Eastern Focus

A project by **GlobalFocus Center**, Bucharest

Elections and Malign
INTERFERENCE

Populism - Illiberalism -
Cultural wars – Identity
politics

Reframing geopolitical
competition: a battle for
influence and narrative

EU in the Western Balkans:
What's left of the sticks if the
carrots are stale?

The return of traditional
great power strategy

COVER STORIES Sir Julian King, Ann Mettler, Doru Franțescu, Dani Sandu, Claudia Ciobanu, Codru Vrabie, Bogdan Dima, Andrej Matišák, Martin Ehl, Iulia Joja **DOSSIER** Jasmin Mujanović, Ana-Maria Luca, Kristof Bender **INTERVIEW** Dimitar Bechev, Nikola Dimitrov, Elbridge Colby.

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Raison d'être

EasternFocus is an international affairs magazine focusing on Central and Eastern Europe, the Black Sea and the Western Balkans, which aims to bring all the contradictions of the region into meaningful conversation.

This quarterly is a new project by the **GlobalFocus Center**, an independent foreign policy and strategic analysis think-tank based in Bucharest. Its aim is to bring Romanian and regional perspectives onto matters that define the world of today, and facilitate the integration of themes and voices from the region into the international circuit of ideas and debates that matter. The themes covered include foreign affairs, regional dynamics, politics, economy, business and trade, society, art and culture, technology and innovation, media, communication and creative spaces.

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The editorial concept adopts a liberal, Euro-Atlantic angle – but encourages the balanced, open, substantive debate of opposites. It embraces constructive controversy, aiming to reflect a diversity of viewpoints and reach across the 'thought bubbles' to draw them into a genuine conversation.

This first issue makes its debut with a dossier on Elections and Malign Interference. The primary reason for this lies in the immediacy of the problem, whose first impact may become apparent in the upcoming European elections. The problem though is both older and wider: a **study** of the Black Sea region's permeability to propaganda and malign influence, published by the GlobalFocus Center, revealed structural vulnerabilities, divisions and resilience gaps in our social, political, economic and foreign policy/security systems, a 'treasure trove' of similar challenges shared across the region and well beyond it, which can be used by internal and external disruptors against the state and society, aggravating existing problems to undermine good governance, prosperity, citizens' trust in democracy or confidence in allies – something for which modern technology, as well as the current state of society and the global order, offers ample cost-effective, high-impact opportunities.

We found that the same weaknesses which find us unprepared and unaware in the face of hostile actors, underscore the current trends toward illiberalism, populism, social conservatism and radicalism, which are not limited to our region, but are already wreaking havoc across it. This first issue explores the problem, attempts to explain

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some of its causes, reveal some of the nuances and, at a minimum, offer some food for thought with regard to future prospects.

EU Commissioner **Sir Julian King** and EPSC Director **Ann Mettler** outline the view of the European Commission: people, protection, pockets, platforms. In brief, increase citizens' resilience; protect the 'critical infrastructure' of our democracy; invest in quality journalism and fact-checking; and negotiate with the tech platforms to share responsibility for the traceability and accountability of information and the detection of fakes. Two things in particular are spelled out: democracy will work only if citizens have access to information; and the greater transparency of sources does not mean that a government or other authority gets to decide what is true and what is false.

VoteWatch Europe's co-founder **Doru Frantescu** explains with names and numbers how the dynamics of influence will change in the European Parliament after EU elections and – at some point (?) – Brexit: the fringes are coming to the fore but are unlikely to coalesce; mostly influential in the big mainstream groups EPP and S&D (now heading for a fall), MEPs from Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) may still tilt the balance in the crucial negotiation battlefields which lie ahead, such as IT&C and trade.

Sociologist **Dani Sandu**, revealing some of the causes behind the rise of populism, says it loud and clear: no, those who vote for populists don't really believe they will deliver more prosperity. However, voters do hope that they may level the playing field by dismantling the economic consensus they feel has been making them poor. He goes on to explain why autocrats in CEE are likely to maintain an anti-EU, anti-globalist discourse and political stance, while at the same time making sure their markets – as well as their

personal coffers – stay open to the inflow of global money.

But populists and illiberals don't operate only within the confines of politics. Warsaw-based reporter **Claudia Ciobanu** describes the intricate web of influence, money and interests that sees American evangelists, the Vatican and Central and East European politicians cooperate in instrumentalising the anxiety and apprehension of those who feel that their traditional values may be under attack from modern, post-material values.

