses and organizes thematic conferences and seminars on foreign policy issues. It supports events emphasizing the political,

40 "Ultra Nationalist Movement 'Georgian March' Transformed into a Political Party," July 7, 2020, [Civil.ge](https://civil.ge/ka/archives/358253).

41 "Fascist Group Moves to Freedom Square," *Newspaper Liberal*, May 15, 2018, <http://liberali.ge/news/view/36612/LIVE-modzraoba-erovnuli-ertobis-tsevreb-dinamodan-rustavelisken-miemartebian>.

42 "Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism," *Transparency International*, May 18, 2018, <https://www.transparency.ge/en/blog/anatomy-georgian-neo-nazism>.

43 "What Did the Alliance of Patriots Demand at the United States Embassy?" *Radio Liberty*, September 15, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3MEoUKA>.

44 Primakov Georgian-Russian Public Center, <https://gorchakovfund.ru/en/centers/georgia/>.

cultural, and religious ties between Russia and Georgia. Lortkipanidze has close contacts with pro-Russian political parties such as the United Georgia Democratic Movement led by Nino Burjanadze, a former speaker of the Parliament of Georgia and a leader of the Rose Revolution; and with Free Georgia, which strives to defend Georgian identity, integrate with EU, and resolve conflicts with Russia.⁴⁵

Notorious oligarch Levan Vasadze, who made his fortune in Russia, mainly in investment and insurance sectors, and who has strong connections with the far-right Russian ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, is a key sponsor of illiberal groups such as the Georgian Demographic Revival Fund, National Religious Institute, Nation and State, and Georgian Idea.⁴⁶ Vasadze developed connections with conservative organizations worldwide, including the US-based International Organization for the Family (IOF) and its leader Brian Brown, who was invited to Tbilisi to share knowledge on how to fight against same-sex marriage and liberal values.⁴⁷ Vasadze organized the 2016 World Congress of Families in Tbilisi. The Congress is an annual meeting held by the conservative Christian family organization, and hosted in a different global city each year. The IOF had been planning to hold its 2014 world congress in Russia, but canceled those plans following the annexation of Crimea.⁴⁸ Levan Vasadze, Mamuka Khazaradze, and Badri Japaridze, along with other oligarchs and media magnates, joined the Supervisory Council of the Georgian Demographic Revival Fund, which calls for promoting family and conservative values in order to reverse the trend of population decline in the country. Vasadze hoped to achieve this goal through raising funds and by engaging in ideological outreach with youth.⁴⁹ It is noteworthy that the National Religious Institute, Nation and State, and Georgian Idea assist Vasadze to recruit new members within his political movement.⁵⁰

Zviad Tomaradze, a lawyer and self-proclaimed human rights activist, chairs the National Religious Institute and Nation and State. These two organizations were set up to promote conservative values, including petitioning against mandatory Covid vaccination⁵¹ and spreading pro-Russian foreign policy discourse. He assisted Emzar Kvitsiani, a member of parliament for the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, with drafting the bill introducing criminal liability for “insulting religious feelings.” Human rights organizations criticized this bill, as it contradicted the right to freedom of expression and urged the Georgian Parliament to block it. The bill ultimately did not pass.⁵² Levan Chachua, a former member of the Orthodox Parents Union who was convicted of interfering in the activities of journalists, established a new political

45 “Political Party Programs,” Partiebige, 2012–2020, <https://partiebige/2020/geo/home>.

46 “Anatomy of Georgian Neo-Nazism,” Transparency International, May 18, 2018, <https://www.transparency.org/en/blog/anatomy-georgian-neo-nazism>; These groups help Vasadze to recruit new members into his organization Unity, Identity, Hope (abbreviated in Georgian as ERI, or Nation), <https://isfed.ge/geo/blogi/qartuli-ideis-koordinirebuli-qseli>.

47 “Interview with Brian Brown about American Conservatism,” International Organization for the Family, February 20, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b05qX9MbQIM>; “Press Conference: Levan Vasadze, Brian Brown, Irakli Gogava,” World Congress of Families, June 16, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vYChwayHEw>.

48 “Interview: Guram Phalavandishvili and Levan Vasadze,” Talk Show with Phalavandishvili, June 13, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mih-2DKVOWQ>.

49 Eka Kevanishvili, “Businessmen for Demographic Revival,” Radio Liberty, July 16, 2013, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/biznesmenebi-demografis-gadasarchenad/25047430.html>.

50 “Coordinated Network of the ‘Georgian Idea’ on Facebook.”

51 Petition 1-152888/21 filed on November 25, 2021, <https://info.parliament.ge/file/1/BillReviewContent/286875>.

52 “Georgia’s Rights Committee Supports Bill against Insulting Religious Feelings,” OC Media, April 25, 2018, <https://oc-media.org/georgias-rights-committee-supports-bill-against-insulting-religious-feelings/>.

movement, the Georgian Idea, advocating against “liberal internationalism” by strengthening ties with Russia.⁵³

During the election campaigns, these conservative groups appeal to traditional values and emphasize the supremacy of Orthodox Christianity.⁵⁴ On May 6, 2021, Vasadze himself established a new movement called “Unity, Identity, Hope,” intended to protect the traditional and religious values of Georgians.⁵⁵ It is noteworthy that Vasadze is a close friend of Shio Mujiri, and met Dugin in Moscow, who later endorsed Georgian far-right groups’ “heroic acts” during the Tbilisi Pride and described these series of violence as the national awakening of Georgia. Furthermore, Dugin reshared the videos of violent attacks at the Office of the Tbilisi Pride and published the bank account details created by his proxies in Georgia on his Facebook page to raise funds in order to post bail for the detainees from the counterdemonstration.⁵⁶

To propagate these values, Vasadze sponsored the television channel Alt Info, launched in 2019 and whose name is openly inspired by the US alt-right. Alt Info rallies radical right-wing groups and broadcasts aggressive and xenophobic programs. It has hosted and featured Dugin to propagate the ideology of Eurasianism and anti-Atlanticism.⁵⁷ Alt Info coordinates multiple Facebook pages and groups spreading misinformation, and uses entertaining pages to attract subscribers, practices that pushed Facebook to block them several times.⁵⁸ In November 2020, the Georgian Communications Commission authorized the broadcasting of this private media outlet.⁵⁹ Although the Communications Commission fined Alt Info several times, it required the internet provider Silknet to include it in its service package.⁶⁰ The two Alt Info creators also established the non-governmental organization Alternative for Georgia, whose board of directors includes key members of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia: Konstantine Morgoshia, who funds the Georgian March; Shota Martinenko, who owns 50% of Alt Info’s shares; along with Zurab Makharadze, Irakli Kizilashvili, and Giorgi Kardava, all of whom are linked to Irma Inashvili and the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia.⁶¹

All these illiberal groups have common beliefs. They express extreme intolerance towards sexual minorities, support antiliberal views, and violently enforce them. Their fundamentals are the “natural family” and conservative values. They emphasize the need for strengthening the constitutional status of the Georgian language and intend to solve the demographic crisis by banning abortions and developing natalist policies, as well as creating alternative (to the West) sources of information. They are also against foreign ownership of Georgian land, they support the nationalization

53 “Legion of Antichrist Cannot Win War against the Georgian Nation,” Interview with Levan Chachua, July 14, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3ymoQA1>.

54 “Georgian Idea,” Myth Detector, July 25, 2017, <https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/profile/georgian-idea/>; “Electoral Platform,” <http://qartuliidea.ge/>; for additional information, see: <http://qartuliidea.ge/bmulebi/>.

55 “Unity, Identity, Hope,” <https://eri.ge/about/>.

56 “Dugin’s 26 Facebook Posts in Support of Violent Protest,” July 28, 2021, <https://www.mythdetector.ge/ka/myth/duginis-26-fb-posti-dzaladobriv-i-aktsiis-mkhardasacherad>.

57 “Interview with Alexandr Dugin,” Alt-Info, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkRMTnXXznI>. This video’s content has become unavailable following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

58 “Coordinated and Secret Operations of Alt-Info on Facebook,” ISFED, August 2020, <https://www.isfed.ge/geo/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoring/alt-infos-koordinirebuli-faruli-operatsia-Facebook-ze>.

59 “Authorizations of Broadcasting,” Communications Commission, June 22, 2021, <https://registry.comcom.ge/BAuthorizations.aspx>.

60 “Silknet Includes Alt-Info in its Network,” Radio Liberty, September 9, 2021, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31452111.html>.

61 “Coordinated Network of the ‘Georgian Idea’ on Facebook.”

of natural resources and the protection of local production,⁶² and are willing to use elements of direct democracy such as referendums to change unwanted politics.

Concerning their foreign policy positions, all these illiberal groups are willing to cooperate with Russia and do not perceive it as an occupier in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Leaders of the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia have visited Russia several times and attempted to establish direct contacts with the de facto authorities in Abkhazia. Irma Inashvili's secret visit to Sokhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, caused controversy among Abkhaz politicians: some viewed it as unhelpful to their republic's interests, while others alleged that the Alliance of Patriots approved the recognition of the breakaway region, and this attitude might lay the foundation for mutually-beneficial cooperation.⁶³ The pro-Russian stance of these illiberal groups translates into anti-NATO attitudes, and softer anti-EU positions, insisting on the need to build a European state without linking it to the issue of EU membership.

Gender Issues and the Vicious Circle of Polarization

One of the most visible drivers of illiberal politics in today's Georgia relates to gender issues and their weaponization. For decades, the politicization of identity was based on national identity/territorial sovereignty issues, more than sexual and gender identity. This has partly changed, with now illiberal actors using LGBT+ issues during the pre-election periods to attract conservative voters. Some Church priests preach intolerance to the extent that some parishioners openly oppose them in the name of the same Christian values.⁶⁴ The government has been using a similar illiberal language when, for instance, Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili stated that 95% of Georgians were against the Tbilisi Pride and advised canceling this demonstration, blaming the United National Movement for organizing the march.⁶⁵

This rise of illiberal voices around identity politics is part of a broader context of polarization in which the liberal left is also politically active. Even if the Georgian Dream positioned itself as embracing the values of social democracy, its conservative wing prevailed, and the rights of the majority dominated its political agenda. Against it, the Georgian left, empowered by Western support (for example, the Heinrich Böll Stiftung and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung South Caucasus), hold that the government uses identity politics to avoid social and economic responsibilities. These leftist groups now mobilize against monopolistic pharmacies and big corporations, as well as for environmental issues. For example, leftist groups organized demonstrations in West Georgia against the Namokhvani Dam to be built by the Turkish company ENKA.⁶⁶ Young leftists have supported local communities by giving them access to social media to voice their concerns. Newly emerging small parties draw their electoral communications from left-wing populism (for example, Aleko Elisashvili, who chairs Citizens; and Ana Dolidze, who chairs the For People political party). These parties

62 "Who is Zviad Tomaradze?," 2018, Ifact, <https://www.ifact.ge/tomaradze/>; "Zviad Tomaradze Announces the Formation of a New Organization – Nation and State," January 18, 2019, GMTV, <https://www.gmtv.ge/?p=53544>.

63 "Unpatriotic Act of the Alliance of Patriots," Ifact, October 2020, <https://www.ifact.ge/aliansi/>; Jimsher Rekhviashvili, "Pilgrimage under the Blessing of the Occupant," Radio Liberty, August 2020, <https://bit.ly/3OLYzTg>.

64 "Bishop Iakob Is Informed about Clergy's Violent Incitements on July 5 during Preaching," Radio Liberty, July 12, 2021, <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31354372.html>.

65 "PM on 'March of Dignity': '95% of the Population Is against the Propaganda March,'" Civil.Ge, July 12, 2021, <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/431681>.

66 "Assessment of Namokhvani HPP Agreement," Social Justice Center, March 4, 2021, <https://socialjustice.org.ge/ka/products/namokhvani-hesis-khelshekrulebis-shefaseba>

have advocated for equal access to social, health, and educational opportunities and demanded a fair redistribution of wealth. Even the center-right political parties such as Lelo and the United National Movement use the elements of left-wing populism in their election programs. In the context of such polarization, LGBT+ community members have different views on the methods of fighting for their rights. Their main concern is that the issue's politicization causes its marginalization, and political and social conditions of the LGBT+ community remain unimproved even with a so-called liberal government in power.

This polarization around gender and sexual identity amplifies the broader polarization of the political space. Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream and Mikheil Saakashvili's United National Movement do not have equal political opportunities because the former controls administrative resources and oligarchic capital. Though Ivanishvili has officially left politics, he still influences the decisions of the ruling party, and several media outlets have close ties with the Georgian Dream. On the other side, the United National Movement cannot unify the opposition and become a front-runner because its leaders are unwilling to share power with other opposition forces. Since the United National Movement had seized TV Imedi, Ivanishvili's new Georgian Dream government returned this television station to the family of the oligarch Arkadi Patarkatsishvili. Similarly, the Georgian Dream government used legal tools to register the ownership of another television channel, Rustavi 2, under Kibar Khalvashi, another Georgian oligarch whose relations with Saakashvili's government deteriorated because of his friendship with Irakli Okruashvili, who had formerly served as defense minister.

This polarization is accentuated by the fact that the whole Georgian media ecosystem shows "political parallelism": that is, it parallels, reinforces, and amplifies political divisions.⁶⁷ The television channel Post TV supports the current Georgian Dream government and openly attacks the opposition channels by broadcasting cynical and insulting media content. This same parallelism can be seen on the opposition side: The television channel Mtavari Arkhi demonstrates political affinity towards Saakashvili and frames its media content according to the preferences of his political party; the director of Mtavari Arkhi is a former justice minister and deputy prosecutor general who justified the attacks of 2007 on TV Imedi as its owner, Arkadi Patarkatsishvili, used this opposition media to undermine Saakashvili's leadership; a former defense minister, Davit Kezerashvili, owns Formula TV and favors the political party European Georgia;⁶⁸ the Tsereteli family owns TV Pirveli and has close business ties with two oligarchs, Mamuka Khazaradze and Badri Japaridze; and so on.

The 2020 new electoral law introduced a proportional system and a lower electoral threshold, thus incentivizing political actors to compete separately for parliamentary seats instead of pooling resources against the ruling party. Different factions within the Georgian Dream have seen this electoral legislation as an opportunity and defected from the party. Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned over his disagreement with the party regarding the detention of Nika Melia, the chair of the United National Movement. Melia refused to post bail following his arrest on charges of participation

67 Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511790867>.

68 Simona Weinglass, "State Prosecutor Announces Likely Indictment of Gal Hirsch, Would-Be Police Head," *The Times of Israel*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/state-prosecutor-announces-likely-indictment-of-gal-hirsch-would-be-police-head/?fbclid=IwARoVFKNvQql6IH3YQU3G177LvMISyONfux3KAWZBore-nAFIqUBnUngoTfWU>.

in the violence that took place during the June 20, 2019 demonstrations.⁶⁹ After the 2020 parliamentary elections, political parties could not reconcile their positions and the country's fragile equilibrium was threatened by parliamentary boycott and fragmentation of the political order. The personalization of political parties disables political actors from winning an overwhelming majority.

To avoid a deeper fragmentation, Christian Danielson, a personal envoy of President of the European Council Charles Michel, with the help of the US and EU ambassadors and the President of Georgia, Salome Zurbishvili, achieved the agreement, "A Way ahead for Georgia," brokered on April 19, 2021 with all opposition parties except for the United National Movement.⁷⁰ This agreement addresses perceptions of politicized justice, stresses the importance of ambitious electoral and judicial reforms, and sets the rules for power-sharing in the Parliament by allowing the opposition to chair key parliamentary committees. Finally, the agreement outlines the circumstances for a snap parliamentary election.⁷¹ But the Georgian Dream government withdrew from the April 19 Agreement and its leaders explained this decision by fulfilling several conditions of the agreement (for instance, releasing the so-called political prisoners, implementing electoral reforms, and expressing readiness for the snap parliamentary election). After the Georgian Dream left the agreement, the leadership of the United National Movement signed it. This agreement is the first attempted democratic transition pact aimed at reducing the effects of polarization in Georgia. So far, only the opposition subscribes to it.

Former President Mikheil Saakashvili arrived in Georgia several days before the local elections and was arrested and imprisoned on October 1, 2021. His arrival was an unpleasant surprise leading to the mobilization of voters from both sides. His harsh electoral rhetoric seeded fear among Georgian Dream activists, a mobilizing effect that resulted in increased political polarization. The Georgian Dream received 46.74 % of the proportional vote. In all major cities, including the capital, the run-off elections for mayors were announced between the United National Movement and Georgian Dream candidates.⁷² In the meantime, Saakashvili went on a hunger strike that led the United National Movement to organize protests to request his transfer to a hospital in a non-penitentiary clinic, in order to prevent Saakashvili from life-threatening complications. Some politicians and journalists joined the hunger strike in solidarity. The Public Defenders of Georgia and Ukraine visited the former president at the penitentiary institution. But the Ministry of Justice decided to leave Saakashvili in the prison clinic and to hold trial hearings there, citing security concerns.⁷³ This latest episode in Georgia's hectic political life accelerated the country's polarization and the entrenchment of politicians into divisive and

69 On June 20, 2019, the Parliament of Georgia hosted the Interparliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy. A member of the Russian State Duma, Sergey Gavrilov, sat in the chair of the speaker of the Georgian Parliament. This incident sparked anti-occupation protests. The police used disproportionate force against the protestors: a total of 275 people were wounded (187 civilians, 15 journalists, and 73 policemen). "Victims of 20–21 June without Status," Open Society Foundation, November 2019, <https://osgf.ge/20-21-ivnisis-dazaralebulebi-statusis-gareshe/>.

70 Elene Panchulidze and Richard Youngs, "Defusing Georgia's Political Crisis: An EU Foreign Policy Success?" May 10, 2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/05/10/defusing-georgia-s-political-crisis-eu-foreign-policy-success-pub-84494>.

71 "A Way ahead for Georgia," April 19, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/210418_mediation_way_ahead_for_publication_0.pdf.

72 Central Election Commission of Georgia, "The 2021 Municipal Elections," https://archiveresults.cec.gov.ge/results/20211030/#/ka-ge/election_45/dashboard.

73 *Night Courier*, "Interview with Rati Bregadze, the Justice Minister of Georgia," TV Rustavi 2, November 5, 2021, <https://rustavi2.ge/ka/news/214065>.

personalized rhetoric that, in the long run, serves the interests of illiberal groups arguing that Western-inspired liberalism brings only chaos and instability.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Illiberal forces gather strength from political fragmentation. Far-right movements rise and strengthen their capacities during democratic setbacks, serving the short-term interest of those in power, or of central institutions such as the Church. Illiberal groups also gain visibility by politicizing salient issues such as gender and sexuality and polarizing the political space. One can conclude that they are a byproduct of the process of democratization. However, the political price of engaging with the far right is high and ruling parties need to also attract the electoral support of the more liberal voters, especially in multi-party systems, irrespective of their degree of institutionalization. Russia uses these domestic conditions to supply local illiberal groups with demanded assistance. Disregarding the democratic rules of the game by the domestic political elites thus enables the Kremlin to delay Georgia's Western-driven democratization.

Democratic institutions matter. This is not to say that democratic regimes do not have illiberal groups; however, they can be fought against and limited to smaller constituencies. An independent judiciary and media, and an undivided opposition that can attract different groups of voters, are the best tools to prevent illiberal forces from destabilizing the polity. Conversely, when political fragmentation occurs, coupled with personalized political parties, the emergence of illiberal groups is facilitated. In conclusion, the institutional framework provides political opportunities for the emergence of illiberal groups; however, whether they successfully mobilize against democracy depends on the political actions of domestic and external political actors. Thus, political polarization is a pathway to illiberalism.

⁷⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 231.



The Transnational Networks of the European Radical Populist Right and the Beacon of Hungarian Illiberal Democracy

JEAN-YVES CAMUS

Abstract

Radical right parties in Europe have been in negotiations since 2018 in order to form a single, unified group in the European Parliament. Today, there are two competing caucuses: one, which is considered the “extreme right” by European standards; and another, which is a collection of far-right, Euroskeptical parties. A unified caucus would challenge the leadership of mainstream conservatives and Christian Democrats in the Parliament and be a show of strength by the radical right. For those who are at the origin of this attempt, namely Marine Le Pen from the French National Rally and Matteo Salvini, leader of the Italian Lega, the goal is also to mainstream their ideology by reaching an alliance with the Hungarian Fidesz party and the Polish Law and Justice Party. Both have become the beacons of illiberal democracy and role models for Western parties that used to be labeled “extreme right” and in need of a break from their past. However, tactical as well as ideological issues have, so far, prevented this unification of the radical right from becoming a reality.

Keywords: Illiberal Democracy, Extreme Right, Radical Right, European Parliament, Law and Justice Party, Rassemblement National, Lega con Salvini

The current balance of power within the radical right in the European Parliament

There are many political parties within the European Union that can claim the mantle of “populist” in the sense of the definition used by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. Almost as many can rightly be classified as belonging to the “radical right” and even to the “extreme right.”¹ I focus in this article on the current state of international cooperation between radical-right parties and the competition that has arisen between the European Parliament political groups Identity and Democracy (ID) and the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).

I also analyze the attempts, so far unsuccessful, to create within the European Parliament a common group, which would be slightly smaller (in terms of number of seats) than that of the European People’s Party (EPP). The latter group traditionally brings together conservatives and Christian Democrats. It was the EPP that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán chose to leave on March 18, 2021. This project appeals to the radical right (notably the Lega con Salvini [League with Salvini, hereafter Lega] in Italy and the Rassemblement National [National Rally, hereafter RN] in France), who seek to shed their image of being extreme-right parties, which handicaps their electoral competitiveness. Alongside Fidesz, the Polish conservatives of the ruling Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, hereafter PiS) also support this project.

There are currently seven political groups in the European Parliament, plus one consisting of non-attached Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). The Parliament’s rules of procedure stipulate that a minimum of 23 members is necessary to form a political group, and that it must include MEPs representing at least a quarter of the 27 member states.² In the current legislature (2019–2024), the EPP has 177 (25.1%) of the chamber’s 705 elected members, thus overtaking the Social Democrats (145, or 20.5%) and the Liberals (102, or 14.5%).

The groups to the right of the EPP are Identity and Democracy,³ chaired by an elected member of the Lega (61, or 8.7%), and the ECR (64, or 9.1%),⁴ chaired by one of the ideologues of the PiS, the political philosopher Ryszard Legutko. Legutko shares this office with former Italian Minister for South and Territorial Cohesion Raffaele Fitto, elected from Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy), a formation that is both post-Fascist (that is, which follows in the footsteps of the former Alleanza Nazionale [National Alliance] of Gianfranco Fini, who dropped all references to Fascism in 1995) and national-conservative (in the sense of being nationalist politically and conservative on moral issues).

The non-registered alliance is a heterogeneous group, which includes: the 12 elected members of Fidesz; a former Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, hereafter AfD) elected official; one MEP from Hungary’s Jobbik Magyarorszáért Mozgalom (Movement for a Better Hungary, hereafter Jobbik), which is now part of the coalition opposing Orbán; two members of the Greek Χρυσή Αυγή (Golden Dawn), whom neither ID nor ECR want to see join them because of their neo-Nazi ideology; and four former RN deputies, who in 2022 defected to Reconquête! (Reconquest!), the party created in January 2022 by far-right French pundit-turned-presidential-candidate Éric Zemmour. The defection of these French MEPs who left far-right candidate Marine Le Pen in the middle of her campaign for the presidential elections of April 2022 has reversed the balance of power which, at the start of their terms, had given Identity and Democracy a one-seat advantage over the ECR.

The search for European alliances and the question of ideological and tactical proximity

The question of power relations and alliances in the European Parliament is not limited to the seating arrangements among those with a sense of ideological affinity for one another. There

1 In the European context, the label “extreme right” usually means the party is associated with Fascism; National-Socialism or an authoritarian right-wing movement from the 1930s–1940s, either because of its ideological roots or because of its present-day ideology.

2 This means that, after the 2019 election, when the UK was still in the EU, it needed group members from seven countries.

3 The member parties of the group are the Italian Lega, the French RN, the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria), the Belgian Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest), the Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany), the Estonian Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond (Conservative People’s Party of Estonia), the Czech SPD, the Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom), the Danish Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People’s Party), and the Perussuomalaiset (Finns Party). See: <https://fridgroup.eu/>.

4 Among the member formations of the group that are comparable to the radical populist right are the Spaniards of Vox, the Brothers of Italy, the Sverigedemokraterna (Swedish Democrats), and the PiS.

The Transnational Networks of the European Populist Right

are two main issues in the functioning of a political alliance: that of the allocation of material resources (offices, staff, funding), and that of political visibility (speaking time in the hemicycle, committee memberships). These explain why there is such a push to form an alliance and calls to unify all the radical populist right-wing MEPs under a common group. This creates a tactical dimension in European Parliament politics, which sometimes comes to thwart the notion of ideological proximity.

In the European Parliament, members do not sit according to their nationality, but are encouraged to join a political group, which is similar to a congressional caucus in the United States. The European political project tends to go beyond the nation-state, moving towards a form of international federalism, or even supra-nationality. This is why Parliament recognizes and funds transnational political parties, which are separate entities from parliamentary groups. They can create think tanks, which also receive separate funding. The European institutions treat them as complementary entities with an important role to play in the process of strengthening democracy within the EU.

Identity and Democracy is a political party, in addition to being a parliamentary group. As such, it can admit to its membership parties that have no elected members in Parliament, such as the Bulgarians of Движение Воля (Volya Movement), the Portuguese of Chega! (Enough!), the Poles of the Kongres Nowej Prawicy (Congress of the New Right), and the Slovaks of Sme Rodina (We are a family), who are represented in their national parliaments and aspire to be also present in Brussels. The ECR party, whose platform is built on Euroscepticism and the return to a Europe of nations founded on Christian values, is thus much broader than the parliamentary group of the same name. It attracts several constituencies, which straddle the line between conservative nationalism and the radical right (the Nacionālā Apvienība [National Alliance] in Latvia; or the Hrast – Pokret za uspješnu Hrvatsku [Hrast-Movement for Successful Croatia], stemming from the Right Party, a continuation of the Ustashi lineage).⁵

The larger a group is, the better it is for all parties affiliated with it. This is why the question of transnational networks on the radical right is not only a question of ideology: there is so much money and political visibility at stake that all the far-right parties sitting in the European Parliament may be tempted to overcome their disagreements with possible partners in order to form a group.

Finally, the symbolic dimension of the radical populist right's leadership also matters. It was first held by the Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement, which is neo-Fascist) following the first elections to the European Parliament in 1979. Then France's far-right Front National (National Front) took its place in the Parliament and the leadership fell to its party boss, Jean-Marie Le Pen. He lasted in this role from 1984 until at least 2011,⁶ due both to his charisma and his party's electoral results. After him and to this day, Matteo Salvini and Marine Le Pen (daughter of Jean-Marie) have shared this more-or-less undisputed leadership. The former represents a government party accepted as a coalition partner by the Italian right, while the latter remains hostile to the unification of the various right-wing forces (that is, between the RN, Reconquest!, and the right wing of the mainstream conservatives of Les Républicains [The Republicans]). However, Marine Le Pen does support the process of ideological reorganization within her own party, which leads her to seek, for domestic political purposes, the broadest possible alliances at the international level in order to make voters forget that RN is first and foremost an anti-immigration, nativist party.

Only by considering all these factors can we understand the objectives of those who seek the unity of all the radical-right populists at the European level, as well as the difficulties they encounter in achieving this and the pivotal role played by Fidesz and Viktor Orbán, and, to a lesser degree, the Polish PiS, in seeking to build this unity.

Hungarian and Polish arbiters

What role can Fidesz and PiS play in building a unified network of European radical-right populists? What would motivate them to join it, considering that such alliances had no influence on the choice of Hungarian voters during their national elections in April 2022, and that Polish voters, who will elect their Parliament in 2023, certainly do not care any more than the Hungarians? Moreover, these alliances bear a reputational risk by associating themselves with parties often

⁵ Website of the European Conservatives and Reformists, <https://ecrgroup.eu/ecr>.

⁶ Jean-Marie Le Pen left the presidency of the National Front in January 2011. He remained an MEP until 2019.

perceived as far-right, with the pejorative connotation that this term carries, both in Western Europe and in the bodies of the European Union.

Fidesz left the EPP of its own accord, but was left with little choice after the latter altered its statutes to exclude it. Fidesz represents a country which, since September 12, 2018, has been the subject of a European Parliament resolution asking the Council to rule on the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach by Hungary of the fundamental values of the European Treaty. This is the implementation of the procedure provided for in Article 7 of the Treaty of Rome, which may entail the suspension of some of the rights deriving from the application of the treaties to the member state in question.

The PiS is in a different situation. It is in power in a country that is even more at odds with Brussels, since Article 7 was used for the first time against Poland on December 20, 2017, at the behest of the European Commission.⁷ It is therefore possible that the two parties will consider allying themselves with movements considered far-right, increasingly so if they were to be confined to the opposition in their respective countries. It may seem like a low-cost move. Nevertheless, PiS has more to lose than does Fidesz. The former is in fact perfectly integrated into the fraction of European Reformists and Conservatives which, until Brexit, included the British Conservatives, and now has member parties endowed with a respectable reputation and real weight on the political spectrum, such as the Czech *Občanská demokratická strana* (Civic Democratic Party) (which returned to power in November 2021) or the *Nieuw Vlaamse Alliantie* (New Flemish Alliance) (which holds the post of minister-president of the province of Belgian Flanders).

On July 2, 2021, Marine Le Pen announced that she had signed a joint declaration on the future of the European Union with Matteo Salvini; Viktor Orbán; Jaroslaw Kaczyński; the Spanish leader of the conservative populist party Vox, Santiago Abascal; and the rising star of the Italian right, Georgia Meloni; along with 10 other European political parties.⁸ This marks a step forward in the formation of a common ideological platform. If it leads to the creation of a common group in the European Parliament, it will constitute an important political event and an unprecedented realignment of the European right. However, this common group has not yet been formalized. The question is: why?

One of the reasons is that Orbán's ideological roots, like those of Kaczyński, lie in a tradition that is not of the extreme right. The Hungarian prime minister is a national-conservative whose party claims to belong to an "authentic" Christian-democratic tradition—that is, not to that of the German *Christlich Demokratische Union* (Christian Democratic Union), long led by Chancellor Angela Merkel, but to a Christian conservatism that is at the same time sovereigntist, morally conservative (if not faithful in all respects to the Social Doctrines of the Catholic Church), insists on the Christian roots of Western civilization, and maintaining, against all odds, the formal framework of representative democracy. Fidesz is a party that developed during the period from 2002–2010 when Orbán was in opposition from the center-right and won the majority thanks to the efforts of "civic circles," a grassroots movement of civil society representing the interests of the nationalist middle class that had returned to traditional religious values.⁹

This is a radically different approach from that of the Italian Lega and the French RN, and it reduces the chances for mutual understanding, except on a few general points such as the rejection of a multicultural society, the promotion of national sovereignty, and their preference for a regime in which executive power is "vertical," the independence of the judiciary is infringed upon, countervailing forces are weak and seen as enemies, and the system of checks and balances is despised as a "proof" of Western "weakness."

Both PiS and Fidesz want to replace the old elites, support the revival of nationalism, promote the role of religion (mainly Catholicism, although there also exists an arch-conservative wing of the Calvinist Reformed Church of Hungary) and their opposition to everything that constitutes

⁷ The sanction mechanism can go as far as suspending the right to vote of the country concerned, but not as far as exclusion. The suspension does not prevent European decisions from continuing to apply to the member state, such that it does not produce the same effects as a voluntary exit from the European Union. For a precise explanation of the procedure for triggering Article 7, see: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/fr/headlines/eu-affairs/20180222STO298434/etat-de-droit-comment-fonctionne-article-7-infographic>.

⁸ See the RN website: <https://rassemblementnational.fr/communiqués/lerassemblement-des-patriotes-europeens-est-lancé/>.

⁹ See Béla Greskovits, "Rebuilding the Hungarian Right through Conquering Civil Society: The Civic Circles Movement," *East European Politics* 36, no. 2 (January 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1718657>.

The Transnational Networks of the European Populist Right

a mockery of Western European values—and therefore a “betrayal” of the “national soul.” This can only be understood through the desire to erase the legacy of the Communist period through the adoption of national-conservative ideologies drawing on movements of the interwar period: the authoritarian regime of Hungarian Regent Miklós Horthy and the Polish statesman Roman Dmowski’s Stronnictwo Narodowo-Demokratyczne (National Democratic Party).¹⁰

This barrier to mutual understanding between Central European parties and their French and Italian counterparts has been aggravated by the practical absence of French or Italian translations of the works of both Polish and Hungarian ideologues from the national-conservative movements. It was only in 2020 that a French neoconservative theoretical journal with limited circulation, *Krisis*, published the text written by Viktor Orbán in 2018 under the title: “What Is Illiberal Democracy?”¹¹ While French New Right philosopher Alain de Benoist is regularly interviewed in the Hungarian press,¹² very few Hungarian conservative intellectuals have reached a French audience, apart from the late philosopher Thomas Molnar (Hungarian: Molnár Tamás, 1921–2010), who was familiar with the counterrevolutionaries of the 19th century, with Thomism, and with the French conservative philosopher Charles Maurras as well as with the New Right. Together with the former Fidesz politician and member of the European Parliament, György Schöpflin, who died in 2021, Molnar is also one of the few to have published in the Anglo-Saxon world (in the United States for the former, in Great Britain for the latter).¹³

Regarding Poland’s PiS, French-speaking audiences are only familiar with the work of one of its leading intellectuals, Ryszard Legutko, titled *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies*, published in 2016.¹⁴ On a more general level, familiarity with Hungary has recently been enriched by the works of Catherine Horel,¹⁵ and by familiarity with the intellectual landscape of Central Europe through the monumental and indispensable dictionary co-edited by Joanna Nowicki and Chantal Delsol.¹⁶

This recent revival of interest in Central Europe, as well as in the theoretical foundations of illiberal democracy, is also expressed by the focus on these topics in the French national-conservative monthly periodical *L’Incorrect*,¹⁷ the neoconservative monthly *Éléments*,¹⁸ and a specialized online publication called the “Visegrad Post,”¹⁹ founded by the Franco-Hungarian journalist François Lavallou (Hungarian name: Almásy Ferenc)²⁰ in partnership with the Hungarian daily *Magyar Nemzet*, the Polish weekly *Do Rzeczy*, and the French identitarian web-TV channel TV Libertés. Some French people have also made known the Hungarian radical-right movement surrounding

10 On the ideological roots of PiS, see Adam Folvarčny and Lubomir Kopeček: “Which Conservatism? The Identity of the Polish Law and Justice Party,” *Politics in Central Europe* 16 (2020–21): 159–188, <https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2020-0008>.

11 See *Krisis* vol. 50, September 2020. *Krisis* is a journal founded in 1988 by Alain de Benoist to open a dialog with intellectuals not affiliated with the New Right but open to discussion on the issues that are important to this movement.

12 In 2018, he was published in *Mandiner* (https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20181214_alain_de_benoist_interju) and several times in the now defunct *Magyar Idők* (<https://www.magyaridok.hu/belfold/orban-viktor-bebizonyitotta-hogy-mindenekelot-nepe-sorsaval-torodik-2418268/>). His work is also known in the small Hungarian perennialist circles that publish the *Pannon Front* and *Magyar Híperjón* reviews. Several of his works have been translated by the Europa Authentica publishing house in Budapest.

13 The lack of knowledge about Hungarian conservatives also affects the historiography of the fascist movements of the 1930s and ’40s. In Latin countries, the Romanian Iron Guard and its mysticism, with the “martyr” figures of Codreanu, Mota, and Marin, has aroused much more interest than the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party, whose leader, Ferenc Szálasi had his book, *Great Space, Vital Space, Guiding People*, published in December 2017 by Ars Magna Publishing of the French nationalist-revolutionary activist Christian Bouchet. See: https://www.editions-ars-magna.com/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=150.

14 See: *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies* (New York: Encounter Books, 2016), available in French translation as *Le Diable dans la Démocratie: Tentations Totalitaires au Cœur des Sociétés Libres* (Paris: Éditions de l’Artilleur, 2021).

15 In particular, her biography: Le Régent Horthy (Perrin, 2014) and her *Histoire de la nation Hongroise: Des premiers Magyars à Viktor Orbán* (Paris: Éditions Tallandier, 2021).

16 Joanna Nowicki and Chantal Delsol, *La Vie de l’esprit en Europe centrale et orientale depuis 1945* (Éditions Cerf, 2021).

17 See: <https://lincorrect.org/le-nouveau-proces-de-lest-la-question-hongroise-lincorrect/>.

18 See: Alain de Benoist, “La démocratie illibérale et ses ennemis,” *Éléments* no. 174, October 2018.

19 See: <https://visegradpost.com/fr/>.

20 Ferenc Almásy is a regular speaker at the colloquiums of the Iliade Institute, which belongs to the Identitarian movement and forms part of the intellectual continuity of Dominique Venner (1935–2013).

Jean-Yves Camus

the neofascist Jobbik party since the 2010s, such as the former Alsatian identity activist Nicolas de Lamberterie, founder of the French branch of the Hatvannégy Vármegye Ifjúsági Mozgalom (Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement), who later joined the National Rally.²¹

Within conservative intellectual circles, both American and Western European, which are present in Budapest and working in connection with Fidesz, one may notice the involvement of Erick Tegnér, who is a close friend of Marion Maréchal (granddaughter of Jean-Marie Le Pen and niece of Marine Le Pen) and supporter of Éric Zemmour, at the Danube Institute in the capacity of Visiting Fellow.²² Zemmour is, among other things, the founder of the online media *Livre Noir*, which presents Hungarian news²³ and covers the Russian-Ukrainian war from an angle that is very favorable to Russia.²⁴ Moreover, since the publication of the presidential candidates' tax returns prior to the elections set for May 10 and 24, it has been known that the Hungarian bank MKB made €10.6 million in personal loans over 16 months directly made out to Marine Le Pen for her campaign.²⁵ Most of the bank's capital is held by a childhood friend of the Hungarian Prime Minister, Lőrinc Mészáros, allied with the entrepreneur Lászlo Szijj, who is also close to Orbán.

Various concurrent initiatives

With these foundations laid, the next step is to question what are the initiatives involving Fidesz and/or PiS that tend to establish relations with national-populist or far-right parties, within the above-described framework of building an alliance at the European Union level? Originally, the driving tandem of the alliance was composed of Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini, who, while now deputy prime minister of Italy, at that time was the minister of the interior.

On October 8, 2018, they met in Rome to create a joint platform for the European elections in May 2019. Salvini, who has already shown his determination to take the lead on the union of "sovereignists," charts a tortuous course. He has indeed previously outlined a rapprochement with Orbán, whom he met on August 28, 2018, in Milan, again in the run-up to the European elections. Their common enemy has since been French President Emmanuel Macron, labeled the "leader of the pro-migrant parties" in Europe.²⁶ The leader of the Lega proceeded by reuniting his own European alliance in Milan, on April 8, 2019, dubbed the Europe of Common Sense, bringing together representatives of the AfD, the Perussuomalaiset (Finns Party), and the Dansk Folkeparti (Danish People's Party), with the ambitious goal of moving towards a "new European dream" built on identity.²⁷ He appealed to Viktor Orbán, who was "unavailable" to participate in this event, to join his allies, the Dutch Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom) of Geert Wilders but without the nostalgists, the "extremists," the veterans.²⁸

Nevertheless, on August 28, 2018, Salvini and Orbán met in Italy in another setting and seemed to agree on the fight against immigration, the convergence of their political action, and their describing the French president as the loathed representative of the Europeanists and liberal

²¹ Abel Mestre and Caroline Monnot, "Le FN et les radicaux: 'Je l'aime, moi non plus,'" *Le Monde*, December 19, 2014, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2014/12/19/le-fn-et-les-radicaux-je-l-aime-moi-non-plus_5992859_823448.html.

²² See the author's profile on the Danube Institute website: <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/authors/tegnér-erik>. Erick Tegnér, former head of the young activists of The Republicans, announces that he wants to publish a book about Hungary as well as to produce a documentary about the country.