Against the background of this demand-side model that helps explain the success of the illiberal movements, public administration expert **Codru Vrabie** quotes comedian John Oliver to show that the toolkit of autocrats is so basic that even the simple wisdom of pop culture has made sense of it; he uses this system of reference to demonstrate why Romania may have been more resilient in front of the anti-democratic backlash for a while, but could catch up fast in the near future. Constitutional expert **Bogdan Dima** puts a name on it, and pins down the strategy to 'autocratic legalism': the process of seizing and centralising power by working within the rules and gradually changing them to fit the purpose. Using democracy against democracy, CEE autocrats invoke the legitimacy of the popular mandate entrusted to them at the polls to control the courts and the judiciary, to change electoral laws and secure stronger, ultimately unrestrained authority over civil society and freedoms. A nationalistic, sovereign, EU-bashing discourse is the natural cherry on top. Read the article to find out which of the region's constitutional systems seem more resilient.

A ray of hope seems to come from Slovakia, where the first round of presidential elections

returned a surprise winner: the pro-liberal newcomer, anti-corruption lawyer and environmental activist Zuzana Čaputová – yet also delivering substantial gains for the various radical forces. Is this reflective of a regional counter-trend to the recent anti-democratic drift? Is it an accident? Or is it just another expression of the same frustration with traditional politics? Journalist **Andrej Matišák** attempts an early analysis.

How likely is it that the march of illiberalism across the region will triumphantly continue? Political scientist **Dimitar Bechev** says in an interview that Viktor Orbán is an export product on high demand – and not just within the EU's borders. The Western Balkans are faring no better, despite the relaunch of the accession agenda and renewed enthusiasm following the political success of the North Macedonian name deal. In a dedicated regional dossier, foreign minister **Nikola Dimitrov** admits that being in the waiting room for so long hasn't helped, but says that it's down to the individual countries to really want to make it – all they can expect from the EU is coaching throughout the process. Balkan Insight's correspondent **Ana-Maria Luca** doubts whether the Union is willing or able to offer the right kind of support, and warns that the streets of Belgrade, Sarajevo and Podgorica, hosts to frequent protests, are telling a different story than their respective governments. Against perceptions of EU failure, political analyst **Jasmin Mujanović** sees the ghost of a post-Euro-Atlantic project looming large, one in which China, Turkey or the Gulf States may play an increasingly influential part.

From Prague, marred by the recent Huawei scandal, international editor **Martin Ehl** tells more about China's influence, this time within the EU; while from Berlin, security expert and GlobalFocus affiliate **Iulia Joja** unpacks Putin's

strategic narrative to explain how the Russians tell a tale that brings supply in line with demand for anti-Western sentiment. The return to great-power competition is perhaps most completely described by **Elbridge Colby**, formerly the DoD's lead official in charge of the development of the US National Defense Strategy and National Security Strategy. His single most reassuring remark? "The US has an enduring interest in preventing Europe from falling under a potentially hostile hegemon".

The Trump administration may have a weird way of showing it – but more about this and the future of the EU after Brexit and the European elections, in the next issue…

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Elections and malign interference

Election interference in the digital age – building resilience to cyber-enabled threats in the EU

By **Sir Julian King & Ann Mettler** | Brussels

At the onset of the digital revolution, there was significant hope – and indeed an expectation – that digital technologies would be a boon to democracy, freedom and societal engagement.

Yet today – although it is clear that this cannot necessarily be attributed to digital technologies – we note with concern and disquiet that the world has experienced twelve consecutive years of decline in democracy and freedom. At the same time, we are witnessing the rise of what might be dubbed as 'digital authoritarianism'.

At stake is nothing less than people's trust in our institutions – without which our democracies cannot function.

Against this backdrop, it is time to better stress-test our assumptions, as well as the emerging technologies that might be put to misuse in an effort to undermine elections and democracies – be it Artificial Intelligence, deep fakes or cyber mercenaries. Given the confluence of potential challenges, we must find the courage to take an honest and unsentimental look at the state of play of election interference driven by cyber enabled threats.

In May 2019, more than 300 million voters will be invited to the ballot boxes across 27 nations, and, in doing so, participate in one of the world's largest democratic exercises.

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Free and open elections are the foundation of our democratic societies.

They make Europe what it is – a place where you can speak your mind without fear of being arrested or prosecuted. A place where voters trust that election results reflect open and transparent public debate.

Protecting the integrity of our elections is therefore an absolute priority; for the European Union, for the Member States, and for all European citizens. But the threat to them has been growing in the past years, which have been marked by a series of attempts to manipulate electoral processes in at least 18 countries, including in the EU.

The threat can be split into two vectors: attacks that target systems and data to interfere with the electoral process or voting technology, and threats that manipulate voting behaviour.

In terms of the first, although this approach is relatively crude, even the suggestion that it has happened or could happen is corrosive to public trust and confidence. For the second, we can break it down further into three categories: targeted hacks and leaks to change public opinion; fake news to influence the results; and the use of psychometrically targeted messaging based on mined user data – such as in the Cambridge Analytica case.