²³ Julien Tellier, "Victor Orbán largement vainqueur aux dernières élections législatives," *Livre Noir*, April 4, 2022, <https://livre-noir.fr/viktor-orban-largement-vainqueur-aux-dernieres-elections-legislatives/>.

²⁴ Reportages de guerre: Le nouveau pôle international de Livre Noir, <https://livre-noir.fr/reporter-de-guerre/>.

²⁵ Haute Autorité pour la transparence de la vie publique, "Déclaration de situation patrimoniale en tant que candidate à l'élection présidentielle," Marion (ditte Marine) Le Pen, February 16, 2022, <https://www.hatvnp.fr/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/DSP-Le-Pen.pdf>.

²⁶ "Salvini: Verso l'Europa del Buon Senso, i Nostalgici Stanno a Bruxelles," *Affaritaliani.it*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.affaritaliani.it/milano/salvini-verso-l-europa-del-buon-senso-i-nostalgici-stanno-a-bruxelles-598132.html>.

²⁷ "Sovranisti, Salvini: Puntiamo a Essere il Primo Gruppo nel Parlamento Europeo. Orbán Venga Con Noi," *la Repubblica*, April 8, 2019, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2019/04/08/news/sovrnanisti_matteo_salvini_parlamento_europeo-223565543/.

²⁸ "Sovranisti, Salvini: Puntiamo a Essere il Primo Gruppo nel Parlamento Europeo. Orbán Venga Con Noi," *la Repubblica*, April 8, 2019, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2019/04/08/news/sovrnanisti_matteo_salvini_parlamento_europeo-223565543/.

The Transnational Networks of the European Populist Right

multiculturalism.²⁹ In April 2019, Salvini traveled to the Serbian-Hungarian border with Orbán to inspect the border fence erected by Hungary during the 2015 migration crisis. At that time, according to the interview Orbán gave to the Roman newspaper *La Stampa*, he remained in the EPP and urged it to consider the specific needs of the conservatives of Central Europe, yet he had not yet decided upon his European strategy—whether to remain in the EPP or leave it. On May 18, Salvini again gathered in Milan alongside representatives of 12 European national-populist groups, including Marine Le Pen; the Czech Tomio Okamura, leader of the Svoboda a přímá demokracie (Freedom and Direct Democracy); the Slovak Boris Kollár of We are a Family;³⁰ and the Bulgarian Veselin Mareski, of the Volya Movement,³¹ who were on stage to represent Central and Eastern Europe. However, the Polish PiS and the Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats) refused to join the event because of the pro-Russian tropes of some of the represented parties: notably of the Lega, the RN, and the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria, hereafter FPÖ)—which cancelled its attendance at the last minute because of the scandal arising from Russian sponsorship, which forced its leader, Vice Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache of the FPÖ, to resign. Fidesz, though absent, remained on standby.³²

The situation would change and become more complex after the May 2019 European elections and especially after the departure of the Hungarian members of the EPP. The change would take place in three stages. First, on July 2, 2021, a Declaration on the future of Europe³³ was signed, conceived as a response to the Conference on the Future of Europe, an exercise in consultation with the citizens of the 27 member states, the result of which were made public in spring 2022. The Declaration on the future of Europe, which has been endorsed by 16 political parties, including the PiS, Fidesz, the Estonian Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond (Conservative People's Party of Estonia), and the Lietuvos lenkų rinkimų akcija – Krikščioniškų šeimų sąjunga (Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania—Christian Families Alliance, similar to the PiS), is a classic sovereigntist statement.³⁴ It evokes “the freedom of nations and the traditions of the European peoples,” as well as the fact that nations “defend their sovereignty and territorial integrity.” It is concerned that “the work of European cooperation is running out of steam, as nations feel that they are slowly being stripped of their right to exercise their legitimate sovereign powers.” The signatories, therefore, call for “a profound reform” allowing nations to regain their power and to stop the drift towards a “European superstate.”

The influence of Fidesz and PiS on the drafting of the text can be seen in the paragraph that states, “The EU is increasingly becoming a tool of radical forces that would like to achieve a civilizational transformation and ultimately a nationless construction of Europe aiming at the creation of a European superstate, the destruction or annulment of European traditions, [and] the transformation of basic social institutions and moral principles.” Surprisingly, however, the PiS obtained an important concession in the text, with the affirmation that “the Atlantic alliance of the European Union with the North Atlantic Treaty, as well as the peace between the cooperating nations, is a great success for a large number of Europeans, giving them a permanent sense of security and creating optimal conditions for development.” At the time, the Rome summit appeared to be a major step towards the constitution of a single group of radical right-wingers, since it had brought the Lega and Brothers of Italy into the agreement, involved the Spanish Vox, and paved the way for relations with minor Lithuanian, Greek, and Romanian parties.

Nevertheless, another source of discord arose from the attitude of Fidesz, during the autumn of 2021, in the run-up to the French elections of 2022. On September 24, 2021, the pundit Éric Zemmour and Marion Maréchal participated in the 4th Summit on Demography in

²⁹ “Migrants: Orban Évoque Son ‘Héros’ Salvini et Fait de Macron Son Ennemi,” *Le Parisien*, by M.-W.L., <https://www.leparisien.fr/international/migrants-orban-evoque-son-heros-salvini-et-fait-de-macron-son-ennemi-28-08-2018-7868262.php>.

³⁰ This party did not win any seats in the European Parliament in 2019, but has 17 members in the national parliament. See: <https://hnutic-smrodina.sk/>.

³¹ This Russophile Bulgarian nationalist party is against immigration and favors the dismissal of the political class, which is considered corrupt. Led by Veselin Mareski, nicknamed the “Bulgarian Trump,” the party has not won a single seat in the European Parliament and, as of 2021, none in the national Parliament. See: <http://volia.bg/>.

³² Carlo de Nuzzo, “Les Mots du Duomo,” *Le Grand Continent*, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2019/05/20/les-mots-du-duomo/>.

³³ Rassemblement National website: https://rassemblementnational.fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/De%CC%81claration_sur_lavenir_de_leurope_MLP.pdf.

³⁴ For the list of signatories, see: <https://rassemblementnational.fr/communiqués/lerassemblement-des-patriotes-europeens-est-lance/>.

Europe, organized by the Hungarian Minister for Family Affairs, Katalin Novak,³⁵ who as a Francophone and Francophile in 2019 was made a Knight of the Legion of Honor (Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur). Former U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, the Serbian president, the Slovenian and Czech prime ministers, and the Serbian member of the troika in charge of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, all addressed the meeting. Zemmour, who was not yet a declared presidential candidate, and Marion Maréchal, who no longer held any elective office, met Orbán at the protocol level for a private discussion. Zemmour, a journalist and essayist signing autographs for his book, *La France n'a pas dit son dernier mot* ("France has not spoken its last word"), was moving faster and faster towards his eventual candidacy, which he announced on November 30.

Marine Le Pen had to react internationally to this competitor whom she had not foreseen. She therefore met the Hungarian prime minister in Budapest in his office at the Carmelite Monastery on October 26 and held an official press conference with him. The protocol of her visit greatly exceeded that planned for Zemmour. The head of the Hungarian government affirmed that he was "looking for partners to cooperate in this new era" and that the camp of Marine Le Pen was "unavoidable," while refraining from formally endorsing any candidate. According to him, "the decision rests with the French people."³⁶ A breakfast between Le Pen and Orbán during a meeting of the European radical right in Madrid on January 29, 2022 (that is, two weeks after Zemmour launched his nationalist-identitarian party, Reconquest!) confirmed that the Hungarian leader had definitively chosen with whom he intended to work on the regrouping of the European right. He sent a video message to supporters of the RN candidate during the meeting in Reims on February 5, despite the numerous defections of RN leaders to Zemmour: those of MEPs Jérôme Rivière (January 19), Gilbert Collard (January 22), Maxette Pirbakas (February 1), and Nicolas Bay (February 16), who now sit among the non-registered members.

Choosing Marine Le Pen over Éric Zemmour is not necessarily a demonstration of definitive commitment from Orbán, since no one knows how the Reconquest! deputies will act from now through the end of their terms. Ironically, it is Zemmour, a Conservative Jew, who is closer to Orbán's traditional Christian values, whereas the Catholic Le Pen has distanced herself from the religious aspect of politics and is very cautious not to take up the claims of traditionalist Catholic groups opposed to the rights of LGBTQI+ people, to abortion, or to medically-assisted procreation. Was it a tactical choice driven by the assumption that the RN would have the upper hand in the presidential election? No doubt. But this choice sends a clear signal of opposition to the mainstream European conservative right, since Zemmour's objective is not to oppose them head-on, but to unite them—from the Republicans to the RN through his own party—while modifying their ideological framework towards a form of identity-based and ethno-nationalist sovereignty, which is also rooted in the French plebiscitary tradition.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one may ask whether in these complicated attempts to form a united front of the radical right, the attitude of the PiS is not more puzzling than that of Orbán. Several key pro-Russian figures, including Orbán, visited Warsaw on December 4, 2021, at a time when American intelligence already had fears of an impending Russian invasion of Ukraine. The protocol level of the trip was quite substantial, almost official, with a wreath-laying in front of the monument to the victims of the Katyn Massacre during World War II, another in front of the monument to the Jewish victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, and then a dinner held for Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and his Hungarian counterpart.³⁷ One can only be left perplexed by the attitude of the Polish government, even if, at the time of the invasion of Ukraine, Marine Le Pen denounced "the clear violation of international law," called for taking in Ukrainian refugees, and judged Russia's aggression to be "indefensible." To this day, and perhaps because of these contradictions, inconsistencies, and different or even opposing projects, the unification of the radical right has not yet been achieved. One cannot be sure that it will be done by the next European elections, scheduled for the end of May 2024.

³⁵ For the Summit's agenda, see: <https://budapestdemografiacsues.hu/en>.

³⁶ *France 24*, "En Hongrie, Marine Le Pen Fait Bloc avec Viktor Orban contre l'Union Européenne," October 26, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/fr/europe/20211026-en-hongrie-marine-le-pen-fait-bloc-avec-viktor-orban-contre-l-union-europ%C3%A9enn>.

³⁷ Jérôme Besnard, "Marine Le Pen à Varsovie," *L'Incorrect*, December 7, 2021, <https://lincorrect.org/marine-le-pen-a-varsovie-politique-lincorrect/>.



The Birth of an Illiberal Informational Autocracy in Europe: A Case Study on Hungary

PÉTER KREKÓ

Abstract

While the institutional aspects of the illiberal shift in Hungary since 2010 have received notable scholarly attention, less analysis has dealt with the informational aspects of this de-democratization trend. In this article, I apply the concept of “informational autocracy” to Hungary to explain the way in which the Orbán government has been able to achieve the kind of hegemonic rule in that has also helped Orbán’s Fidesz party win their fourth straight election. The article briefly explains how the Hungarian media infrastructure (the “hardware”), was built up, and what are the dominant narratives—especially the conspiracy theories—that the regime is propagating (the “software”). The efficiency of Orbán’s informational autocracy in shaping public opinion is explained through specific cases in which the government could easily shore up its popularity by manipulating information, such as during the pandemic and after the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The article argues that Hungarian informational autocracy combines strategies and techniques that are imported from Western liberal democracies—with plenty of inspiration coming from the recent example of the United States, and with narratives and conspiracy theories that are imported from Eastern autocracies.

Keywords: Hungary, informational autocracy, conspiracy theory

Introduction¹

On April 3, 2022, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Fidesz-KDNP, the coalition that has been in power since 2010, won its biggest victory to date. Winning with 3 million out of more than 5.6 million votes cast (in a country of 8.2 million eligible voters overall), he took 52% of the share of the ballots cast on party lists in Hungary. This domestic result was topped off by the mail-in ballots of ethnic Hungarian voters from surrounding countries, which resulted in another constitutional majority (the fourth in a row), with a mandate of 68% of the seats in parliament.²

According to Politico's Poll of Polls database, which aggregates polling results and calculates an average for them,³ Fidesz's advantage over the opposition was one of 49% against 45% as of February 1, before the invasion of Ukraine—only a four-percentage-point difference. But two months later, the difference that manifested in the election results was dramatically higher, with Fidesz winning 52% of the votes on the party lists and the opposition mustering only 36%. The mail-in ballots then further boosted this initial 16-percentage-point advantage of Fidesz to 20.⁴

Looking at the events preceding the elections, the results were surprising to many observers. Orbán cultivated the strongest ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin of any leader from within the European Union, and Russia, against prevailing expectations, invaded Ukraine in the run-up to the campaign.

How was this landslide victory still possible? Besides the rally-'round-the-flag effect that manifested itself in many NATO countries⁵—as well as in Ukraine and Russia—in the months after the invasion, Fidesz's campaign during the war had a huge impact on voter preferences. After a period of confusion, Fidesz found its footing in terms of messaging, sending four main messages to voters through its centralized and politically-controlled media machinery. These were:

- 1) The opposition would pull Hungary into the war and even conscript Hungarian civilians to go and fight in Ukraine.
- 2) If the opposition is elected, the era of cheap gas will be over, since they would immediately raise the price of gas.
- 3) The Hungarian opposition secretly conspired with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his cabinet to interfere in the elections to help them.
- 4) If the opposition wins the election, children will be exposed to dangerous sex-change surgeries. There was a referendum held on the day of the election to push back these looming threats, including the question: "Do you support promoting sex-change surgeries for children?"

¹ I would like to express my thanks to Johns Hopkins University SAIS Bologna Institute for Policy Research for hosting me for a month in April 2022 as a research fellow so that I could work on the first draft of this paper. I am also personally indebted to Professor Evgeny Finkel for his inspiring discussion of the concept of "authoritarian inflation" during my guest lecture in his class. I am further grateful to the Institut Montaigne for organizing a session where I could present my initial findings and incorporate feedback into the text. Finally, I give thanks to Sergei Guriev for raising some important points during these discussions. All errors, logical mistakes, and omissions are my own.

² Hungarian National Electoral Committee, Accessed August 1, 2022, <https://ytr.valasztas.hu/ogy2022/orszagos-listak?tab=parties>

³ "Polls of Polls: Hungary" Politico, accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/hungary/>.

⁴ Note that questions have been raised concerning the reliability of the polls conducted before the elections, since none of them had predicted such a huge difference in support.

⁵ "Ukraine: Rally around the NATO flag," *Europe Elects*, April 13, 2022, <https://europeelects.eu/2022/04/13/ukraine-rally-around-the-nato-flag/>.

None of these points kept up with facts and reality. First, while the head of the opposition, Péter Márki-Zay, once said in an interview that if he were the prime minister, Hungary would follow NATO guidance on assistance to Ukraine, even in terms of military assistance,⁶ he and opposition leaders afterward have all repeatedly denied that they would send troops directly to Ukraine. Second, the opposition also expressed that it has no plans for the immediate abolition of the popular price cap on natural gas and on gasoline in Hungary—measures that were introduced by the Orbán government and which have kept energy prices low while they have been skyrocketing elsewhere.⁷ To top it off, the government itself announced in the middle of July that the price caps will be incrementally lifted—and that above-average consumption will not be subsidized.⁸ As it turned out after the elections, Hungary in fact pays more for Russian gas than it would pay for gas on the global market, which belies Orbán's claim that close ties to Moscow are an important means of guaranteeing access to cheap gas.⁹ Third, while there have been discussions between Hungarian opposition politicians and Ukrainian officials, such as the ambassador, during the campaign after the war broke out, such discussions are not extraordinary for at least three reasons.

First, officials of the governmental side from Hungary also communicated with their Ukrainian counterparts after the invasion. Second, many opposition leaders around the democratic world have communicated with Ukrainian officials to express their sympathy and to discuss ways of providing assistance. (For example, US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell met personally with Volodymyr Zelenskyy on May 14, 2022.) Third, no proof of any conspiratorial discussions between the Hungarian opposition and Ukrainian authorities has been presented by Fidesz and the government so far—only the fact that the leader of the opposition planned to have a discussion with the Ukrainian president, which ultimately did not even take place.¹⁰ As for the sex-change surgeries for the underaged, this does not even constitute a theoretical threat in Hungary given that it is only legally permitted for people above the age of 18—and there are only extremely few cases where it even happened in Hungary.

Fidesz could thus win the election following an essentially post-truth campaign, painting the opposition candidate as a warmonger—and Ukraine, rather than Russia, as the main source of danger. Orbán even went as far as naming Zelenskyy as one of his opponents among the many whom he managed to defeat during the campaign.¹¹ This campaign clearly had an impact on public opinion: according to the latest poll by Eurobarometer, the Hungarian public expresses low sympathy with Ukrainians (the lowest after Bulgaria), and is the least supportive of Ukraine joining NATO.¹² According to another poll, by Ipsos, 67% of Hungarians agree with the statement that “the problems of Ukraine are none of our business, and we should not interfere.” In none of the nine other European countries in the sample did a majority of those polled agree with this statement. In only one country out of the 27 polled (Saudi Arabia) did

6 Csaba Tibor Tóth, “Márki-Zay partizános elszólása a NATO-ról eldöntött szinte mindent,” *Mérce*, April 10, 2022, <https://merce.hu/2022/04/10/marki-zay-partizanos-elszolasa-a-nato-rol-eldontott-szinte-mindent/>.

7 Raven Bettina, “Márki-Zay Péter: A rezsicsökkentés marad,” *Index*, January 7, 2022, <https://index.hu/belfold/2022/01/07/marki-zay-peter-rezsicsokkent-es-ellenzek/>.

8 Official website of the Hungarian government, “Megóvjuk Az Energiabiztonságot És Megvédjük A Rezsicsökkentést,” July 13, 2022, <https://kormany.hu/hirek/megovjuk-az-energiabiztonsagot-es-megvedjuk-a-rezsicsokkentest>.

9 Jandó Zoltán, “Brutálisan drágán jön az orosz gáz Magyarországra,” *G7.hu*, April 21, 2022, <https://g7.hu/vallalat/20220421/brutalisan-dragan-jon-az-orosz-gaz-magyarorszagra/>.

10 “Márki-Zay elismerte, hogy a stábjá beszélgetést szervezett Zelenskij ukrán elnökkel,” *HVG*, April 11, 2022, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20220411_marki_zay_peter_ukran_egyeztetes_valasztas_kampany.

11 Aisha Rimi, “Viktor Orban Calls Zelensky an ‘Opponent’ after Hungary Election Win,” *Independent*, April 4, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/orban-zelensky-hungary-ukraine-election-b2050328.html>.

12 European Union, Eurobarometer, “EU’s Response to the War in Ukraine,” April–May 2022, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2772>.

a higher number of respondents agree with this statement (69%).¹³ Polls also indicate that Fidesz voters blamed Russia more at the beginning of the invasion,¹⁴ but they have increasingly put the blame on Ukraine instead as the conflict has progressed.¹⁵

This temporal pattern cannot be attributed to anything other than governmental, and pro-governmental, messaging, in which pundits have been pushing conspiracy theories from the Kremlin playbook in the Hungarian state-sponsored media—on the so-called genocide of ethnic Russians in Donbas, on supposed secret American-Ukrainian biolabs, or on the idea that Ukraine, which had given up its nuclear weapons following the collapse of the Soviet Union, was now somehow threatening Russia with developing nuclear weapons.¹⁶ The invasion could have been the most decisive topic that influenced the final outcome of the elections.¹⁷ Voters—especially on the Fidesz-KNDP side—were very supportive of conspiracy theories promoted by Russia as well.¹⁸ For example, 46% agreed that due to Ukrainian nationalists, the well-being of trans-Carpathian Hungarians is in constant danger, 37% of Hungarians agreed that Ukraine has committed genocide against Russian minorities, and 28% of the voters believed that the US operates secret biolabs in Ukraine where bioweapons are developed against the Russians.

But there have been other policy areas during Orbán's previous term of office as well in which Fidesz managed to take positions stridently at odds with the European mainstream without risking any loss of popularity at home in Hungary while others were suffering heavily. While some populists in government (such as former President Donald Trump in the United States or President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil) have suffered consequences from the political impact of high rates of coronavirus infections and mortality, Orbán has been able to survive the pandemic practically without any loss of popularity. He has managed to do this despite having the highest mortality rate in the EU and the third-highest in the world, according to statistics from Johns Hopkins University.¹⁹ In fact, the pandemic just helped Orbán extend his grip on power and strengthen the authoritarian characteristics of his regime.²⁰ The information environment clearly played a role in his success, as surveys indicate that two-thirds of Hungarians were vastly underestimating the death rate in Hungary, while the overwhelming majority parroted governmental messages on the country's quick and successful vaccination campaign as compared to the "slowness" of vaccine distribution elsewhere in Europe.²¹

13 "The World's Response to the War in Ukraine: A 27-Country Global Advisor Survey," Ipsos, April 2022, https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2022-04/Global%20Advisor%20-%20War%20in%20Ukraine%20-%20April%202022%20-%20Graphic%20Report_o.pdf.

14 Endre Hann, "Medián: A Fidesz győzelme szinte biztosra vehető, csak a mértéke kétséges," HVG, March 30, 2022, https://hvg.hu/360/20220330_Median_valasztas_2022_Fidesz_ellenek_mandatumbecsles_kozvelemeny_kutatas.

15 Dániel Rényi, "Jobban kedvelik a fideszesek Putyint, mint a nyugati vezetőket," 444.hu, May 10, 2022, <https://444.hu/2022/05/10/jobban-kedvelik-a-fideszesek-putyint-mint-a-nyugati-vezeteket>.

16 Dávid Sajó, "Magyarországon is óriási erővel terjeszti a Kreml a háborús propagandát," Telex.hu, March 3, 2022, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/03/03/kormanykozeli-segitseggel-terjeszti-a-kreml-magyarorszagon-a-haborus-propagandat>.

17 Zsolt Enyedi and Andrea Szabó, "Nem osztották szimpatizánsaik az ellenzéki pártok Ukrajna-pártiságát," Telex.hu, May 25, 2022, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/05/25/enyedi-zsolt-szabo-andrea-valasztas-utani-kutatas-zavecz-elemzes-kulpolitika>.

18 Péter Krekó and Csaba Molnár, "Magyarországon is kéz a kézben jár a Covid-szkepticizmus és az oroszbarátság," Telex.hu, June 29, 2022, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/06/29/oroszbaratsag-oltasellenesség-kutatas-political-capital>.

19 Johns Hopkins University, Coronavirus Resource Center website, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality> accessed July 26, 2022. Archive: <http://web.archive.org/web/20220720102202/https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>.

20 Agnes Batory, "More Power, Less Support: The Fidesz Government and the Coronavirus Pandemic in Hungary," *Government and Opposition* (2022): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2022.3>.

21 Endre Hann, "Medián: Fáradnak és megosztottak a járványkezelés megítélésében a magyarok," HVG, April 14, 2021, https://hvg.hu/360/20210414_Median. Note that Hungary has been the only country that certified the Russian Sputnik V and Chinese Sinopharm vaccines.

The Birth of an Illiberal Information Autocracy in Europe

The democratic backsliding of Hungary has received notable attention in the last few years, with many brilliant articles explaining the illiberal character of the regime, and a special focus on how the legal system has changed and how the system of checks and balances has been demolished.²² Less scholarly attention has been dedicated to the aspect of the information policies of the Hungarian regime—even if it is intertwined with, and aided by, the institutional changes. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the nature and the modus operandi of the Hungarian regime using the concept of “informational autocracy.”

Hungary as an Informational Autocracy

Modern dictators tend to use information more than violence and direct repression to keep themselves in power. The concept of “informational autocracy,” (or “spin dictatorship”), as described by Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, is a fair characterization of Viktor Orbán’s Hungary.²³ As the inventors of the term put it:

The key to such regimes, we argue, is the manipulation of information. Rather than terrorizing or indoctrinating the population, rulers survive by leading citizens to believe—rationally but incorrectly—that they are competent and public-spirited. Having won popularity, dictators score points both at home and abroad by mimicking democracy. Violent repression, rather than helping, would be counterproductive because it would undercut the image of able governance that leaders seek to cultivate.²⁴

Guriev and Treisman cite Hungary as an example of such a regime. In their book they argue that the nature of these regimes seems democratic at first, before turning more into dictatorships of a different kind.²⁵ The authors discuss four main characteristics of these informational autocratic regimes.

The first is the low application of violence against political opponents (and concealing of violence if does happen). Some examples include political executions, imprisonments, torture, or violence against protesters. This obviously fits the Orbán regime: it has managed to replicate political success without the need for a recourse to violence. Hungarian voters, as I put it in a 2018 piece with Zsolt Enyedi, “enjoy the secret ballot, face no threat of violence, live in a country belonging to that club of democracies called the European Union, and get news from journalists who need fear no jail time. Yet these same Hungarians tolerate and indeed vote for an increasingly autocratic regime.”²⁶ While indexes measuring democracy such as those of the

22 András Bozóki and Dániel Hegedűs, “The Rise of Authoritarianism in the European Union: A Hybrid Regime in Hungary,” in *The Condition of Democracy, Vol. 2: Contesting Citizenship*, ed. Jürgen Mackert, Hannah Wolf, and Brian S. Turner (London: Routledge, 2021), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781003158370-12/rise-authoritarianism-european-union-andr%C3%A1s-boz%C3%B3ki-d%C3%A1niel-heged%C3%BCs>; Péter Krekó and Zsolt Enyedi, “Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán’s Laboratory of Illiberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 39–51, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0043>; Kriszta Kovács and Kim Lane Scheppele, “The Fragility of an Independent Judiciary: Lessons from Hungary and Poland—and the European Union,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51, no. 3 (September 2018): 189–200, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.07.005>; R. Daniel Kelemen, “Europe’s Other Democratic Deficit: National Authoritarianism in Europe’s Democratic Union,” *Government and Opposition* 52, special issue no. 2, “Democracy without Solidarity: Political Dysfunction in Hard Times” (April 2017): 211–238, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.41>; Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016).

23 Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, “A Theory of Informational Autocracy,” *Journal of Public Economics* 186, (June 2020): p. 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104158>.

24 Guriev and Treisman, “A Theory of Informational Autocracy,” 100–101.

25 Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

26 Krekó and Enyedi, “Explaining Eastern Europe,” 41.

Economist Intelligence Unit²⁷ or Freedom House's Freedom in the World report²⁸ are clearly showing a gradual and steady decline in the quality of democracy in Hungary—especially when it comes to the quality of information and independence of the press. Meanwhile, the level of civil liberties is still rated higher, and despite the decline of the independence of the judiciary, there are no obvious cases of political imprisonment.

The second feature of these regimes, as Guriev and Treisman argue, is that they mimic democracy. This is obviously true for Hungary, which is part of international clubs for democracies—both NATO and the European Union—and institutionally keeps up a democratic façade. The government rejects any criticism of its democratic shortcomings and abuses of power, even if they come from officially recognized sources such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which organizes the most widely accepted election observation missions throughout the world. Government spokesman Zoltán Kovács' response to the criticism of the OSCE report on Hungary (after having officially invited its election observation mission) was: "Whatever credibility OSCE ODIHR [Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights] may have had left is now gone."²⁹ At the same time, the Hungarian government was busy legitimizing the elections with observers of questionable credibility, mainly from pro-Russian European far-right and extreme-right political forces (such as the Austrian Freedom Party) and NGOs (such as the ultranationalist Polish organization *Ordo Iuris*).³⁰ This trick of fake election observers has been imported from Putin's Russia. It reflects an obvious attempt to paint unfair elections as being democratic.

The third characteristic of information autocracies is that, unlike democracies that are more supported by the better-educated and better-off, they have much less public support among the elites and the highly-educated than among the lower classes and the less-educated. Empirical data provides clear support for the presence of this gap in Hungary. Researchers at 21 Research Center have created 14 categories based on the economic and social (including educational) status of the Hungarian population, and found that support for the governing party Fidesz incrementally increases as one goes further down the socio-economic ladder, and it is much lower among the most privileged category (33%) than among the most underclass group (48%). See the graph below.

27 "Democracy Index 2021: The China Challenge," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, February 10, 2022, https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2021/?utm_source=economist&utm_medium=daily_chart&utm_campaign=democracy-index-2021.

28 "Freedom in the World 2021: Hungary," Freedom House, accessed June 21, 2022, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/freedom-world/2021>.

29 "Orban's Ruling Party Had 'Undue Advantage' in Campaign—OSCE Report," *Reuters*, April 4, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/orbans-ruling-party-had-undue-advantage-campaign-osce-report-2022-04-04/>.

30 "Government-Friendly Election Observers at the 2022 Hungarian Parliamentary Elections," European Platform for Democratic Elections, April 13, 2022, <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/Government-Friendly-Election-Observers-at-the-2022-Hungarian-Parliamentary-Elections.html>.

Table 1. The class distribution of the whole of society
According to educational background, income, wealth, occupational position, internet use, place of residence and ethnicity.
1= lowest class, 14= highest class.

| Class by grades | Pro-government(%) | Pro-opposition(%) | No party choice(%) | Total (%) | Sample size |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------|-------------|
| 14 – Most privileged citizens | 33 | 47 | 21 | 100 | 456 |
| 13 | 35 | 42 | 23 | 100 | 439 |
| 12 | 37 | 40 | 23 | 100 | 608 |
| 11 | 39 | 36 | 25 | 100 | 749 |
| 10 | 42 | 31 | 27 | 100 | 955 |
| 9 | 36 | 33 | 31 | 100 | 987 |
| 8 | 37 | 34 | 29 | 100 | 897 |
| 7 | 39 | 31 | 30 | 100 | 831 |
| 6 | 40 | 31 | 29 | 100 | 746 |
| 5 | 45 | 25 | 30 | 100 | 584 |
| 4 | 46 | 22 | 33 | 100 | 578 |
| 3 | 41 | 25 | 34 | 100 | 433 |
| 2– underclass | 44 | 19 | 37 | 100 | 252 |
| 1– underclass, economically most deprived citizens | 48 | 13 | 39 | 100 | 247 |
| Full sample | 40 | 32 | 29 | 100 | 8762 |

Source: Dániel Róna et al., *The Fidesz Party's Secret to Success: Investigating Economic Voting in Hungary* (Budapest: 21 Research Center, 2020), https://21kutatokozpont.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Main_Secret_Fidesz_Success_final-2.pdf.

In short: the economic losers of Orbán's regime are its most enthusiastic supporters.³¹ It also reveals the power of symbolic politics: these voters might be losers economically, but they are winners in terms of symbolic capital and identity politics. This success of symbolic politics is, of course, part of a broader zeitgeist and is not limited to spin dictators. Francis Fukuyama convincingly argues for example that “megalothymia” (striving for recognition) is the most important psychological and political driver of politics these days in the democratic world.³²

But this also brings up the fourth characteristic of information autocracies that might fit a bit less with Orbán's Hungary: these regimes, according to Guriev and Treisman, are less ideological than other forms of autocracies, and they like to emphasize competence and performance over violence. Orbán's illiberal populist rhetoric is, of course, less ideological than that of old-school Communist and fascist dictators in Hungary. At the same time, compared to that of more “technocratic” democratic politicians, his rhetoric is highly ideological in its support for ultraconservative values, use of strong enemy images, and conspiracy theories for mobilizing the electorate. In the 2018 election campaign, for example (during a period of steady growth and rising living standards), Fidesz used the most negative messaging in the history of post-transitional Hungarian political campaigns, mobilizing the electorate against the “pro-migration” and “Soros-puppet” opposition forces.³³

31 For a similar case in the United States, see: Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005) (Thanks for the editor for this suggestion.)

32 Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

33 Fruzsina Nábelek, “Negatív kampány Magyarországon: A negatív kampány megjelenése az 1998 és 2018 közötti választási kampányokban” (PhD diss., Budapest Corvinus University, 2020), <http://doeplayer.hu/204021534-Negativ-kampany-magyarorszagon.html>.

At the same time, in line with the argument of Guriev and Treisman, Orbán obviously uses the rhetoric of competence and performance as well. Also, he is considered a highly competent leader by the general public, who usually mention him first as the politician they would be most happy to see in decision-making positions.³⁴ This image of competence clearly helps Orbán regularly win supermajorities (that is, with two-thirds or more of the seats in parliament). Taking this positive image as a competent leader into consideration, the performance-based legitimacy as this fourth feature of informational autocracies fits Hungary as well.

The fact that Hungary, to a certain extent, fulfills all four of the above-mentioned criteria, however, only proves that the regime is *informational* in nature, but not that this is an *autocracy*. Hungary can be fairly characterized (based on the literature cited above) as either a *hybrid* or a *competitive authoritarian* regime with an illiberal character. In the dichotomous typology of regimes along a spectrum between two polar opposites, in which the non-democratic systems all qualify as autocratic to at least some extent,³⁵ Hungary falls on the autocratic part on the spectrum—given that hybrid regimes are by definition not fully democratic. Of course, it falls closer to the democratic end than it does to full-scale dictatorships such as Turkey or Russia. The illiberal features of the regime are reflected in the strongly ideological elements of the government's public communications.³⁶

Orbán's Information Autocracy in Action

What is peculiar about Orbán's information autocracy, however, is that it operates within the framework of the European Union: a deeply institutionalized system of intergovernmental cooperation among many of the most democratic countries in the world. This also means that Orbán's policies are seemingly similar to other populists' policies. But there are actually more differences than similarities. As Guriev and Treisman put it: "While populists may attack or circumvent the state-controlled media, information autocrats almost always view it as an essential tool."³⁷ While Orbán's regime is clearly populist in its rhetoric and strategies of mass mobilization, its approach to information policy is centralized, controlled, and promoted by the state. Orbán's regime is a prime example of how informational autocracy overlaps with the new populism. At the same time, it goes well beyond populism (as will be shown later) as it seeks not only to adapt to public opinion, but to transform it.

The Hardware

As for its media infrastructure and institutional system, Hungary is clearly unique. The Hungarian media market has seen large-scale centralization since the second Orbán government took power in 2010. This gave rise to a government-organized media empire.

The government has used legislative and informal means to take control of the media market and overcome the alleged advantage of leftist-liberal outlets. The ruling Fidesz-KDNP government and parliamentary majority have used several tools to transform the Hungarian media landscape:

- The media law, passed in 2011, gave the Media Council (stacked with Fidesz loyalists) the power to selectively approve media acquisitions to the

34 "Népszerűség és elutasítottság. Hazai politikusok megítélése öt különböző szempont alapján," *Republikon Intézet*, 2016, http://republikon.hu/media/38236/republikon_politikusi-ne%CC%81pszeru%CC%8Bse%CC%81g_2016_augusztus.pdf.

35 János Kiss, "Demokráciából autokráciába: A rendszertipológia és az átmenet dinamikája," *Politikatudományi Szemle* 28, no. 1 (January 2019): 45–74, <https://doi.org/10.30718/POLTUD.HU.2019.1.45>.

36 Marlene Laruelle, "Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction," *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (March 2022): 303–327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

37 Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, "Informational Autocrats," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 33, no. 4 (2019), 102, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.33.4.100>.

Media Council.

- This right was used extensively when pro-government oligarchs acquired private media to either shut them down, or to turn them into propaganda outlets, creating vast media empires.³⁸ At the same time, the media authority impeded attempts by independent media companies to merge, citing overt media centralization as a concern.³⁹ This selective approach strongly contributed to the “party colonization” of the Hungarian media.⁴⁰
- A large share of public-sector advertisements⁴¹ were allocated to media loyal to the government; furthermore, the government actively discouraged market players from advertising in non-government-affiliated news outlets.
- An advertising tax was imposed that made the financial situation of independent outlets more difficult.⁴²
- In 2018, in a grave attack against media pluralism in Hungary, more than 500 media outlets were put into a huge media foundation called KESMA⁴³ (Central European Press and Media Foundation), which means that the “owners” of these outlets were practically deprived of their media assets, including their ownership rights, without due compensation. Such maneuvers, to say the least, would be highly surprising in well-functioning, pluralistic media environments, and should leave no doubt that the “private” acquisitions preceding this move had been all politically controlled and orchestrated by pro-Fidesz pundits and media strategists.

As a result of these steps, Hungary clearly boasts the most centralized media system in the European Union. According to data from the Mérték Institute from 2019, 79% of the media was concentrated in pro-Fidesz hands.⁴⁴ This degree of media centralization after the transitions of 1989–1990 is unprecedented in post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe, and nowhere comparable with what can be seen in other current EU member states where populists have been in power in the last three decades, such as in Austria, Slovenia, or Poland.⁴⁵

38 For example, Heinrich Pecina, the owner of the company publishing the left-wing daily Népszabadság, shut this paper down just days before the company (Mediaworks) was sold to pro-government oligarch Lőrinc Mészáros.

39 “Nem engedélyezték az RTL Klub és a Central-csoport fúzióját,” *Napi.hu*, January 24, 2017, <https://www.napi.hu/magyar-vallalatok/nem-engedelyeztek-az-rtl-klub-es-a-central-csoport-fuziojat.628446.html>.

40 Péter Bajomi-Lázár, “The Party Colonisation of the media the Case of Hungary,” *East European Politics and Societies* 27, no.1 (2012): 69–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325412465085>.

41 For more information, please see: “Állami Hirdetések Magyarországon 2006-2017,” *Mérték* (blog), accessed July 5, 2018, <https://mertek.atlatszo.hu/allami-hirdetesek-magyarorszagon-2006-2017/>. The data tells us important information about how the advertising market works in Hungary. First, state spending on advertisements has grown considerably since 2010, especially since 2015. Second, while under previous governments the majority of advertising expenses went to multinational companies (whose products had the largest audience), successive Orbán governments have directed funds towards outlets loyal to the governing coalition.

42 Ella Csarnó, “A 7,5%-os reklámadó végleg ellehetleníti a magyar médiumokat,” *Index*, May 3, 2017, http://index.hu/gazdasag/2017/05/03/magyar_lapkiadok_egyesulete_magyarorszagi_tartalomszolgáltatok_egyesulete_reklamado_adoemeles/.

43 “Report: Establishment of KESMA Exacerbates the Overall Risk to Media Pluralism in Hungary,” Central European University, CEU Democracy Institute, August 8, 2019, <https://cmds.ceu.edu/article/2019-08-08/report-establishment-kesma-exacerbates-overall-risk-media-pluralism-hungary>.

44 “Mindent beborít a Fidesz-közeli média,” *Mérték Médiaelemző Műhely*, April 25, 2019, <https://mertek.eu/2019/04/25/mindent-beborit-a-fidesz-kozeli-media/>.

45 Burçe Celik, Melek Küçüküzün, Mojca Pajnik, Marlene Radl, Marko Ribač, Birgit Sauer, Gerhard Schnyder Iztok Šori, Fanni Toth, Tjaša Turnšek, and Lana Zdravković, “The networks of media ownership,” Presentation at the PopBack Workshop, 30 November 2021.

The Hungarian “regime of posttruth [sic]”⁴⁶ is at a crossroads between past and present. It combines messages from East and West (or from autocratic and democratic countries alike), and the latest modern propaganda techniques with those of the past. The Russian-style media centralization based on “private” acquisitions mentioned above followed the model in Russia used after the *Kursk* submarine disaster of August 2000 when Putin, feeling that a critical media depicting him as incompetent and ignorant could be deadly to his image and popularity, took over media outlets and turned them into news sources that posed no direct threat to him. Orbán took similar steps in Hungary after 2010. Hence, the manipulation of the population through centrally-controlled disinformation, by directing the media through political orders, has become easier and more efficient than ever before.

The doomsday narratives concerning the state of the West—depicting it as a faltering region in the wake of mass migration, multiculturalism, and “ultraliberalism” (used in Hungary in a similar sense than “wokeism” in the US)—resemble some neo-Eurasianist⁴⁷ messages that appear in Russian state-controlled messaging. Moreover, fake news and conspiracy theories from Russian propaganda pieces find their way into the Hungarian public arena. Hungarian Pro-Fidesz media outlets often promote the Russian interpretation of the events on issues like migration, George Soros, Ukraine, NATO and the United States, or the Western liberal elite.