Our work through the Security Union is designed to tackle both of these threats. The European Commission has been working for some time now to create tangible solutions for tackling disinformation, political campaigning, and election integrity in the digital age.

Together with Member States and other stakeholders, we have delivered:

- The **Communication on Tackling Online Disinformation** (April 2018);

- A **Compendium on Cybersecurity of Election Technology** – with Member States in the lead (July 2018);

- The **Communication on Securing Free and Fair European Elections** (September 2018);

- A **High-Level Conference and Member State Workshop on Election Interference** as well as a new **Code of Practice** for industry and civil society (October 2018);

The most recent step was the **Action Plan against Disinformation**, which was published on 5 December. It responds to the calls of the European Council in June and October 2018 to develop a coordinated response to the challenges in this field, especially in view of the forthcoming European elections, and focuses on how to deal with disinformation both within the EU and in its neighbourhood.

The Action Plan is accompanied by a progress report on the April Communication. This report sets out the progress achieved, notably regarding the Code of Practice, to foster a secure, trust-worthy and accountable online ecosystem with appropriate awareness and media literacy as well as support for independent media and quality journalism.

At stake is nothing less than people's trust in our institutions – without which our democracies cannot function. Our adversaries certainly know that, which is precisely why they are using digital tools to disrupt and sow doubt. This is proving not only much more potent than many traditional forms of attack, but also significantly cheaper and more difficult to prove – and ultimately prosecute.

What more can be done to strengthen our resilience?

Together, the Action Plan and the progress report are critical further steps towards robust and vibrant democracies for the future. But more steps are needed, and the measures we

need to take can be roughly categorised into the following: people, protection, pockets, and platforms.

First, we must ensure that *people* – European citizens – understand what kind of threat we are facing in order to bolster the resilience of our societies against interference, by supporting innovative approaches by start-ups, NGOs and volunteers wanting to help protect democracy at this critical moment in time.

In May last year, two Dutch fourteen-year-olds perfectly spread a fake story about an upcoming heat wave that attracted 800,000 unique visitors in just one week. It was a school project – done with the help of a civil society organisation, trying to increase awareness about the impact of disinformation, during class, with their teacher's encouragement. It shows that we need to accept that disinformation is an easy and powerful instrument. It perfectly exploits our human weaknesses and is successful at dividing societies. It is the first choice of weapon for demagogues and authoritarian regimes and can wield great power in mobilising the public, sometimes more so than journalism or politics.

The lesson to be drawn here is that civil societies and governments need to step up their engagement with the public ahead of the elections, to ensure we have the appropriate level of media literacy, digital skills and culture to cope with these issues. But they cannot do it alone.

Second, we need *protection* of the critical institutions and processes that underpin our electoral systems – and which deserve to be classified as critical infrastructure. As the tools and mechanisms underpinning Europe's democratic systems and everyday life, political parties, election systems, infrastructure

providers – and potentially also media groups and services – should be included within the concept of 'essential services' by Member States covered by the Directive on Security of Network and Information Systems ('NIS' Directive). One example is the German decision to classify all election-related infrastructure as critical, with adequate response protocols, for two weeks prior and two weeks after an election. Furthermore, electoral process and components relevant for elections of the EP should be qualified as European Critical infrastructure and as such covered by any existing or future EU legislation.

do initiatives which seek to harness technology for our common good. Democracies can only function if their citizens have the information they need to participate in civic affairs. Purveyors of false information know this, which is why they target the citizens of the world's democracies. False information can spread quickly, crowding out reliable information, if citizens have no help in determining which is which.

Over the past two decades, global spending on newspaper print ads shrunk to less than 10 percent of the market share, while spending on digital ads rose to 33 percent – forcing many publishers to go digital, seek alternative sources of funding and, in some cases, rethink the types of content they publish. The EU is already supporting a wide range of journalistic efforts but more needs to be done to innovate the business model that in previous times used to represent a fundamental pillar of democracy – and still does, but under increasing pressure. This will be a long-term effort that needs close attention in the coming years, where governments and civil society can do their part to ensure a healthy public debate and support journalism.

Disinformation is the first choice of weapon for demagogues and authoritarian regimes and can wield great power in mobilising the public, sometimes more so than journalism or politics.

Furthermore, relevant national authorities should implement as a matter of urgency a risk assessment based approach to identify vulnerabilities against cyber threats into their electoral process and components with a view to mitigate identified gaps and allocate appropriate resources.

Thirdly, we need to delve into our *pockets* to invest in communities and the means we need, as well as minding how funds are being spent on campaigns online, and making it more transparent.