At the same time, the Hungarian media imports tools and messages from the Western post-truth world. As an example, Árpád Habony, the government’s unofficial spin doctor (or, as a BuzzFeed article labels him, the “phantom advisor”),⁴⁸ who was behind the successful political campaigns of Fidesz for more than a decade has many ties to the United States. He was in direct contact with two American-Israeli consultants: Arthur Finkelstein and George Birnbaum, who were the masterminds behind the anti-Soros political campaign that helped Orbán win the elections in 2018.⁴⁹ Árpád Habony also had personal professional meetings with Steve Bannon in Washington, DC before Orbán’s 2018 reelection.⁵⁰ Orbán, through his advisors, is carefully following political and campaign trends in the United States to cherry-pick some narratives that he hopes can work in Hungary as well. As a sign of ideological convergence between the US Christian right and Orbán’s Hungary, Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson has also been a guest in Hungary at the invitation of the government and he also had Orbán on his show.⁵¹ Furthermore, Hungary hosted the American hardline right-wing organization Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in 2022, and Orbán is scheduled to speak in Dallas in fall 2022 by invitation of the same organization.

46 Jayson Harsin, “Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies,” *Communication, Culture and Critique* 8, no. 2 (June 2015): 327–333, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cccc.12097>.

47 A revival of the Eurasianist ideology after the fall of the Soviet Union (by authors such as Aleksandr Dugin), which is based on the assertion that Russia is closer to Asia in terms of its culture than to Europe. (neo) Eurasianism expresses a strong hostility towards the West, its culture, and its values. See, for example: Marlene Laruelle, *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe-Russia Relationship* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2015).

48 J. Lester Feder and Rebeka Kulcsar, “Meet the Mystery Man Who Is the Power Behind the Throne in Hungary,” *BuzzFeed News*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/hungarys-steve-bannon>.

49 Hannes Grassegger, “The Unbelievable Story of the Plot against George Soros,” *BuzzFeed News*, January 20, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/hnsgrassegger/george-soros-conspiracy-finkelstein-birnbaum-orban-netanyahu>.

50 Patrick Kingsley, “Safe in Hungary, Viktor Orban Pushes His Message across Europe,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/04/world/europe/viktor-orban-media-slovenia.html>.

51 Charles Creitz, “Hungary’s Viktor Orban Tells Tucker Carlson: ‘Western Liberals Can’t Accept’ Right-Wing Dissent,” *Fox News*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.foxnews.com/media/hungary-viktor-orban-tucker-carlson-western-liberals>.

Also, Orbán's government has used President Donald Trump's "American model" to discredit and stigmatize independent media by labeling them "fake news factories."⁵² This has worked remarkably well in keeping information contrary to the government narrative out of sight from Fidesz voters. Moreover, some media outlets controlled by the government are trying to copy far-right news and opinion website Breitbart, likely in an attempt to make conservatism seem catchy—an ambition articulated by government commissioner, ideologue, and Director of the State Historical Museum House of Terror Mária Schmidt, among others.⁵³ In line with this, a number of Hungarian websites have sought to copy the style and approach of the voices from the American populist right.

The Orbán government manipulates the population through centrally-controlled disinformation. The Hungarian government's rhetoric is made up of easy-to-understand, unified messages that are selected based on surveys conducted by pro-government think tanks. Their polling strategy (learned from US-based consultants) is that they only focus on the government's existing or potential voter base—tactically ignoring unpersuadable opposition voters entirely.

The Hungarian model applies the latest technological tools in its information policies, combining these with attempts to push one particular message in a highly centralized and concentrated manner. For example, its media empire spends hundreds of millions of dollars on targeted advertising around one particular message such as "Stop Soros," "Stop Brussels," or that Orbán's electoral opponent Péter Márki-Zay is a "warmonger." They blanket the public space through billboards, media, and social media advertisements.⁵⁴ The latter is more characteristic of the brainwashing campaigns of the 20th century, instead of 21st-century disinformation that is based more on confusion (through a plethora of messages) than persuasion (through one message).⁵⁵ In short: the Hungarian ruling party's disinformation campaign employs 21st-century methods to spread its simplified narratives akin to 20th-century-style propaganda.

Conspiracy Theories for Winners

In information autocracies, conspiracy theories have a different function than in democracies. In democracies, conspiracy theories typically target those in power. Authoritarian regimes can instrumentalize conspiracy theories from a position of strength to mobilize their bases and legitimize themselves and their centralization of power. This notion goes against the traditional democratic understanding of conspiracy theories as guerrilla narratives for "the losers"⁵⁶ (that is, for low-status groups who lack the financial and political resources to contest their high-status opponents, who wield greater political and economic power).⁵⁷

Conspiracy theories in informational autocracies can be deployed to help the government mobilize its own electorate during campaigns, but also to blame the

52 NYG, "Szűjjártó: Frusztráltak a nemzetközi álhírgyarak Orbán támogatottsága miatt," *Index*, May 10, 2019, https://index.hu/belfold/2019/05/10/szujjarto_kossuth_radio_pentek/.

53 Gergely Szilvay, "Ma már a konzervatív a szexi – Schmidt Mária a Mandinernek," *Mandiner*, May 22, 2018, http://mandiner.hu/cikk/20180522_schmidt_maria_interju.

54 Babett Oroszi, "Csaknem 100 milliárdot költhetett Rogán Antal tárcája kormánypropagandára," *HVG*, January 20, 2022, https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20200120_miniszterelnoki_kabinetiroda_zarszamadas_kormanyzati_kommunikacio.

55 Mariia Shuvalova, review of *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War against Reality*, by Peter Pomerantsev, *Kyiv-Mohyla Humanities Journal* 7 (2020): 263–265, <https://doi.org/10.18523/kmhj219687.2020-7.263-265>.

56 Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent, *American Conspiracy Theories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

57 Roland Imhoff and Martin Bruder, "Speaking (Un-)Truth to Power: Conspiracy Mentality as a Generalised Political Attitude," *European Journal of Personality* 28, no. 1 (January–February 2014): 25–43, <https://doi.org/10.1002/per.1930>.

objects of those conspiracy theories for policy failures. In this respect, they play a similar role in Hungary as they do in President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey⁵⁸ and Vladimir Putin's Russia.⁵⁹ The depreciation of the Hungarian forint in 2020, for example, was immediately blamed on "speculators" (and, of course, philanthropist George Soros) instead of on government economic policies or the Hungarian National Bank.⁶⁰ In 2022, blame for the decline of the national currency was put on Brussels.⁶¹ This is very similar to the strategy of the Turkish president, who blamed the plummeting of the Hungarian currency on "foreign powers."⁶²

Conspiracy theories in the Hungarian informational autocracy are used by the ruling party and its media empire to maintain the unity of their voter base and mobilize them when needed. Prime Minister Orbán's main political strategy revolves around dividing the Hungarian nation into two camps: a "patriotic" side represented solely by Fidesz, and an "unpatriotic" camp loyal to foreign interests. Consequently, Fidesz claims that only its views and policy solutions benefit Hungarians. This division is strengthened and maintained by the "war rhetoric" of Fidesz, whereby the "unpatriotic" group—being anyone who disagrees with the ruling party—is the puppet of the alleged enemy (such as the EU, the West, or liberals) following an "anti-Hungarian agenda." In this way, conspiracy theories help the government to morally discredit its opponents and turn public opinion against them.

The Success of the Electoral Autocracy in Shaping Public Opinion

As mentioned in the introduction, the government has been able to successfully shape public opinion on the Russian invasion and on the pandemic. There are several other examples of how strongly the government has been able to shape public opinion through its centralized media campaigns:

- In the case of migration and related attitudes, the overwhelming majority of Hungarians have been persuaded by Fidesz's policy stance. Consequently, xenophobia has been rising in Hungary ever since the start of the migration crisis in 2015, according to polls,⁶³ and manipulative government campaigns have certainly played a role in this.
- The ruling party's anti-EU, anti-Western, and pro-Russian rhetoric has clearly had an effect on the population's foreign-policy orientation.⁶⁴ Fidesz has been able to gradually shift the attitudes of its voters in a more pro-Russian, anti-Western direction. While back in 2014, a plurality of Fidesz voters preferred cooperation with the US over Russia (40% vs. 39%, respectively), by 2022 this has dramatically changed (24% vs. 55%).⁶⁵ And while, on the whole, public opinion favors the United States as a strategic partner over Russia, Washington's advantage in this regard is slowly

58 Mustafa Akynol, "The Tin-Foil Hats Are out in Turkey," *Foreign Policy*, September 12, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/12/the-tin-foil-hats-are-out-in-turkey/>.

59 Ilya Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet World* (New York, John Wiley & Sons, 2018).

60 Gergely Brückner, "Soros György és a magyar forint elleni támadás esete," *Index*, April 16, 2020, https://index.hu/gazdasag/2020/04/16/soros_gyorgy_es_a_magyar_forint_elleni_tamadas/.

61 "Varga Mihály megtalálta a forintgyengülés felelősét: Brüsszel," *Heti Világgazdaság*, March 7, 2022, https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20220307_varga_mihaly_brusszel_szankciok.

62 "Turkey Blames 'Foreign Powers' for Fresh Currency Woes," *Deutsche Welle*, May 14, 2020, Business, <https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-blames-foreign-powers-for-fresh-currency-woes/a-53431231>.

63 Ildikó Barna and Júlia Koltai, "Attitude Changes towards Immigrants in the Turbulent Years of the 'Migrant Crisis' and Anti-Immigrant Campaign in Hungary," *Intersections: East European Journal of Society and Politics* 5, no. 1, (May 2019), <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v5i1.501>.

64 Péter Krekó, "Russia in Hungarian Public Opinion," *Hungarian Social Report 2019* (Budapest: Tarki, 2019): 358–371.

65 Péter Magyar, "A magyarok többsége Amerikát választaná és nem Oroszországot," *444.hu*, January 7, 2015, <https://444.hu/2015/01/07/a-magyarok-tobbsege-amerikat-valasztana-es-nem-oroszorszagot>.

diminishing. Thus, Fidesz's anti-Western narrative seems to be making a considerable impact on Hungarian society, although the vast majority of Hungarians still support the country's EU and NATO membership. Support for EU membership is above 70%, while support for NATO membership is above 80%.⁶⁶ Some newer polls also indicate that the image of both Vladimir Putin and Russia has declined as a result of the invasion, but much less on the governmental than on the opposition side, and this asymmetry can be explained by governmental messaging.⁶⁷

- While George Soros was a rather unknown figure until the governmental campaign began against him in 2015 with attacks on his migration policy, and then because of the Central European University that he established in Budapest, he became a hated figure in the eyes of the Hungarian public as a consequence of strong governmental messaging, begun with political statements and then turned into a full-scale campaign through massive paid advertisements and billboards.⁶⁸ The vast majority of Fidesz voters support the ruling party's security narrative, mainly targeting civil society organizations allegedly funded by Soros—the government's public enemy number one. In light of this, it is unsurprising that of those who had heard about the 2017 NGO law aiming to stigmatize independent civil society organizations by labeling them as foreign-funded organizations, 54% of Hungarians (and 87% of Fidesz supporters) accepted the government's justification for it, according to a poll conducted by Medián.⁶⁹ (The law has since been abolished as a result of an EU decision.)
- The polarizing narratives of the Hungarian government have also had an impact: polarization has increased substantially between 2018 and 2022. According to polling data from the Political Capital Institute from March 2022,⁷⁰ Manichean thinking has increased significantly during this period. In 2018, 25% of Hungarian voters agreed that "Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil," but this figure rose to 39% just four years later. Similarly, the ratio of voters who agree with the statement that "The people I disagree with are misinformed" increased from 24% to 35%, and the ratio of voters who agree that "You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics" increased from 19% to 30%. We can see a vicious circle here: the increasing polarization, evidently, is creating even more fertile ground for conspiracy-theorizing and disinformation, which in turn facilitates further polarization in a feedback loop of negativity and ill will.

66 Daniel Milo, Katarína Klingová, and Dominika Hajdu, "GLOBSEC Trends 2018, Central Europe: One Region, Different Perspectives" (Bratislava: GLOBSEC Policy Institute, 2018), <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2018.pdf>.

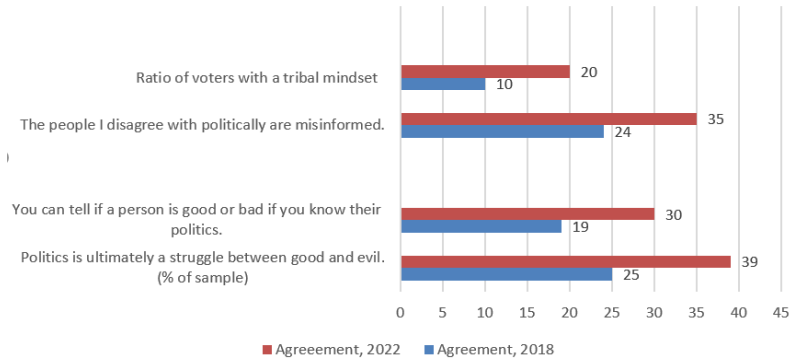
67 Flóra Dóra Csatóri, "Putyin népszerűsége idehaza is erősen csökken, egyedül a Mi Hazánk tábora szimpatizál vele egy kicsit," *Telex.hu*, June 8, 2022, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/06/08/oroszpartisag-nyugat-putyin-megitelese-kozvelemeny-kutatas-zavecz-research-kreko-peter>; Dominika Hajdu, Katarína Klingová, and Michal Kortiš "GLOBSEC Trends 2022: Central and Eastern Europe amid the War in Ukraine" (Bratislava: GLOBSEC Policy Institute, 2022), <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2022-central-and-eastern-europe-amid-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

68 For a chronology, see: https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soros-ellenes_kamp%C3%A1ny_Magyarorsz%C3%A1gon.

69 Erdelyip, "A Magyarok 3 Százalékának Jut Eszébe Soros György, Ha Civil Szervezetekről van Szó", *444.hu*, August 6, 2017, <https://444.hu/2017/08/06/a-magyarok-3-szazalekanak-jut-eszebe-soros-gyorgy-ha-civil-szervezetekrol-van-szo>.

70 Political Capital Institute, "Tribalism in Hungary in 2022", forthcoming

Table 2. Manichean Worldview and Tribal Attitudes in Hungary, 2018 and 2022



Source: Political Capital Institute (forthcoming), representative poll from March 2022

“Disinformation Diplomacy”: Exporting Information Autocracy

As has already been mentioned, the Hungarian media ecosystem is strongly inspired by foreign models.

We can see at the same time that Hungary is not only a student of disinformation, but a teacher as well, especially in the broader Central and Eastern European region. The Polish government, under the leadership of the ultraconservative and illiberal Law and Justice party, has obviously learned some lessons from the transformation of the Hungarian political system, including the public media.⁷¹ In the infamous Ibizagate scandal, the former head of the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs: FPÖ), Heinz-Christian Strache, was recorded referring to Viktor Orbán’s media system as a model to emulate. “We want to build a media landscape like Orbán did,” he said on the leaked videotape.⁷²

The massive government-affiliated media conglomerate also serves the foreign policy ambitions of the Orbán government. And these ambitions are on display for all to see: on January 10, 2019, during a press briefing, Orbán openly declared that Hungary’s objective was to make sure that anti-immigration forces would become dominant in all EU institutions and that his government would provide all the help necessary to promote this. This would happen first in the European Parliament, followed by the Commission, and finally, following a series of national elections, in the European Council as well.⁷³ This speech clearly indicated that Orbán’s ambitions for information expansion are already European in scale.

Orbán’s regime has taken many determined steps to spread its successful information policy in the region through buying up media outlets and exporting consulting services, especially in the Western Balkans. The Orbán regime has acquired considerable media portfolios both in Slovenia and in North Macedonia, as well as in the countries where major ethnic Hungarian communities live such as Romania and Serbia. Hence, the government in Budapest tries to influence public

71 Wojciech Przybylski, “Explaining Eastern Europe: Can Poland’s Backsliding Be Stopped?,” *Journal of Democracy*, 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 59–61, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0044>.

72 “Austria’s Disgraced Strache Wanted ‘Orbán-Like’ Media Landscape,” *Budapest Business Journal*, May 21, 2019, <https://bbj.hu/politics/foreign-affairs/visits/austria-s-disgraced-strache-wanted-orban-like-media-landscape>.

73 “Orbán Viktor: Magyarország jobban teljesít,” *Origo*, January 10, 2018, <http://www.origo.hu/itthon/20190110-orban-magyarorszag-jobban-teljesit.html>.

The Birth of an Illiberal Information Autocracy in Europe

opinion abroad. Obviously, its impact is not comparable to that in the domestic sphere. Both Nikola Gruevski, the former prime minister of North Macedonia and head of the VMRO-DPMNE party; and Janez Janša, the former prime minister of Slovenia (two nationalist illiberal politicians and willing recipients of Orbán's autocratic information aid), have lost their most recent elections. But Orbán's aid could have helped them stay in power for a while. Janša, for example, received considerable support from two Slovenian media outlets, namely from the gossip tabloid *Skandal24* and from the television channel NovaTV24, both of which had earlier been purchased by a Hungarian pro-Orbán businessman.⁷⁴ Following Janša's defeat in the recent Slovenian elections, there are signs that Hungarian investors are beginning to pull out of their Slovenian media holdings.⁷⁵

In North Macedonia, the former executives of Hungary's strongly government-controlled public broadcaster MTI have acquired a considerable media portfolio. These outlets, including Alfa TV, Republika Online, Kurir, and Lider, were used to actively support VMRO-DPMNE and its leader Gruevski.⁷⁶ The methods and content used by these media channels were strikingly similar to those seen in Hungary: spreading conspiracy theories, defaming political opponents, mobilizing against George Soros, and talking about migration. These tactics are, of course, not Hungary-specific, but the style, tone, and topics are practically copy-pasted from those of Hungarian political campaigns.

In addition to all this, since 2010 the consecutive Orbán governments have managed to create a large, mostly online media empire in Hungary's neighboring countries, aimed at dominating the public discourse on ethnic Hungarians living in these states. Setting up a complex media portfolio has been part of a major institutional build-up in ethnic Hungarian communities who were born and live abroad,⁷⁷ particularly in Slovakia, Romania, and Serbia. The media outlets controlled by either the Orbán government or by pro-Orbán oligarchs play a dual role in terms of supporting illiberalism. First, they are actively mobilizing ethnic Hungarians who also hold Hungarian citizenship to cast their votes in the Hungarian parliamentary elections (and, most recently, for the European Parliament as well). Second, these channels are also used to encourage local Hungarians to vote for the parties favored by the government in Budapest.⁷⁸ The massive influx of money from Hungary, including media acquisitions, into these ethnic Hungarian communities abroad has created networks of clientelism much more dependent on Budapest than on the capitals of their respective countries. This dependence is so strong that some experts already speak of the "infantilization" of ethnic Hungarian communities abroad, particularly in Romania.⁷⁹

But Viktor Orbán is exporting his message to the West as well—through different means. He is becoming a role model for some notable US conservatives such as Tucker Carlson, who paints Orbán and his regime as a real model to follow for the American right. In the interpretation of some American conservatives, Hungary is a country that is vehemently opposing immigration and woke culture, and where

74 Patrick Kingsley, "Safe in Hungary, Viktor Orbán Pushes His Message across Europe," *New York Times*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/04/world/europe/viktor-orban-media-slovenia.html>.

75 Novica Mihajlović, "What next for Hungarian-owned media in Slovenia? (Delo)," *International Press Institute*, June 2, 2022, <https://ipi.media/what-next-for-hungarian-owned-media-in-slovenia-delo/>.

76 Maja Jovanovska, Tamás Bodoky, Aubrey Belford, "Right-Wing Hungarian Media Moves Into the Balkans," *OCCRP*, May 9, 2018, <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/right-wing-hungarian-media-moves-into-the-balkans>.

77 Ádám Kolozsi, "Médiafelvásárlás, pénzszerzés, klientúraépítés: a Fidesz nagyon ráment a határon túl magyarokra," *Index*, December 13, 2018, https://index.hu/belfold/2018/12/13/mediafelvasarlas_penzszerzas_klienturaepites_a_fidesz_nagyon_rament_a_hataron_tul_magyarokra/.

78 Kolozsi, "Médiafelvásárlás, pénzszerzés, klientúraépítés: a Fidesz nagyon ráment a határon túl magyarokra," *Index*.

79 "NERDély 2: Hogyan alakította át az erdélyi politikát a Fidesz?," *Átlátszó Erdély*, April 6, 2018, <https://atlatszo.ro/2018/04/06/nerdely-2-hogyan-alakitotta-at-az-erdelyi-politikat-a-fidesz/>.

traditional family values are respected.⁸⁰ Orbán is portrayed as a nationalist, anti-globalist, anti-immigration hero on American hyper-partisan and disinformation sites.