Fact-checkers and journalism need money to thrive. We have to be honest about this. And so

At the same time, we need to ensure the money going into political campaigns is sufficiently transparent. Regulators and election bodies during campaigns are now struggling to apply the existing tests to social media content or foreign material. This is a huge challenge but the

principles do not change, and in fact they are well expressed in the Venice Commission's Code of Good Practice on Electoral Matters from 2002.

They include equality of opportunity for parties and candidates, including a principle of proportionality, which e.g. applies in particular to 'radio and television air-time' and stipulates that '[i]n conformity with freedom of expression, legal provision should be made to ensure that there is a minimum access to privately owned audio-visual media, with regard to the election campaign and to advertising, for all participants in elections'. Furthermore, they state that campaign funding must be transparent and mean that equality of opportunity can also, in some cases, lead to a limitation on political party spending, especially on advertising.

In the new digital world, manipulation of social media during an election campaign can undermine that equality of opportunity, and so these principles must be taken to heart, and properly embedded into our growing digital society.

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Fourth, and finally, we need to keep *platforms* clearly involved and hold them accountable.

We have the first iteration of a code of conduct agreed by platforms – it is a good start. But to be effective it needs to go much further, much faster. We need to make it easier for users to see the provenance of content, allowing them to assess its trustworthiness, while also reducing the visibility of disinformation.

Nor should we be afraid to consider requesting that platforms better know their customers at a time when foreign or domestic actors so actively polarise our societies

under the shelter of anonymity or fake accounts. Would we still see similar levels of hatred, bullying, disinformation and insults if it were otherwise? Is it not time to have an earnest debate about how to restore civility to our public discourse?

But let's be crystal clear. We are not proposing that the platforms – or anyone else – be the judge of what is true or what is false. The issue at stake here is different. We are asking for increased transparency about the sources and provenance of information. What we ask of social media is to make political advertising traceable, transparent and accountable.

In the new digital world, manipulation of social media during an election campaign can undermine that equality of opportunity, and so these principles must be taken to heart, and properly embedded into our growing digital society.

In parallel, platforms should step up their efforts against the use of bots. We are for *free* speech, not *artificial* speech.

Pre-empting future evolutions

As we look ahead to future elections, a far more dangerous tool will enter the election interference toolkit: deepfakes. These are Artificial Intelligence-based human-image synthesis techniques, that combine and superimpose existing images and video onto source video with a view to creating an alternate reality.

Deepfake technology will enable malign actors anywhere to create a video of virtually anyone, doing and saying whatever they want them to. Deepfakes are becoming less prohibitively costly to produce just as they become more convincing. This technology will soon be available not only to malign states, but to malign individual actors.

Imagine what could happen to public trust and civic discourse around elections as this technology spreads. Put bluntly, deepfakes could transform not just election interference, but politics and geopolitics as we know it.

So what can be done to prepare ourselves for the next wave of election interference via deepfakes?

First off, we need to step up our game. We need Artificial Intelligence specialists if we are to beat other specialists with malign intentions. Artificial Intelligence can also be utilised to sniff-out imperfections in manipulated video invisible to the human eye, through watermarking algorithms and metadata built into authentic video. Deepfakes can thus be identified and stopped before they spread. The development of this detection technology must therefore be our top priority.

Second, there is a need for private sector platforms to embrace this detection challenge as a priority of shared public interest. They should turn their research-and-development firepower towards this urgent threat, before it appears and spirals out of control on their own platforms. The key here will be to focus on detecting manipulation of source video (not evaluation of political content).

But perhaps most importantly – and thirdly – civic education about the threat of deepfakes has to be incorporated as an essential element of democratic defence against this next generation of disinformation. Governments, civil society and private industry must come together to facilitate comprehensive public education campaigns to inoculate the public – before deepfakes spread virally, dramatically impact public opinion, or change the outcome of election.

The bottom line is that without greater public awareness of this danger, deepfake technology has the potential to cause electoral chaos and, eventually, geopolitical instability. Democratic governments need to get ahead of the threat by engaging the public to safeguard our democracies – and building citizen resilience to deepfake disinformation must become a shared public interest priority.

When looking towards the European Parliament elections in 2019, the need for action is urgent – doing nothing risks the robustness of democracies and our democratic processes being undermined, at both the imminent elections and further beyond.

The European Union itself rose from the decline of autocratic regimes, forging a unique shared destiny with the new liberal-democratic world order, and thus has an existential stake in preserving it. Its continued strength and vitality relies in part on a wider network of institutions and norms committed to the same

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fundamental values of democracy, human rights, and rule of law. The bedrock of these values are our democratic elections, and we have a vital interest in defending them. We have a lot to do, if we want to save this project from falling overboard – for ourselves, and for our children.

That is why it is so important to bring together all the relevant players – from the EU, Member States, and the private sector – to ensure that we form a united front in the battle against those who wish us, and our way of life, harm.