Conclusion: Theoretical and Policy Implications

According to Guriyev and Treisman, information autocracies can operate successfully within the circumstances of relatively modern societies, even where the level of education is relatively high and access to information is widespread.

The case of Hungary, one in which a well-established democracy has become an information autocracy in a little less than a decade, clearly illustrates that the manipulation of information may be far more efficient than direct oppression and application of violence, and it can be elegantly done within the institutional framework of a Western, nominally democratic state. Of course, the first steps towards building up an information autocracy are quite similar to those for the building up of a more classical authoritarian regime. Changing the legal-institutional system went hand in hand with building up an information autocracy in Hungary, as these different institutional changes were amplifying each other. For example, the Media Authority and the courts paved the way for the huge media acquisitions that helped to create an information environment where the government enjoys a hegemonic role but not a monopolistic one.

Consequently, large swaths of the Hungarian population are kept in an information bubble by their own government—although they do have access to alternative sources of information as well.

In Hungary, citizens can gain access to information critical of the government not just through newspapers and television channels, but especially online. Studies show that in Hungary we cannot talk about the totalitarian rule of information bubbles. In 2016, three-fourths of Hungarian voters said that they were interested in the political opinion of the other side as well.⁸¹ At the same time, as the media concentration develops, the information that reaches voters who are not actively seeking independent sources of information is increasingly pro-governmental. Pro-governmental forces spent eight times more on promotional billboards during the electoral campaign than the opposition.⁸² Using the logic of behavioral economics, the bigger the effort one has to make to obtain some alternative information against the “default,” the less likely it is that people will ultimately encounter this alternative information.

And, studies suggest, state-sponsored disinformation has a clear impact in Hungary—and not only on governmental voters. For example, according to research by the Dimenzió Media Foundation, before the elections of April 4, 2022, 86% of Hungarian voters had heard the “news” that the main opposition candidate would send troops to Ukraine, 67% that the left supports sex-change surgeries, and 85% that Hungary was successful in dealing with COVID. Those who hear these “stories” tend to accept them. For example, 60% of those surveyed who had heard the statements that Hungarian soldiers would be sent to Ukraine if the opposition were to win, accepted these statements as factual.⁸³ These figures clearly show the power of the increasingly Orwellian governmental disinformation campaigns.

80 Benjamin Novak and Michael N. Grybaum, “Conservative Fellow Travelers: Tucker Carlson Drops In On Viktor Orbán,” *New York Times*, August 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/07/world/europe/tucker-carlson-hungary.html>.

81 “A politikai tájékozódás forrásai Magyarországon 2016,” *Mérték*, November 25, 2016, <https://mertek.eu/2016/11/25/politikai-tajekozodas-forrasai-magyarorszagon/>.

82 “RTL: Nyolceszor annyit költöttek plakátokra a kormánypartok, mint az ellenzék,” *HVG.hu*, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20220408_RTL_kampany_plakatok.

83 “What has been proven by the Hungarian election results?” Dimenzió Média Alapítvány, July 31, 2022, https://www.dimenziomedia.hu/hir/What_has_been_proven_by_the_Hungarian_election_results-144.

The Birth of an Illiberal Information Autocracy in Europe

Of course, informational autocracies are not omnipotent. Guriev and Treisman write that the legitimacy of information autocracies is mainly based on their ability to persuade voters on the basis of their political and economic performance. An important test of the regime, therefore, will be how much Orbán will be able to manipulate information during the turbulent times ahead, such that the lack of economic performance and the expected stagflation will not be blamed on him, but rather on bureaucrats in Brussels. Orbán's media already tries to push the message that in Western Europe inflation is much higher than in Hungary—even though this is factually incorrect⁸⁴—and that all the present economic problems are a result of the sanctions that the EU has placed on Russia.⁸⁵ More repressive regimes, like those in Turkey or Russia, also face hard times when they have to explain economic hardships to their citizens—so the term ahead, with much less abundance of EU funds and of wealth to distribute, might be decisive on the fate of the Orbán regime. In July 2022, protests against austerity measures have already begun in the streets of Budapest, demonstrating the limits of persuasion.⁸⁶

As the huge success of the Hungarian government has illustrated, a majority of the voters do not necessarily feel oppressed in an information autocracy—and no violence is used against its opponents. Elections in Hungary, even according to the OSCE, can be characterized as free, but unfair.⁸⁷ But their freeness means that the voters are willingly, and enthusiastically, re-electing their leadership on the basis of the available information. At the same time, lack of freeness of the elections (such as ballot stuffing, denial of voting rights to certain groups, intimidation on election days) is much more spectacular than lack of fairness in campaigning (such as uneven access to the media space, which is only visible in statistics). This makes the life of opponents of the regime very difficult as the illiberal, majoritarian arguments legitimize the regime as being the embodiment of the voice of the people (“we do what the voters want, as they support us”) is, technically, often valid. The road that leads to this point is paved with all kinds of attempts to silence opponents: state subsidies, closures of media outlets, media buy-ups that are made possible by discriminative legislation and law enforcement.

Viktor Orbán's regime is often characterized as “populist” and, as we can read in the literature, spin dictators can be populists as well. At the same time, overuse of this term would lead to misunderstanding the nature of this regime, as “populism” would also imply a chameleonic adaptation to the voters' needs. Orbán's informational autocracy, tries to change and transform voters' opinions instead of just parroting them. In this sense, his populist rhetoric is not coupled with a populist understanding of the public opinion—which is more transformative than adaptive. Orbán so far has shaped the opinion of Hungarians like play-dough.

84 According to Eurostat data, inflation, year on year, in April 2022 stood at 9.5% in Hungary, and at 8.1% in the Eurozone. “Hungarian consumer confidence falls in May amid surging inflation,” *Reuters*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/hungary-economy/hungarian-consumer-confidence-falls-in-may-amid-surging-inflation-idUSKCN2N0074>; Eurostat, “Annual Inflation up to 8.1% in the Euro Area,” June 17, 2022 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/14644605/2-17062022-AP-EN.pdf/1491c8b5-35e4-cdec-b02a-101a14a912ad>.

85 Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister of Hungary, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 31st Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp,” July 23, 2022, <https://miniszterelnok.hu/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-31st-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp/>.

86 Agence France-Presse in Budapest, “Hungary Protests Continue for Fifth Day amid Growing Anger at Orbán Tax Changes,” *Guardian*, July 17, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/17/hungary-protests-continue-for-fifth-day-amid-growing-anger-at-orban-tax-changes>.

87 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, “Hungary, Parliamentary Elections and Referendum, 3 April 2022: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions,” April 4, 2022, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/hungary/51511>.

So far, this shaping of opinion has been effective. As alluded to before, when Viktor Orbán delivered his speech on July 23 at Baile Tusnad in Transsylvania,⁸⁸ a Romanian nationalist from the crowd interrupted him. “Treat him kindly, as do policemen with drug addicts on the bridges” Orbán told the angry crowd sarcastically, referring to the protestors on the streets of Budapest who blocked bridges to protest against the austerity measures. This sentence could have been the motto of informational autocracies in general, and the Hungarian regime in particular, as it expresses the restraints of spin dictators against the use of violence. As political scientist Steven Levitsky argued in a comment to an article: “I’ve never seen an autocrat consolidate authoritarian rule without spilling a drop of blood or locking someone up,”⁸⁹ arguing that Orbán’s power is based on his ability to control societal institutions and the media. On the rocky road of upcoming implementation of austerity measures, time will tell if this strategy will be enough for Orbán to keep the power.

88 Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister of Hungary, “Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 31st Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp,” July 23, 2022, <https://miniszterelnok.hu/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-31st-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp/>.

89 Nicholas Riccardi, Justin Spike, “Embrace for Hungary’s Orbán deepens among US Conservatives,” *Washington Post*, July 24, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/us-conservatives-embracing-controversial-hungarian-leader/2022/07/25/23252f4a-obdo-11ed-88e8-c58dc3dbae2_story.html.



State Ideology, Science, and Pseudoscience in Russia

BAASANJAV TERBISH

Abstract

This paper recounts the entangled histories of three distinctly Russian movements, namely: Soviet state ideology, Russian cosmism, and Eurasianism. Despite harboring pseudoscientific and mystical ideas specific to Russia, all three intellectual movements have been propagated by their followers as “universal sciences,” and all three have vied for scientific supremacy and universal acceptance. Suppressed by the Bolsheviks and their state ideology as “unscientific” in the 1920s, Russian cosmism and Eurasianism led an esoteric underground existence during the Soviet period and re-emerged during perestroika, seeking not only to reclaim their “scientific” status but also to potentially fill the perplexing vacuum left by the ensuing demise of Soviet state ideology.

Keywords: State Ideology, Cosmism, Eurasianism, Russia, Kalmykia

State Ideology, Science, and Pseudoscience in Russia

Russia is a country defined by the legacy of its past. While this can be said of any society, Russia's pioneering experiment with state ideology during the Soviet period and its intellectual movements of cosmism and Eurasianism are unique. This paper aims to summarize my research on these topics and describe my fieldwork in the Republic of Kalmykia, in southwest Russia, which provides a local perspective from which I approach broader Russian issues.

Despite their seeming incompatibility and differences, these three embodiments of "science," or intellectual movements, not only emerged at the same time (the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th) but are also products of the same wider Russian tradition of cosmo-philosophical and historiographical movements aimed at transforming the world. Rooted in the Slavophile philosophy of the 19th century, this tradition has several distinctive features. First, it combines national distinctiveness with universalist claims about the global destiny of the Russian nation. According to this view, Russia is a keeper of universal wisdom, blending the best achievements of Europe and Asia. Second, this tradition is eclectic in the sense that it represents a mixture of ideas derived from various sciences, pseudosciences, religions, and occultism. This tradition has been closely connected with specifically Russian history, yet it has also striven to encompass global history. Third, this tradition has a cosmic dimension. Not only human society but the Earth itself is considered too small to realize the great visions of Russian prophets—hence space must be colonized, and a multiplicity of worlds and dimensions must be conquered.

Since their birth from this tradition, these three movements—Soviet state ideology, Russian cosmism, and Eurasianism—never co-existed peacefully for long. Suppressed by the Soviet state and its ideology as "unscientific" in the 1920s, Russian cosmism and Eurasianism led an esoteric underground existence during the Soviet period and re-emerged in the dying years of the Soviet Union, seeking not only to reclaim their status but also to potentially fill the perplexing vacuum left by the demise of Soviet state ideology. By describing the entangled stories of state ideology, science, and pseudoscience, this paper outlines the past 100 or so years of Russian history. It also relates the post-Soviet search for a new state ideology (or as some Russians put it, new "National Idea") at the federal and regional levels, based on the Kremlin's projects and the case of the ethnic Republic of Kalmykia.¹

Kalmykia

Kalmykia is a small place roughly the size of South Dakota. Situated in the lower Volga region and north of the Caucasus Mountains, it extends along almost 100 km of Caspian Sea coast at its eastern extremity. Kalmykia's population is less than 300,000, more than half of whom are ethnic Kalmyks, a people of Oirat-Mongol origin.² Despite a belief reiterated in Western journalism and social media, the Kalmyks did not descend from the Golden Horde in Russia (1241–1502), although some of their ancestors did serve the Mongol Empire in Russia, China, Persia, and elsewhere. The ancestors of the Kalmyks came to their present homeland in the 1630s

¹ For more information on the topics of ideology, science, and pseudoscience, see Baasanjav Terbish, *State Ideology, Science and Pseudoscience in Russia: Between the Cosmos and the Earth* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2022).

² The Oirats are a Mongolic group whose historical homeland today corresponds to Western Mongolia. Beginning in the early 13th century, the Oirats were intertwined with Chingis Khan's lineage, serving the Mongol Empire. In 1368, the Mongol Empire retreated from China to its ancestral land north of the Great Wall of China, where the tribes split into two large warring factions: the Oirats in the west and the Mongols in the east.

from Zungaria (present-day Western Mongolia and Xinjiang, China). The Kalmyks are also the only Buddhist group with a centuries-long history in Europe and one of the three Buddhist peoples of the Russian Federation, the others being the Buryats and the Tuvans in Siberia. Apart from their distinct culture that has developed in isolation from other Mongol groups for over four centuries, the Kalmyks are known for having made the last long-distance nomadic migration in world history: in 1771 the majority of the Kalmyks set off on a perilous 3,300 km-long journey back to Zungaria during which an estimated 100,000 perished along the way.

Until the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Kalmyks who remained in Russia had been predominantly nomadic and the Kalmyk Steppe was used as a cattle-breeding periphery of the Russian Empire. During the Soviet period, they underwent a series of tremendous changes such as Russification, national unification, secularization, collectivization, and other shifts that left a deep imprint on their social organization and identity. From 1943 to 1956, the entire population was deported under Stalin to Siberia on charges of betraying the Soviet motherland during World War II, only to be pardoned and returned to their native land by Khrushchev following Stalin's death.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991 it was decided to create the post of president in Kalmykia, but owing to scandals the election was postponed. During the next attempt in 1993, the main struggle broke out between General Valery Ochirov, a hero of the Afghanistan War, and Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, a young self-made millionaire who promised to turn impoverished Kalmykia into a "second Kuwait." Ilyumzhinov won the election. During the Yeltsin era (1991–1999), Kalmykia, like other subject territories of the Russian Federation, enjoyed unprecedented freedom in both domestic and foreign affairs, and underwent significant political and social changes and distress. Among the first initiatives carried out by Ilyumzhinov were the dismantling of the local soviets, the proclamation of a new "economic dictatorship," and control of the media. Around 1994, Ilyumzhinov established an offshore zone in Kalmykia,³ which is said to have brought him substantial income. In a few years, with the National Bank of Kalmykia and the entire economy under his firm control, Ilyumzhinov was acting more like the CEO of a company rather than the president of a republic.⁴

Another significant development that Ilyumzhinov presided over was the revival and spread of both traditional and nontraditional religious movements, among which Buddhism benefitted the most. His position as president of the International Chess Organization (FIDE), which he held until 2018,⁵ gave him access to the international press and more business opportunities. During his time in power, he captured the attention of both the Russian and foreign press with his self-promotion, colorful personality, and controversial meetings with troubled Middle Eastern dictators

3 Having attracted thousands of Russian firms that sought to evade taxes, the Kalmyk offshore zone was closed in or around 2002 at the "request" of the Kremlin. According to my informants close to Ilyumzhinov, Putin told Ilyumzhinov to close the offshore zone. This was done orally, without issuing written orders and the like.

4 According to the 1993 constitution, the Russian Federation consists of 89 constituent units, also known as "subject territories," including republics, krais, oblasts, cities of federal importance, autonomous oblasts and autonomous okrugs. Under President Boris Yeltsin, all republics of the Russian Federation, including Kalmykia, held elections to elect republican presidents. In 2004 Putin abolished the local institutions of the presidency along with republican presidential elections in all territories of Russia. Leaders of the republics, according to the new law, were degraded from "presidents" to "heads of republics" (*glava respublik*) who had to be appointed by the Kremlin.

5 "FIDE's Ethics Commission Suspends Ilyumzhinov as Its President." *Tass.com*, Tass Russian News Agency, 13 July 2018, <https://tass.com/sport/1012990>.

including Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi, and Bashar al-Assad. Ilyumzhinov is also a self-professed UFO abductee with a taste for eccentric projects.⁶

In 2010 Ilyumzhinov had to resign not because of his cosmic mismanagement of Kalmykia but because of a new law signed by President Dmitriy Medvedev imposing term limits on regional leaders.⁷ Aleksey Orlov, a Kalmyk who had been Ilyumzhinov's representative in Moscow, was appointed head of Kalmykia, a post which he held until March 2019, when he was replaced by Batu Khasikov, a master of martial arts and former policeman.⁸ Despite Khasikov's pledge to kick-start Kalmykia's revival and bring order to its finances, no visible improvements have taken place, and the republic remains to this day an underdeveloped periphery with high levels of corruption, unemployment, and economic criminality.

I have studied Kalmykia since 2009, first as part of my graduate coursework at university in England. From 2014 to 2019, I worked on an anthropological project based at Cambridge University aimed at video-documenting the endangered culture of the Kalmyks, generating more than 2,500 videos of interviews, rituals, and cultural activities.⁹ I traveled to Russia almost every year until 2020, observing changes in Kalmykia's situation and talking to people. Outside Kalmykia, I also interviewed Kalmyk diasporas in cities such as Moscow and Saint Petersburg and in Astrakhan Oblast, which allowed me to get to know local Russians and to better understand the situation in Russia.

Three Embodiments of “Science” in Russia

Despite harboring pseudoscientific and mystical ideas specific to Russia, all three movements under consideration—Soviet state ideology, Russian cosmism, and Eurasianism—have been propagated by their followers as “universal sciences,” and all three have vied for scientific supremacy and universal acceptance.

To understand why these movements have been presented as “sciences” by their followers, one must first look at the Russian concept of science around the beginning of 20th century. The Russian word for science is *nauka*, which derives from the word *uk*, meaning “teaching, instruction.” Its derivatives are the verb *uchit'*, which can be translated into English as both “to teach” and “to learn,” and the noun *uchennyi*, meaning “scholar” or “an intelligent and experienced person.” In contrast with the modern Western understanding of science as “knowledge acquired by study,” *nauka* denotes pre-existing, natural knowledge that people can either teach others, or learn from others or from one's own life experience. That is, to do *nauka* one does not need to be a scientist in the Western understanding of the term but can be anyone deemed “smart and experienced,” such as peasant elders, priests, or particularly adept horse thieves. Another popular meaning of *nauka* is “organized knowledge,” which is close to the Western definition of science. Having several overlapping meanings, *nauka*

6 Tom Parfitt, “King of Kalmykia,” *Guardian*, September 21, 2006, Europe, World, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/21/russia.chess>.

7 Helge Blakkisrud, “Medvedev's New Governors.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 3 (May 2011): 367–395, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2011.557531>.

8 Edward C. Holland, “Leadership Change and Protests in Russia's Kalmykia: Moscow's Corruptive Meddling and Its Discontents,” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* no. 628 (December 2, 2019): 1–5, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/leadership-change-and-protests-in-russia-s-kalmykia-moscow-s-corruptive-meddling-and-its-discontents/>.

9 Deposited at Cambridge University's Apollo Repository, the video collections can be accessed at: <https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/253889>.

is far broader than “science,” with the implication that it allows any authoritative teaching, dogma, or pseudoscience to be presented as *nauchnyi* “scientific.”

In light of this definition, it becomes clearer why these three movements were proclaimed as “sciences.” Soviet ideology was trumpeted by its followers as a *scientific endeavor* for a revolutionary transformation of society to usher in scientific communism, the final stage of social evolution. Russian cosmism was revealed by its adherents as a *science* of truth about the Universe, aimed at engineering an immortal human race and bringing about ultimate cosmic order and peace. Based on geographical determinism and seeing Russia as a unique “landlocked civilization,” Eurasianism was popularized by its proponents as a new kind of *meta-science* about the terrestrial totality of Russia-Eurasia. By analyzing these three embodiments of “science,” one can get a sense of what constitutes “science” or a “scientific system” in Russia and seek to unpack the Russian/Soviet notion of state ideology and reveal its underlying links to pseudoscience and the occult.

State Ideology

Ideology has been understood differently by various groups in different societies at different times. Since the term *ideology* was first coined by Antoine Destutt de Tracy in his work *Éléments d'idéologie* (1817–1818), its meaning has undergone a dramatic change and bewildering proliferation. If ideology originally meant the scientific study of human ideas, it soon came to denote systems of ideas themselves. With the contributions of scholars such as the Baron d'Holbach, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Karl Mannheim, and Karl Marx, the term rapidly developed other subtle abstract meanings, such as a teaching, a belief, a philosophy, a practice, a critique of ideas, and so on. Today, as Terry Eagleton points out, ideology has a number of meanings, not all of which are compatible with each other. In *Ideology: An Introduction* (2007) Eagleton gives 16 different definitions of the term that are currently in circulation in the West alone.¹⁰ Eagleton's study of Western traditions opens up the possibility that ideology may be understood even more differently in other parts of the world. This is the case in Russia. What this means is that a Russian person who hears the word *ideologiya* may think of something different from what Westerners may think of when they hear the word.

Unlike in Western democracies, in Russia ideology has historically been synonymous with state ideology, and as such it has a single definition approved by the state. Individual philosophers, scholars, or intellectuals cannot come up with their own definitions, which can be construed by the state as a challenge to its monopoly. This was especially the case in the Soviet period. Ideology in Russia also embodies the highest form of the political, for it is not supposed to emerge from the masses, but must be held within the purview of a tiny minority of political elites and experts. The Russian concept of *ideologiya* is often misunderstood in the West because it conveys meanings that are not necessarily present in Western definitions of the term. In the Soviet Union or Russia, ideology has in general been understood as a positive thing that serves two essential functions. Domestically, it is believed to be indispensable for national unity and the orderly running of society, and thus is both seen and practiced differently from how people in the West perceive ideology. Internationally, a state ideology is supposed to be planetary in scope and inspire those nations that seek ways of development that differ from Western models. As an overarching system of ideas and ideals that guides both domestic and foreign policy, a state ideology is also a belief system that defines the meaning of people's lives and explains their country's

10 Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 2007), 28–31.

place in the world. That said, ideology is not supposed to be a set of ideas invented by political elites, or any humans for that matter, but should reflect the immutable eternal truth of nature and the Universe itself. The role of political elites is to seek out and translate this truth for the masses.

The Universal Truth can be correctly understood in its totality and analyzed only through “scientific” methods. In the Soviet Union, this role befell the guardians of Soviet state ideology, or Marxism-Leninism. Presented as a comprehensive scientific doctrine, Soviet ideology consisted of three main parts (philosophy, political economy, and theory of scientific socialism) that were supposed to be applicable to all scholarly disciplines, from the sciences to the humanities, along with politics and economics. In short, Soviet ideology was presented by the Communist Party as a “universal science” capable of providing a unified explanation of everything. Despite not living up to its promise and describing the world through the distorted lens of a bourgeois vs. proletarian dichotomy, Soviet ideology persisted more or less unscathed throughout the Soviet period.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, did not change people’s attitudes toward the importance of living in an ideologized society. Following the demise of the Soviet system, it was expected that *Homo sovieticus* would similarly disappear, or at least evolve into a more democratic person by shedding his instinctive obedience to the state and abandoning fear, powerlessness, and the dogmatic need for a state ideology. Although the immediate post-Soviet experience of the 1990s generated renewed hope and new visions of the future, people clung to their old habit of needing state protection and worshipping the state, while trying to adjust their behavior to new realities as they had always done. As the idea that Russia has to be united by a strong state employing a “set of unifying principles” remained largely intact in the political imagination of the majority of the population, it is no wonder that President Boris Yeltsin set up a special team in 1996 to create a “National Idea” (reminiscent of a state ideology) for Russia. Yeltsin’s attempt, however, did not produce the anticipated outcome, and he soon had to abandon his ideological project.¹¹

While the Kremlin initiated unsuccessfully the search for a National Idea, in some rural parts such as Kalmykia discussions regarding the need for a new state ideology were independently initiated in the early post-Soviet days by various high-ranking bureaucrats and individuals who saw themselves as belonging to intellectual elites. For them, the ideological vacuum was problematic and dangerous precisely because it indicated the absence of collective values or morality, as well as the state’s weakness. The fact that Kalmyk intellectuals proposed various all-encompassing ideologies illustrates that the death of Soviet ideology did not result in state ideology becoming obsolete, but sparked a remarkable resurgence of ideological aspirations that both competed with and complemented various nationalist, religious, and developmental visions in Kalmykia.

While these ideological proposals did not materialize in their original forms, Kalmykia’s president weighed in and offered his own ideology. Emboldened by Yeltsin’s “take as much sovereignty as you can swallow” approach to local leaders and encouraged by Yeltsin’s search for a new National Idea, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov propounded a new Kalmyk-centric state ideology that reflected his vision of a new cosmic order not only for Kalmykia but for Russia as a whole. For his ideology, Ilyumzhinov proposed to revive not discredited scientific atheism but to use

¹¹ Kathleen E. Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics & Memory during the Yeltsin Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 148–64.

spirituality and “new scientific systems,” which he found in the pseudoscientific movements of Russian cosmism and Eurasianism that had emerged from the Soviet esoteric underground during perestroika. Ilyumzhinov’s ideological project poses a question: Why did he propose a universalistic ideology instead of a more particularistic one based on ethno-nationalism, as was the case in many national republics in the 1990s including Tatarstan, Chechnya, and others? To answer this question, we need to look briefly at Kalmykia’s Soviet experience of nation-building and historiography.

As mentioned, the ancestors of the Kalmyks (several tribal confederations of Oirat-Mongol background including the Torghuts, the Derbets, the Khoshuds, and the Zungars) settled in what is today Kalmykia beginning in the 1630s. For various historical reasons, these tribal confederations never united into a single people until the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, when they underwent ethnic unification, becoming a single people (*narod*) with one historical outlook and set of ancestors and heroes at the expense of tribal histories, ancestors, and identities. The forced removal of the entire Kalmyk population to Siberia from 1943 to 1956 under Stalin was a turning point. Deprived of their citizenship rights and subject to institutionalized humiliation and abuse, the Kalmyks were scattered in small numbers all over Siberia and Central Asia.¹² There they were forced to conceal their ethnic identity and ethnic markers (clothing, holidays, rituals, beliefs, and language). Following Khrushchev’s pardon of them, the Kalmyks returned from exile not only bilingual, tamed, and physically deteriorated, but eager to reconnect with each other and—perhaps not surprisingly—to adjust to the ideals of the Soviet regime by accepting Soviet views uncritically.

Partly due to Kalmykia’s small population (which made it easy to control and surveil them effectively), and to Kalmyk eagerness to readjust, post-exile Kalmykia never generated its own hidden ethno-nationalism, nor did it nurture anti-regime subcultures, which was the case among other exiled groups such as the Chechens. During the post-exile readjustment period, a success if seen from a Soviet perspective, the history of the Kalmyk people was rewritten on the initiative of Kalmyk historians themselves (though not without the help of Russian advisors) in terms of *voluntarily* joining Russia and evincing eternal loyalty to the common motherland and the Communist Party. On the eve of perestroika, most Kalmyks spoke only Russian, were ignorant of their traditional culture, and saw themselves as Soviet citizens. The collapse of the Soviet Union, however, did not bring conflict to the republic based on ethnic difference (that is, Kalmyk versus Russian), nor unleashed ethno-nationalism, which can be attributed to the success of both the Soviet ethno-project and the Soviet interpretation of Kalmyk history. Unchallenged in terms of its foundational ideas, today the official history remains strongly pro-Russian, and many, if not most, Kalmyks proudly see themselves as Russian patriots.

Given these circumstances, Kirsan Ilyumzhinov’s choice of a universalistic ideology based on all-Russian ideas and movements, albeit mystical in orientation, is unsurprising. Ilyumzhinov’s main collaborator, Kalmykia’s State Secretary for Ideology Alexei Nuskhaev, was also a Russian patriot, as were the Russian and Kalmyk members of the Eurasian Academy of Life in Elista, the regional capital city, who advised Kalmykia’s leaders on the new state ideology. Ilyumzhinov’s ideological experiment, however, proved unsuccessful.

¹² Following the banishment of the Kalmyks to Siberia in 1943, many individuals were later further removed to other places. By 1948, Kalmyks had been scattered across 15 *oblasti* and *kraya* in Siberia and the Russian Far East, 13 *oblasti* in Kazakhstan, as well as in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

While more than three decades have passed since the collapse of state socialism and the repudiation of Soviet ideology, this positive attitude towards a state-sponsored ideology is still prevalent, and many people wish their country had a state ideology akin to the centralized Soviet model. One of the propositions of this paper is, therefore, to move away from the conventional Western understanding of ideology as something negative and artificial, if one is to understand contemporary Russia, because ideology in that country is perceived as something that is natural, brings order, offers guidance for the future, and gives meaning to people's lives. If asked about how order and prosperity should be brought about, today many people in Kalmykia—who still associate ideology with positive things but may see both historical Marxism-Leninism and more recently Ilyumzhinov's ideology as experiments gone wrong—would reply that they need “a better state ideology.” This is the case not only among many middle-aged and older people in Kalmykia, but also among their compatriots in other parts of Russia, who remember the Soviet Union and feel unhappy about the current situation in their country, which they see as being plagued by widening inequality, disorder, and precariousness of life.

Russian Cosmism

Like Soviet ideology, Russian cosmism was born during a period when idealistic belief in the omnipotence of science spread rapidly among writers, philosophers, political elites, and the general public. This belief played out against a backdrop of social unrest that swept across Russia including three revolutions (one in 1905 and two in 1917) that opened up new horizons (at least for the time being) and changed Russian society beyond all recognition, undermining centuries-old dogmas, conventions, knowledge, and values. It was in this transformative environment that Russian cosmism emerged to deal with a host of scientific-philosophical questions, among which those concerning the cosmos and the fate of technologically advancing humankind were of central importance. Guided by their universal aspirations, what the early cosmists did was to try to make sense of a new emerging reality and systematize major scientific discoveries—from the tiniest particles such as atoms to the largest structures such as galaxies and everything between—and to offer a new unifying story. In this sense, Russian cosmism was similar to Soviet ideology, which was presented by the Communist Party as a universal science capable of providing a unified explanation of everything.

According to cosmism's view, the Universe consists of energy and data flows, and humans are intimately connected not only with their planet but with the endless expanse of the Universe teeming with countless extraterrestrial civilizations through myriad cosmic energies and waves. These energies and waves are believed to transfer not only heat but many other miraculous qualities such as collective intelligence, memories, wisdom, healing powers, and even sensibilities. Some even believe the Universe to be a gigantic living organism. Despite its “scientific” aspirations, cosmism is not a science, as the term is generally understood in the West, for not only does it not utilize experimental methodology involving control groups, equipment, and the like, but its underlying belief in the omnipotence of science and technology is rooted in the idea of the magic power of occult knowledge. The cosmist idea of the realization of immortality and the revival of the dead with the help of science, for example, has a long occult and Gnostic heritage in which death is seen as a technical problem, aside from the fact that cosmist conceptions contain theosophical and panpsychic influences.

While many cosmists do not believe in a god or other supernatural beings, some who do belong to cosmism's Fëdorovian (followers of Fëdorov) quasi-spiritual-quasi-technological branch that focuses, in the spirit of "science," on physical phenomena, energies, and human technology at the expense of God. Similar to deism, this spiritual branch sees God as a passive power, which does not intervene in the Universe, having relegated his active duties to humans with their powerful technology. By appointing itself the "perfecter of the Universe"¹³ and endowing itself with powers of creation and destruction, humanity—the cosmic duty of which is to pursue scientific progress by eradicating disease, freeing itself from biological limitations, and attaining immortality—takes up the role ascribed in folk cosmologies to gods. This cosmic endeavor, however, has to be managed by strong leaders—a Russian autocrat, a team of leading [Russian] scientists, or, according to some cosmists, the Russian God-man himself—a view consonant with Russia's traditional political culture. By worshipping humanity and its growing technology (rather than the biblical God), cosmism is essentially a humanistic movement in the age of modernity.

In the early decades of the Soviet Union when the Bolsheviks were openly experimenting with all sorts of ideas—from free love to Lenin's New Economic Policy (which allowed private enterprise) to avant-garde art to a scientized occult—it is not difficult to imagine that cosmism's activist approach to all life's problems and its way of thinking, full of futurism, idealism, energy, and a metaphysics of technology, offered a source of inspiration to early Soviet literature, philosophy, art, science, and politics. Not only did many great Russian poets exhibit, to one degree or another, cosmist concerns in their works, but some Bolshevik leaders were cosmists themselves, including Alexandr Bogdanov (an early political rival of Lenin's), Anatoly Lunacharsky (people's commissar for education), Leonid Krasin (Soviet minister for trade), and others. This honeymoon period in cosmist-Bolshevik relations, however, began to wane during Stalin's "great turn" of 1929 as scientific disciplines quickly consolidated under the umbrella of Soviet state ideology, and the pseudoscientific side of cosmism was suppressed by the state (although some of the movement's less controversial ideas were quietly incorporated into Soviet culture).

Purged for most of the Soviet period, cosmism as a body of ideas, however, survived in the shadows in many guises: in the secretive healing practices of psychics who used cosmic and telepathic energies; in stories about UFO sightings; in underground circles in which the paranormal was discussed and practiced; in *samizdat*¹⁴ manuscripts; in futuristic works of art; and in the names of the movement's pioneers, including Nikolay Fëdorov (1829–1903), Konstantin Tsiolkovskii (1857–1935), and others, who happened to be the leading philosophers of the Soviet space program. The relationship between Russian cosmism and the mainstream scientific community, and the Soviet state in particular, remained controversial. As a movement labeled "non-scientific," cosmism's very existence, albeit in the Soviet underground, shaped the contours of what "science" or Soviet ideology was. Furthermore, in the Soviet Union, a society notorious for secrecy and suppression in which people sought unsanctioned explanations (that is, conspiracy theories about what was going on inside their country and beyond), cosmism served an important societal role by helping sustain a belief among the population in the hidden, the unknown, and the paranormal.

¹³ Michael Hagemester, "Russian Cosmism in the 1920s and Today," in *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 185–186.

¹⁴ *Samizdat* refers to the underground copying and distribution of literature banned by the state.

Like other suppressed movements, cosmism emerged from the underground only during Mikhail Gorbachev's period of perestroika and glasnost. Not only did cosmism openly proliferate at the grassroots level, but the movement's activist, universalist, and humanist ideals were incorporated at the highest political level in Gorbachev's policy of "new thinking."¹⁵ Politburo members from Mikhail Gorbachev to Aleksandr Yakovlev to Eduard Shevardnadze, as well as other high-ranking Party members, stressed the fundamental importance of the unity of the world and universal values in their speeches, announcements, and writings, thus further popularizing cosmism. Gorbachev, for example, called for the "formation of an integrated universal consciousness," something he described as "a form of spiritual communication and rebirth for mankind."¹⁶ Dubbed the "godfather of glasnost" and the intellectual force behind Gorbachev's reform program, Yakovlev asserted by using cosmist rhetoric that "the world is becoming ever more aware of itself as a single organism."¹⁷ Pointing out that "the biosphere recognizes no division into blocs, alliances, or systems," Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze contended that all nations "share a place where individual national efforts unite into a single energy field."¹⁸ Anatoliy Adamishin, the Soviet deputy foreign minister, supported his superior by drawing attention to the fact that "physicists have long realized the unity not only of the world but of the entire Universe. It is now politicians' turn."¹⁹

It was in this environment that the Experimental Creative Center was established in 1990 in Moscow under the patronage of the Politburo member Yuri Prokofyev, which was led by Sergey Kurginyan, a former theater director and an admirer of the cosmist movement. The Center's task, staffed with hundreds of researchers, was to write a post-perestroika program for the ideological and spiritual renewal of the Soviet Union. Kurginyan proposed a "cosmic philosophical religious social idea" based on Russian cosmism, communism, nationalism, and Christian theology.²⁰

The cosmism-inspired call for universal unity and for the Soviet Union's ideological resuscitation was accompanied by another phenomenon: mass sightings of UFOs in many parts of the Soviet Union that were duly reported by the liberalized press. While central news agencies and newspapers disseminated the news of UFO sighting and landings near military bases, nuclear power plants, and other strategic locations, sightings in small and not very strategically important localities were also reported in increasing numbers in many local newspapers. One such locality was Kalmykia. Thus, in the article, "Did the Aliens Visit Us?" published in *Izvestiia Kalmykii* ("Kalmyk News") on June 7, 1995, the journalists wrote:

In response to our article "In the Night Sky Above Elista" published on June 2, all of a sudden our newspaper office was flooded with telephone calls from the readers. In order to process all the incoming information, our workers had to wait at the phone machine in turns. Being in a hurry to share what they saw, people phoned us not only from Elista but also from the remotest corners of Kalmykia. And this in spite of the high cost of intercity calls! Thank you, dear friends! From all the stories

15 Steven Kull, *Burying Lenin: The Revolution in Soviet Ideology and Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992), 28.

16 Kull, *Burying Lenin*, 27.

17 Kull, *Burying Lenin*, 27–28.

18 Kull, *Burying Lenin*, 27.

19 Kull, *Burying Lenin*, 25–28.

20 S. E. Kurginyan et al., *Postperestroika* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990).

we have recorded so far, we tried to select the most, in our view, interesting and colorful ones.²¹

The article published 25 eyewitness accounts of UFOs, indicating the enormous popularity of this topic in Kalmykia. This mass excitement went hand in hand with the reported abductions of Kalmyk citizens by space aliens, among whom the most high-profile victim was Kalmykia's President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, who claimed to have been abducted in September 1997 while on a business trip in Moscow.

The establishment of the Eurasian Academy of Life in Elista in 1990 attests to the early popularization of cosmism in the region. Consisting of cosmists, Eurasianists, historians, philosophers, and psychics, the Academy's star member was Alexei Nuskhaev, a self-proclaimed alien contactee, who was hired in 1995 by President Ilyumzhinov as Kalmykia's state secretary for ideology. Another cosmist organization to emerge in Kalmykia was a discussion club called Aribut, founded by one Valery Dorzhinov, another self-confessed alien abductee who shot to fame thanks to colorful accounts of his intergalactic journeys that he published in the state-controlled newspaper *Khalmg Unn* ("Kalmyk Truth"). Dorzhinov also organized a series of exhibitions of his cosmic paintings, contributing to the proliferation of cosmism in Kalmykia. Other notable names are the famous Kalmyk artist Dmitry Sandzhiev, who paints cosmic works of art; Zoya Boschaeva, professor of economics at Kalmyk State University, who writes on solar-Earth theory;²² and the architect Jangar Pyurveev, who has written several books on cosmism.²³

Like many cosmists, these individuals claim to be connected to the cosmos from where they say they receive novel ideas, visions, and the truth about the Universe. Having foothold in the realm of the spiritual, Russian cosmism, which positions itself as a non-religion, nonetheless influences religious belief. In Kalmykia many folk healers who practice Buddhism mixed with folk beliefs use various energies, including "cosmic energy," which they claim to absorb from their environment or receive from Buddhist gods. Some even claim to receive this energy directly from the cosmos or extraterrestrial beings. The most prominent belong to a community called *Vozrozhdenie* ("Revival"), led by a charismatic folk healer named Galina Muzaeva, who appropriately describes her religion as *Kosmicheskii buddizm* ("Cosmic Buddhism"). Apart from healing the sick by means of traditional methods (such as reading Buddhist mantras, using herbs, and so on) the community, which consists of 16 "cosmic Buddhists," carries out cosmic projects in collaboration with extraterrestrial powers. Members of this community communicate with the cosmos and receive celestial maps, diagrams, and instructions on how to create "energy corridors" for UFOs to beam down cosmic rays. Once these spots have absorbed enough cosmic energy, Galina Muzaeva assures, they begin to radiate with power enough to turn the entire planet into an earthly paradise where diseases will be eradicated, corrupt nation states purged, and all religions and nations will become united in a cosmic union centered around Russia under the leadership of the spiritually powerful Kalmyks headed by Galina Muzaeva herself.²⁴ Due to the

21 "Did the Aliens Visit Us?" *Izvestiya Kalmykii*, June 7, 1995.

22 Zoya Boschaeva, *Upravlenie Ekonomicheskim Rostom* (Moscow: Ekonomika, 2004); Boschaeva, *Formula Ekonomicheskogo Rosta* (Moscow: Ekonomika, 2007).

23 Jangar Pyurveev, *Arkhitektura Mirozdaniya* (Moscow: Izd-vo PKTs Al'teks, 2006); Pyurveev, *Velikoe Sokrestie Kontinentov—Strategicheskaya Model' Kosmoplanetarnoy Integratsii Planety Zemlya v Noosfere* (Moscow: Sofi Print, 2014); Pyurveev et al., *Cosmoplanetarian Integration of Earth* (Moscow: Mirozdanie Ltd., 2009).

24 Baasanjav Terbish, "I Have My Own Spaceship: Folk Healer in Kalmykia, Russia," *Inner Asia* 20, no. 1 (April 2018): 132–158, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22105018-12340101>.

proliferation of popular cosmism, in Kalmykia, the populace generally takes cosmic topics seriously and many—including respectable scholars, politicians, journalists, and public figures—are more likely than not to believe in telepathy, cosmic energies, the transubstantiation of souls, and UFOs.