■

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European elections: How results in CEE can be decisive for the direction of Europe

By **Doru Franțescu** | Brussels

European Parliament, Brussels
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The European Parliament (EP) elections in May 2019 will take place in a historically new context. The planned departure of the UK will lead to a shift in the balance of power in favour of the Eurozone countries, which will also influence the shape of European policies in many relevant areas.

To highlight the most important aspects of the upcoming elections, this analysis will discuss the current balance of power in the European Parliament and how the political forces have formed coalitions in order to shape EU legislation. Due to its high level of heterogeneity and political fragmentation, coalitions in the European Parliament are formed on an *ad-hoc* basis, meaning that the political majorities change from one vote to the next. Following a broader analysis of political patterns in the EP, this article also examines key trends with regard to the role played by Central and Eastern European decision-makers at the EU level.

Introduction

The upcoming European Parliament elections will take place in an entirely new context. With the UK leaving the European Parliament, the size of the European Parliament will decrease from 751 to 705. Consequently, Central and Eastern European member states will obtain an additional 5 seats whereas member states from other regions will get a further 22 seats. As a result, the additional share of influence which the Central and Eastern European member states will obtain is relatively small in comparison to other countries, especially with regards to the southern European member states, which will gain 9 seats.

Poland will become the fifth and Romania the sixth biggest EU member states after Brexit, and some of their MEPs are already among the most influential in the European Parliament, according to our dedicated study[1] on the influence of MEPs. Importantly, most of the MEPs from Central and Eastern European member states are members of the European People's Party (EPP) and Socialists & Democrats (S&D), which are the biggest groups in the European Parliament, a situation which increases their leverage. Moreover, at the elections in 2014, it was the results in the CEE countries that made the difference, giving a narrow victory to the EPP. This explains why the CEE's delegations are important to the big EP groups.

However, the overall landscape in the EP is set to change from 2019. The EPP and S&D are both expected to lose a substantial amount of seats in May. As a result, the EPP and S&D will probably not be able to form a majority on their own. Additionally, the opposition to further European integration is likely to increase, due to gains for both right-wing and far-left parties across the continent. One big winner in the next election could be Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), which is expected to gain seats through its cooperation with Macron's La République en Marche. This group will see its role of kingmaker in the European Parliament strengthened, since the weakened EPP and S&D are likely to seek cooperation with ALDE in order to get a majority.

The EPP and S&D will probably not be able to form a majority on their own.

ALDE will also play an important role during the post-electoral allocation of top posts at the EU level. While the Presidency of the European Commission seems to be out of reach for the centrist group, ALDE will try to leverage its rising influence in order to take the Presidency of another key institution. If the European Council decides to stick to the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure (which is not legally binding), the candidate of the strongest party is likely to get priority as the national governments' pick to replace Jean-Claude Juncker. Assuming that the EPP remains the strongest group after the elections, the current frontrunner is Manfred Weber of the Bavarian Christian Social Union.

Whether Weber will become the next EC President or not, the job is set to become more difficult, due to the increasing political

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1. https://www.votewatch.eu/blog/updated-who-holds-the-power-in-the-european-parliament-assessing-the-influence-of-individual-meps/

FIGURE 1   Source: https://europeelects.eu/

GUE/NGL	European United Left-Nordic Green Left	ECR	European People's Party
S&D	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats	**EFDD**	Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy
G/EFA	Greens/European Free Alliance	**ENF**	Europe of Nations and Freedom
ALDE	Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	**NI**	non-attached MEPs
EPP	European People's Party		

fragmentation within the European Parliament. Although the moderate pro-EU forces will still be able to hold a combined majority of seats, the fringes will get the chance to influence EU legislation whenever divisions within the pro-EU camp arise.

Composition, coalition building and cohesion in the EP (2014-2019)

The fringe forces can count on about 30% of seats (depending on how they are defined). While they cannot win a vote by themselves, they can still swing key votes.

Figure 1 shows the current composition of the European Parliament. With almost 30% of the seats, the EPP is currently the strongest political group. After the EPP, the S&D can count on around 25% of seats. The European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) with 70 seats and ALDE with 67 seats hold between 8 and 9% of seats in the EP8. While the fringes on the left and the right have been gaining ground since the past elections, their size in the current EP is relatively small. Several coalition formations have been possible within this constellation. Needless to say, most of these combinations have involved the mainstream groups. In most cases (about 68% of times), the EPP, S&D and ALDE have formed a 'Super Grand

Coalition' which could provide substantial support to EU legislation (over 60% of MEPs belong to the three groups combined).

Nonetheless, the 'Super Grand Coalition' has lost significant power in comparison to the previous parliament, and will probably continue to lose seats in the coming election. In general, the 'Super Grand Coalition' is the most frequent combination, especially in regional development, culture & education, budget, and foreign & security policy.

However, there are also policy areas such as gender equality, environment & public health and employment & social affairs in which the three groups have been prone to disagree more frequently. In some of these cases, we observed alternative arrangements, namely centre-right and centre-left coalitions. The most common alternative to the 'Super Grand Coalition' is the centre-right coalition between ALDE and the EPP (which might also include the right-wing ECR). This is particularly common when it comes to votes on the internal market, industrial policy, the environment and employment. Nonetheless, there are policy areas such as gender equality, home affairs, and also fisheries where a centre-left coalition between the S&D and ALDE - which might also include the Greens/European Free Alliance (EFA) and, to a lesser extent, Group of the European United Left (GUE)/ Nordic Green Left (NGL) - is more common than a centre-right

one. Another possible coalition arrangement is a 'Grand Coalition', which is the same as a 'Super Grand Coalition' but without ALDE. In this coalition, the EPP and S&D have a combined majority of almost 55% of seats. While this arrangement has more often been observed with regard to votes on legal affairs, the 'Grand Coalition" does not happen that often in other policy areas. After the elections in May 2019 this coalition will probably no longer be able to form a majority.

Last but not least, the fringe forces can count on about 30% of seats (depending on how they are defined). While they cannot win a vote by themselves, they can still swing key votes.

Although the moderate pro-EU forces will still be able to hold a combined majority of seats, the fringes will get the chance to influence EU legislation whenever divisions within the pro-EU camp arise.

Beside the frequency of any given coalition, the cohesion of any such group is a significant factor, which determines the success of a European group in policy making. MEPs defecting from their parties' line can be decisive, especially when the moderate pro-EU forces disagree with one another.

The Greens/EFA have the highest cohesion, with 95.38%, followed by the EPP with 92.47% and the S&D with 91.75%. Particularly in policy areas like gender equality the EPP has proved least cohesive, whereas in policy areas such as international trade and regional development, the EPP shows its highest rate of cohesion. This situation is quite similar to the previous parliament. The S&D, on the other hand, generally shows high and stable

cohesion over all policy areas. ALDE itself has a lower cohesion than the other main groups, but it still lies above the average. In policy areas such as regional development and budgetary control ALDE's cohesion is generally high, but in employment & social affairs, for instance, its cohesion is lower.

Despite not having the highest cohesion among the political groups, ALDE is significantly more often on the winning side than other groups, thanks to its pivotal position between the EPP and S&D. This means that most of the time, the coalition partner chosen by ALDE (either the EPP or S&D, depending on the subject being voted) is also in the winning coalition. As a result, ALDE was on the winning side in 94.74% of all votes. S&D and the EPP follow on, with just above 85% winning rates. The pivotal role of ALDE will most likely strengthen substantially after the 2019 elections, given that ALDE will get bigger, while the EPP and S&D will shrink.

How do the fringe groups influence Parliament's positions?

In the current term of the EP, the smaller fringe groups to the right of EPP and the left of the S&D have been far less successful in shaping EP's positions than the larger centrist groups. In particular the Eurosceptic groups such as Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) and Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) have had a low success rate, due to their isolation from the other political groups as well as their lower internal cohesion. The far-left group have been more successful than the far-right ones, but they still trailing the main groups significantly.

Much has been said about the likely influence of these parties after the elections, given their

rise in popularity (and the projected number of seats they will hold in the next EP). A frequent question is whether the parties to the right of the EPP, i.e. the soft and hard eurosceptics and nationalists, would come together to form a single, and hence highly influential group in the next EP. This seems rather unlikely, due to the underlying differences in the views of some of these parties. For example, while most of these parties agree that immigration should be limited, they do not share economic policies: the French National Rally (RN) and the Italian 5-Star politicians want a protectionist, interventionist state, while Poland's Law and Justice (PiS) and Spain's VOX are economically liberal. Similarly, the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), Freedom Party of Austria (FPO) and German Alternative for Germany (AfD) want strict budget discipline and austerity imposed on southern Europe, which conflicts with the views of the nationalist parties in that part of Europe, including those of the Italian League.