Today, Russian cosmism is propagated as *dukhovnaia nauka*, a “science of soul-searching and the truth,” purporting to address hitherto suppressed psychic, spiritual, and paranormal issues and anxieties from a global, cosmic perspective. Given the circumstances of the period when cosmism came about, the knowledge, explanations, and predictions of its founding fathers were bound to be as speculative as they were emotional. Russian cosmism emerged as a cultural-intellectual movement that propagated speculative ideas about the nature of humanity, its projected evolution, and its place in the Universe, and this trend continues to this day. Due to cosmism’s wealth of topics and predictions, today the Russian cosmist scene resembles more an ecosystem encompassing diverse and fluid groups and networks, including self-proclaimed cosmists, transhumanists, posthumanists, immortalists, futurologists, and Fëdorovians, whose beliefs overlap in some areas but contradict themselves in others.

Nevertheless, united by a common belief in the possibility of attaining immortality, many cosmist-minded individuals not only contend that their movement has great potential, but some even call for cosmism to be developed into a “universal ideology” of the future. It can be argued that the current popularity of cosmism, as strange as it may sound, was to some extent precipitated by Soviet ideology with its futurism, space exploration, and ethno-engineering projects extending into the future. Promoted as an original product of the Russian mind (hence the label “Russian cosmism,” as opposed to the “Western” one), cosmism also has the capacity to trigger strong nationalistic feelings and sentiments. Staunchly nationalist, many cosmists of different ethnicities in Russia indeed share a conspiratorial mindset and are openly anti-Western.

Eurasianism

Another ambitious, all-embracing, collectivist movement that has arisen from the ashes of Soviet science and ideology is Eurasianism. Purporting to be a “science,” it offers a systematized explanation of the uniqueness and fate of the large territory that coincides with the borders of the former Russian Empire and its successor, the Soviet Union. Whereas during the Soviet period this political-geographical union, inhabited by myriad sedentary and nomadic peoples, was legitimized by the Marxist-Leninist theory of evolutionary merger by stages, today its most promising substitute is Eurasianism, which postulates not social evolution and merger, but the idea of fixed, primordial civilizational clusters (Eurasian, Atlanticist, Chinese, and other clusters) that exist in opposition to one another.

Eurasianism was first proposed by Russian émigrés in Sofia, Bulgaria, in the 1920s. The proponents of this theory who fled Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution (including Prince Nikolay Troubetskoy, the minor aristocrat Pëtr Savitskii, the historian Georgii Vernadskii, the Kalmyk doctor Erenzhen Khara-Davan, and

others)²⁵ argued that Russian civilization does not belong to the European category, but is a unique civilization in its own right. It is neither European nor Asian but something in between: Eurasian. By rejecting European values, the founding fathers of the movement (referred to as “classical Eurasianists”) also rejected “atomistic” European scholarship and attempted to explain Russia-Eurasia by constructing a new meta-science that would render it possible to understand the world in its totality.²⁶

This desire to create an overarching system of ideas resembles the early cosmist project of unifying all sciences and recounting the story of life from a cosmic perspective. But unlike cosmism, Eurasianism’s analytical angle was embedded in terrestrial geography, or more precisely in its interpretation of terrestrial geography, laced with Europhobia. In comparison with human-centric cosmism, Eurasianism is nature-centric in that nature is seen as the source of all truth. While aiming to explain the Earth in its totality, Eurasianists focused attention on Russia-Eurasia and sought to demonstrate the existence of a meta-science peculiar to Eurasia, which they saw as a territory embodying “a structural totality, explicable through its own internal elements and not in terms of its interaction with the outside.”²⁷ Fascinated by the laws and regularities of nature, the founding fathers of Eurasianism proposed arguments that were metaphysical, conspiratorial, and verged on geographical determinism. In their metaphysical conception of geography, Eurasia was a “unique civilization,” a “closed circle,” and a “living organism”²⁸ that shaped human collectives, their culture, psychology, history, and politics.

Owing to this geographical closure, Eurasia, which encompassed myriad peoples with different languages, cultures, and histories, was historically predestined by nature itself to form a single civilization, a single state unit in opposition to Europe. In this light, the Bolshevik Revolution was reimagined as Russia’s natural reaction to rapid Westernization, and the ensuing bloody civil war was seen as a divine force to cleanse Russia-Eurasia of its cultural corruption and bring its inner vitality and essence to the fore. Based on this insight, the Eurasianists attempted to predict Russia-Eurasia’s future. Opposed to militant atheism and Bolshevik ideas, they came to believe that soon nature, with its immutable laws, would correct itself and the Bolshevik power would organically evolve into a new national, Orthodox-Christian government.²⁹

However, this expectation never materialized, and the Soviet secret police, which had orchestrated the Red Terror during the Russian Civil War, successfully eradicated the Eurasianist movement. The Soviet government’s eradication of the movement had some irony to it, in that many Soviet policies informed by their own state ideology

25 Mark Bassin, Sergei Glebov, and Marlene Laruelle, eds., *Between Europe & Asia: The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015); Mark Bassin and Pozo Gonzalo, eds., *The Politics of Eurasianism: Identity, Popular Culture and Russia’s Foreign Policy* (London [Shouldn’t this be Lanham, Maryland?]: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008).

26 Mark Bassin, Sergei Glebov, and Marlene Laruelle, “Introduction: What Was Eurasianism and Who Made It?,” in *Between Europe & Asia: The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism*, edited by Mark Bassin, Sergei Glebov, and Marlene Laruelle, (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 9.

27 Marlene Laruelle, “Conceiving the Territory: Eurasianism as a Geographical Identity,” in *Between Europe & Asia: The Origins, Theories, and Legacies of Russian Eurasianism*, ed. Mark Bassin, Sergei Glebov, and Marlene Laruelle (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 69.

28 Pëtr Savitsky, “Geograficheskiy obzor Rossii-Evrazii,” in *Rossiya: Osobyi Geograficheskiy Mir*, (Prague, unknown publisher, 1927), 29, 57.

29 Bassin, Glebov, and Laruelle, *Between Europe & Asia*, 7–9.

were not dissimilar to those held by Eurasianists. The Soviet state was staunchly anti-Western, conspiratorial, totalitarian, promoted narratives of the Soviet Union's exceptionalism, and unleashed Russocentrism by upholding the Russian people as "the first among equals" and the "vanguard nation" in Soviet society. Mirroring Eurasianist values, the cultures of non-Russian peoples in the Soviet Union were also taught to be historically tied to that of the Russians.

Despite being eradicated as an organized movement, Eurasianism as a theory of geographical determinism was revived in the Soviet Union thanks to the dissident historian Lev Gumilëv (1912–1992). Like his predecessors, he saw the Soviet Union, successor to the Russian Empire, as neither a European nor an Asian country, but a unique Eurasian civilization. In so doing, he de-emphasized Russia's links to European culture and portrayed European peoples as historical foes of Russia. His contribution to Eurasianism was his theory of ethnogenesis, or "birth of ethnos," which hinges on the concept of *passionarnost'* ("passionarity"). Passionarity refers to a process whereby leaders absorb energy from the environment and use this energy in organizing and managing their compatriots, setting up new standards of behavior, and in this way bring about a new ethnos. In his view, history does not develop in a linear advance, but consists of cycles when passionarity gives birth to new ethnos and civilizations, and ultimately when the impulse is depleted the ethnos dies out, giving way to the next. He did not stop there. Influenced by cosmists, he established the origin of passionarity in cosmic rays which, he argued, are absorbed by a landscape. In other words, cosmic energy from outer space ultimately shapes terrestrial human civilizations.

According to Gumilëv, the distribution of passionarity is not equal across the globe. The highest concentration of this energy is in the territory of the Soviet Union-Eurasia and the Middle East, with the implication that these territories contain the highest number of "passionaries." By contrast, Western Europe and the United States not only have a low level of passionarity, but are constantly losing this vital energy.³⁰ By anchoring anti-Western sentiments to Eurasia's landscape, he saw Cold War animosity between the Soviet Union and the West not as a fight between communism and capitalism, but as a fight that had deeper natural and even cosmic roots. What he did was to "energize" human history and trace the energy stored in the landscape, which brings about civilizational clusters, back to its cosmic origin. The role of leaders, or "passionaries," is to serve as a bridge between cosmic and social phenomena. Gumilëv established a new link between the cosmos and the Earth and instituted a new cult of leaders.

Suppressed by the state and despised by the Soviet scientific community, Gumilëv nonetheless achieved stratospheric fame during the perestroika era. With Soviet ideology by then in tatters and the whole society in search of alternative thinking while anxious about preserving the Soviet Union, his civilizational ideas and his theory of ethnogenesis gathered support from politicians, philosophers, and scholars from a wide political spectrum, ranging from liberals to conservatives to nationalists and imperialists. Not only did Eurasianism provide an alternative vision of ideology, but it also justified the existence of the multiethnic Soviet Union as a single political entity. The collapse of state socialism provided fertile soil for Eurasianism to transmogrify and branch out. His works were especially well received not only in some of the newly independent states of Central Asia including Kazakhstan and

³⁰ Lev Gumilëv, *Ot Rusi do Rossii* (Moscow: Izd-vo Zakharov, 1993), 10-25; Gumilëv, *Etnogenezis i Biosfera Zemli* (Moscow: AST, 2005).

Kyrgyzstan, but in ethnic regions of Russia where local scholars, philosophers, and writers offered interpretations of Eurasianism which valorized indigenous peoples.

While Eurasianism swept across some ethnic minority regions within Russia, in Moscow, the seat of power, its popularization is closely linked to several individuals. One of them is Aleksandr Dugin (born 1962), a prominent Russian conspiracy theorist, far-right nationalist, occultist, and political analyst who founded the Eurasian Party in 2001, which later morphed into the international Eurasian Movement. An admirer of Nazi Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich, Heinrich Himmler's deputy,³¹ Dugin's contribution has been to create a militarized and geopoliticized version of Eurasianism fit for post-Soviet conditions by combining Eurasianism with the *siloviki* outlook (denoting the intelligence services, the police, and the army) and fascism. Hitherto known only within the Russian far-right movement, thanks to his writings on Eurasianism laced with metaphysics, Dugin shot to fame among the general population owing to his book, *Foundations of Geopolitics* (1997), which became a textbook at military academies across Russia.

In *Foundations of Geopolitics*, which is presented as an academic work, Dugin reiterates Gumilëv's pseudoscientific position that the clash between the Soviet Union and the West was never a dispute between communism and capitalism, but one of a land-based Eurasian power against an array of Atlantic maritime powers. But unlike Gumilëv, Dugin, deeply influenced by his exposure to the military establishment (he wrote the book while teaching at the Frunze Military Academy in Moscow), expounds on the game of geopolitics which, according to him, is based on raw competition, conquests, alliances, covert operations, conspiracies, and spheres of influence. In the book, Dugin also argued that Western nations' notions, such as "democracy" and "human rights," are nothing more than window dressing and propaganda deployed to conceal their true intent, which is to encircle and destroy Russia. By preaching that Russia's post-perestroika humiliation was the direct result of Western conspiracies, the book's prescription for Russia's revival was to improve the country's defensive position by counteracting the conspiracy of "Atlanticism" led by the United States. The tactical plan was to put the Soviet Union back together as a new Russian-led Eurasian Empire, and push the Atlanticists back by using canny geopolitical alliances with regional powers, including Germany, Iran, and Japan. With regard to the concept of a Russo-German alliance, the book dictates that the two countries must divide Eastern Europe into spheres of influence and create a direct border with each other (reminiscent of the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact), which would shift Europe away from American and British influence and toward Russia. Russia-Eurasia must then simultaneously pursue proactive international politics by means of annexations and covert operations, including but not limited to: incorporating Georgia's South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions into Russia, annexing Ukraine, and spreading separatism and instability in the United States and Britain.

Some of these proposals put forward by Dugin in 1997 proved to be truly prophetic. The year 2008 saw the Russo-Georgian War over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In 2014, Putin annexed the Crimea from Ukraine and expressed his support for the self-determination of rebellious elements in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region. On February 24, 2022, Putin invaded the rest of Ukraine, intending to occupy the entire country. With regard to "Atlanticist" territories, there is a growing body of evidence implicating Russian-sponsored and Russia-based actors in meddling in Britain's Brexit referendum in 2016. Later that same year, the

³¹ Marlene Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist?: Unraveling Propaganda East and West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 116.

United States was also rocked with allegations of Russian-led interference in the country's presidential election.

Having constantly evolved over the course of the century since its inception, today Eurasianism serves as an umbrella term that accommodates a variety of ideas. Like a Russian *matryoshka* doll that consists of wooden dolls of decreasing sizes placed one inside the other, Eurasianism encompasses civilizational, geographical-deterministic, geopolitical, anti-Western, nationalistic, militaristic, economic, ethno-psychological, imperial, and mystical ideas, which are all united by an overarching theme of a strong Russian state. Despite its esoteric origins and internal contradictions, as a civilizational and ethno-psychological doctrine celebrating Russia's uniqueness, Eurasianism has, under Putin, been appropriated by the Russian state and inaugurated as a "science" of culturology and historiography, lending it the legitimacy to be used not only in classrooms but also in wider political projects. Dreamt up by a group of homesick émigrés, as a political dogma Eurasianism has found its material incarnation in Russia's foreign policy concerning former Soviet territories. Following Kremlin-backed geopolitical and economic projects such as the Eurasian Economic Community (2000–2010) and the Eurasian Customs Union (2010–2014), today the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which came into effect in January 2015, has five members that are all former Soviet republics including Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia.

As a theory and philosophy of restoring and protecting the "Russian world" and "Eurasian identity," Eurasianism also presupposes flexible borders. At the inception of the EEU, President Putin stated that his goal was to enlarge the organization to all post-Soviet territories, excluding the three Baltic states (which are both NATO and EU members). As a former imperial center, Russia under Putin not only appointed itself as the protector of a common history, common ways of life, and the purity of common values, but also jealously guards its civilizational peripheries from alien penetration and contamination. The fact that both Georgia's and Ukraine's rapprochement with NATO elicited Russia's military intervention into these two post-Soviet countries, regarded by the Kremlin as Russia's backyard, should be understood in this context.

In Kalmykia, Eurasianism is as popular as in many other parts of Russia, although Kalmyks have embraced aspects of Eurasianism for reasons peculiar to their ethnic group. First, as a theory of geographic determinism, Eurasianism fits with Kalmyk folk cosmology, in which the worship of land, seen as an "animated" entity teeming with local spirits of nature that control human destiny, has an important function in people's lives. As such, Eurasianism not only helps Kalmyks understand themselves as an ethnic group, but also explains who their neighbors are. In believing that the Kalmyk Steppe instills obedience, patriotism, and tranquility in people living there, Kalmyks, for example, widely perceive local Russians as similar to Kalmyks in terms of mentality and values. Hence, many local Russians are seen by Kalmyks as "honorary Kalmyks." By contrast, Russians from other parts of the country are often met with a degree of suspicion due to the vast and varying geography of Russian dispersal that supposedly shapes diverse localized mentalities. Therefore, in Kalmykia today, popular explanations about the presumed bond between landscape and human character are as much folk-derived ideas as they are based on state-disseminated propaganda. Given a popular belief in regional mentalities on the one hand and in the uniqueness of Russia on the other, it is not hard to convince Kalmyks of the existence of a supra-national identity peculiar to Russia-Eurasia. Hence, it takes only a small leap of faith for them to support Moscow-centric projects, both

geopolitical and military, aimed at protecting Russia-Eurasia's spheres of influence and civilizational integrity. No wonder, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its recent full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, both propagated by the Kremlin-controlled media as measures aimed at protecting the motherland against a so-called illegitimate, NATO-imposed, Ukrainian Nazi government, have met with approval by many in Kalmykia.

Second, Eurasianism gives Kalmyks a new and dignified history and also offers them a conceptual tool to deal with the identity crisis that engulfed the Kalmyk ethnos following the demise of the Soviet system. When becoming *Homo sovieticus* ceased to be the aim, Eurasianism proved particularly attractive as a substitute, in that it presented an opportunity for Kalmyks to overcome the identity crisis by realigning the benchmarks of Kalmyk identity closer to Russian values yet again. The popular self-narrative among Kalmyks asserting that they are a unique, hybrid people of Asian origin integrated into the European cultural world and who serve as a bridge between Europe and Asia makes the Kalmyks an epitome of a Eurasian (or Euro-Asian) ethnos. Given the existence of such Eurasianist discourses focused on the "symbiotic" relations between Russia and the Kalmyk ethnos, today it is not rare to meet Kalmyks, especially among the younger generation, who say, with a sense of pride, that they are "people with Asian faces, Buddhist faith, and Russian soul." Celebrated by the Kalmyk government, not only did Gumilëv's books achieve great popularity, but the fact that the Kalmyk Dr. Khara-Davan was among the founding fathers of Eurasianism is a source of immense pride (Khara-Davan popularized the idea of Chingis Khan being the first emperor of the Eurasian Empire). In Elista a street was named after Gumilëv and a monument dedicated to Eurasianism was erected in 1996 in front of the Government House. The Eurasian Academy of Life in Elista, as mentioned, assisted President Kirsan Ilyumzhinov in writing his textbook on Kalmykia's state ideology.

Conclusion

In the last century of the last millennium, Russian and Soviet philosophers and intellectuals proposed what they termed a "science" capable of transforming the world and turning Russia and the Soviet Union into a universal superpower. Defined differently from cosmic (Russian cosmist), social-evolutionary (Soviet state ideological), and terrestrial (Eurasianist) perspectives, each embodiment of this "super science," or new system of knowledge, was supposed to enable humans to overcome the chaos of the world and bring about universal order between the cosmos and the Earth. Despite their globally oriented appeal, all three embodiments of "science" promoted Russia's exceptionalism and uniqueness and contrasted Russia and the Soviet Union against the West. All three promoted a cult of personality around certain leaders.

In the new millennium, despite Soviet state ideology being repudiated following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the idea that a strong state should have an all-encompassing ideology remains intact among the population, especially among those who are middle-aged or belong to the older generation, who are the powerbrokers in today's Russia. Meanwhile, cosmism and Eurasianism are gaining in popularity. Since their inception, both cosmism and Eurasianism have gone through transformations and generated offshoots. Russian cosmism has developed methods of attaining various "levels of sensual reality" through such variants as biocosmism, energocosmism, anthropocosmism, astrocosmism, teocosmism, soficosmism, hierarchocosmism,

and sociocosmism,³² and encompasses, as mentioned, diverse groups and networks, including cosmists, transhumanists, posthumanists, immortalists, futurologists, and Fëdorovians. While these various groups seeking to attain various “levels of sensual reality” may not be incompatible with each other, Russian cosmism as a whole is still a distinct movement promoting Russian exceptionalism. The same can be said of Eurasianism, which denounces liberal Western values. In this respect, they not only nourish each other’s impulses for authoritarian domination but intersect with the idea of Russia needing a powerful, centralized ideology that would render the country exceptional and superior.

32 O. D. Kurakina, “Russkiy kosmizm i nookosmologicheskij vzglyad v budushchee,” *Sait ob Osnovakh Kosmicheskogo Miroponimaniya*, <http://cosmizm.ru/c4220-d-kurakina-russkij-kosmizm-i-nookosmologicheskij-vzglyady-budushhee/>.

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Exploring the Topography of the Authoritarian: Populism, Illiberalism, and Authoritarianism | |
| GÜNTER FRANKENBERG | 1 |
| Guillaume Faye (1949-2019): At the Forefront of a New Theory of White Nationalism | |
| STÉPHANE FRANÇOIS AND ADRIEN NONJON | 17 |
| Illiberal Forces Against Democracy in Georgia | |
| ZARINA BURKADZE | 31 |
| The Transnational Networks of the European Radical Populist Right and the Beacon of Hungarian Illiberal Democracy | |
| JEAN-YVES CAMUS | 47 |
| The Birth of an Illiberal Informational Autocracy in Europe: A Case Study on Hungary | |
| PÉTER KREKÓ | 55 |
| State Ideology, Science, and Pseudoscience in Russia | |
| BAASANJAV TERBISH | 73 |



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