The most likely scenario is that two groups to the right of EPP, i.e. the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the ENF, will emerge. The ECR is likely to survive Brexit and even increase its share of seats thanks to the potential 'recruitment' of Salvini's League and VOX from Spain. The ECR is an economically liberal group which strongly supports the internal market, i.e. the free circulation of goods, services, capital and labour among the member states. This is where the ECR is very different from the ENF, whose parties are economically protectionist, i.e. they oppose the strengthening of freedom of movement as they believe this hurts the workers in their own countries. What both the ECR and the ENF oppose is 'political supervision' by the European Commission, as it opposes the 'federalisation' of Europe (this is also where 5-Star joins the 'club'). Both the ECR and the ENF are also concerned about the dilution of

TABEL 1, AVERAGE PARTICIPATION RATE IN ROLL-CALL VOTES IN THE PLENARY

Member States	ALDE	ECR	EFDD	ENF	EPP	G/EFA	GUE-NGL	NI	S&D	ALL
Rest of the Member States	42	43	46	37	136	43	49	8	148	**552**
Central and East European Member States	25	27	2	0	85	7	3	7	43	**199**
Bulgaria	4	2			7				4	**17**
Croatia	2	1			5	1			2	**11**
Czechia	4	2	1		7		3		4	**21**
Estonia	3				1	1			1	**6**
Hungary					12	2		3	4	**21**
Latvia	1	1			4	1			1	**8**
Lithuania	4	1	1		2	1			2	**11**
Poland		17			25			4	5	**51**
Romania	6				11				15	**32**
Slovakia		3			6				4	**13**
Slovenia	1				5				1	**8**

Source: **https://www.votewatch.eu/**

their countries' national identities due to immigration. Hence, it is in these dimensions, the strengthening of political supervision and immigration policy, where we can expect significantly more opposition to the Commission's proposal in both the European Parliament and the Council (through the parties which are part of their national governments) in the coming years.

Lastly, another potential 'great acquisition' for the ECR would be Hungary's FIDESZ, if this party were to leave (or be expelled from) the EPP. If this were to happen, the ECR would grow to over 100 seats, which would allow it to pose serious competition to the EPP on the right of the European spectrum. FIDESZ's divorce with the EPP seems a less likely possibility at this point, though, as the

It seems rather unlikely that the soft and hard eurosceptics and nationalists would come together to form a single, and hence highly influential group in the next EP, due to the under-lying differences in the views of some of these parties.

EPP parties are deeply concerned about their already shrinking size – historically, when the EPP shrank, it increased its level of acceptance of 'diversity' in order to compensate for its losses. If it stays in the EPP group, FIDESZ would likely be the third largest national delegation, and so its departure would be a substantial blow to the group in the EP (and, importantly, the loss of yet another seat on the Council). This explains the rather accommodative stance adopted by the majority of their European partners so far. However, what will happen it will of course depend on the evolution of the situation 'on the ground', i.e. if Orban continues his drift away from the line of his western European EPP counterparts, then this may ultimately force a divorce.

Important trends for Central and Eastern European member states

Overall, MEPs from Central and Eastern European Countries account for 25.57% of the European Parliament. Therefore, they cannot win a vote by themselves, but they can still have a significant influence on the European Parliament's policy making. However, their voting behaviour naturally depends on the groups to which they belong. As Table 1 shows, most Central and Eastern European MEPs are members of the EPP (85) and the S&D (43). As explained above, both groups have a high cohesion and high success rate. Therefore, most of the Central and Eastern European MEPs are members of the most influential groups in the European Parliament. The Central and Eastern European member states are relatively underrepresented in the rest of the groups, with the exception of ALDE and the ECR. However, the influence goes both ways, as the CEE

national groups' positions are also influenced by the stances of their political groups. This is particularly visible within S&D, where the more conservative (at least on social issues) Romanian, Slovak and Bulgarian members have had to adapt to the more progressive line of their political group.

MEPs need the support of their political groups in order to access important positions, as well as legislative files, in the EP.

How do CEE MEPs distinguish themselves in the EP?

According to the algorithm developed by VoteWatch Europe[2], out of the 72 most influential MEPs, 18 (25%) are from Central and Eastern European member states. However, of these 15 MEPs eight are from Poland, which makes clear that the Polish have a significant influence in the European Parliament. France, by comparison, accounts for only for 6 of the most influential MEPs (out of 72).

Romania provides three of the most influential MEPs. Firstly, Ioan Mircea Pascu, who is one of the current Vice-Presidents of the European Parliament, is placed 32nd across the whole EU. He is mainly responsible for the House of European History and multilingualism. Pascu is also the coordinator for S&D in the sub-committee on security and defence, and a member of the committee on foreign affairs.

Secondly, Adina-Ioana Valean, who chairs the powerful committee on environment, public health and food safety, is ranked 36th. Thirdly, Siegfried Muresan, who is the spokesman of the EPP (the party, not the group) and the rapporteur on EU's budget, is ranked 49th.

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2. https://www.votewatch.eu/blog/updated-who-holds-the-power-in-the-european-parliament-assessing-the-influence-of-individual-meps/

Overall, the influence exerted by CEE members on shaping EU policies is still below average, 15 years after the EU's big-bang enlargement. However, the CEE members punch above their weight when it comes to influencing policies in some areas, especially information and communication technology (IT&C) and international trade. In the case of IT&C, this is correlated with the relative competitive advantage that these countries have developed in this area due to a combination of national policies and their skilled, low-cost labour forces. As regards free trade, CEE members are, on average, stronger supporters of free trade than their Western counterparts (which may seem somewhat counter-intuitive, but can be explained by the lessons of recent history). For example, Romanian social democrats are much more favourable to establishing trade agreements (e.g. with the US or other third countries) than the French or Spanish social democrats, who are much more protectionist.

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The CEE MEPs also distinguish themselves by their views on environmental policy, where they prefer a much more gradual transition to renewables than their Western counterparts (explained by the lower preparedness of their own economies for this transition). Lastly, CEE MEPs display a stronger opposition to immigration from non-EU countries, which is explained by a combination of cultural (they have more homogenous societies) and economic factors (they perceive that they have less need of additional labour force in their countries, while their own migrants in Western Europe fear the competition from non-EU countries).

The role played by the CEE MEPs in shaping EU policies is largely influenced by their own societies' level of interest in the EU decision-making process: the more the citizens and stakeholders of these countries know about the decisions in Brussels, the more they are interested in questioning, but also supporting, their MEPs. The very low turnout at the 2014 elections in CEE countries indicated that at that time this level of knowledge and interest was very weak. In a couple of months we will find out how much things have changed since.

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Populism – Illiberalism – Cultural wars – Identity politics

There isn't just one cause for populism, there's a whole Google[1] of them

By **Dani Sandu** | Florence

One of the more intense and inconclusive debates of recent years has focused on the underlying causes for the rise in anti-establishment political figures, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, but more recently in much more economically advanced societies as well. While these debates have featured both academics and policy practitioners, the results have been far from conclusive, and at times even contradictory. The first part of this essay will outline the existing debate regarding the causes of this development, while the second will delve more deeply into a specific cause: technological change. While the latter has long been argued to be a game-changer in the global economy, its more contemporary effects, especially on issues of political representation, have barely been addressed.

What is populism?

First, a definition of the new anti-establishment political parties and leaders, often called populist, is in order. Often, especially in earlier times but even more so recently, the term 'populism' has been readily used as a substitute for the concept of "right-wing extremism". However, the label itself is of limited use, as any overview easily shows that the political parties under discussion freely combine left- and right-wing ideological stances, political tropes or policy proposals. In fact, Dani Rodrik ties populism to globalisation, and argues that these anti-establishment political parties are generally the result of a backlash against the prevailing globalisation discourse their supporters have been exposed to, and sometimes against the political legacy of the country in question (Rodrik 2017). Therefore, as he sees it, populism in Latin America

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1. The word **'google',** when spelled **googol**, also refers to a number followed by 100 zeros.

tends to be left-wing, clearly differentiated from the military dictatorships of the '80s and '90s, and with a cool reticence toward the United States[2] . On the other hand, European populism – especially as seen in Central and Eastern Europe –tends to be pro-American, anti-Communist and very much open to free market liberalisation.

Regardless, the various flavours of populism that we can find throughout the world seem to be linked by three factors:

1. a public discourse that divides society in two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the 'pure/average people'' and 'the 'corrupt elites'', placing itself on the side of the people;

2. a deeply held belief and moralisation of how politics should be the expression of the general will of the people, hence the prevalent use of referenda;

3. a relatively constant stream of nativist and (at least partially) anti-globalist political stances (Mudde 2007).

More recently, especially for EU member countries, these traits have also merged into an obsession with sovereignty in connection to Brussels or other instances of intergovernmental decision-making. In discourse, these become the ultimate 'corrupt' elites, who take decisions against the will of the people and for their own benefit. In this framework, the idea of the 'ultra-elites' self-interest can easily appeal to anti-Semitic tendencies or beliefs.

Causes for the advent of populism

Secondly, we need to distinguish between the multiple categories of causes for the rise of such political parties. The initial distinction should be drawn between supply-side causes, related to the supply of political parties and figures

© *Photo by Anna Dziubinska on Unsplash*

2. In this framework, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil would likely constitute a backlash to the previous Workers' Party backlash.

available, and demand-side causes, related to the political demands of the populations in these countries. While some authors have argued that populism would not exist in the absence of populist political leaders, supply-side arguments tend to be relatively limited in scope. Political leaders have always aspired to acquire political power and consolidate their hold over it with time, but often found themselves politically isolated regionally or globally and, ultimately, they lost the public support that initially got them into office. If such attempts have always existed, many believe there is a reason why these attempts have been more widely successful today than in the past. We have little reason to believe that Orbán, Kaczyński or even Donald Trump are innately more astute or politically savvy than past political leaders.
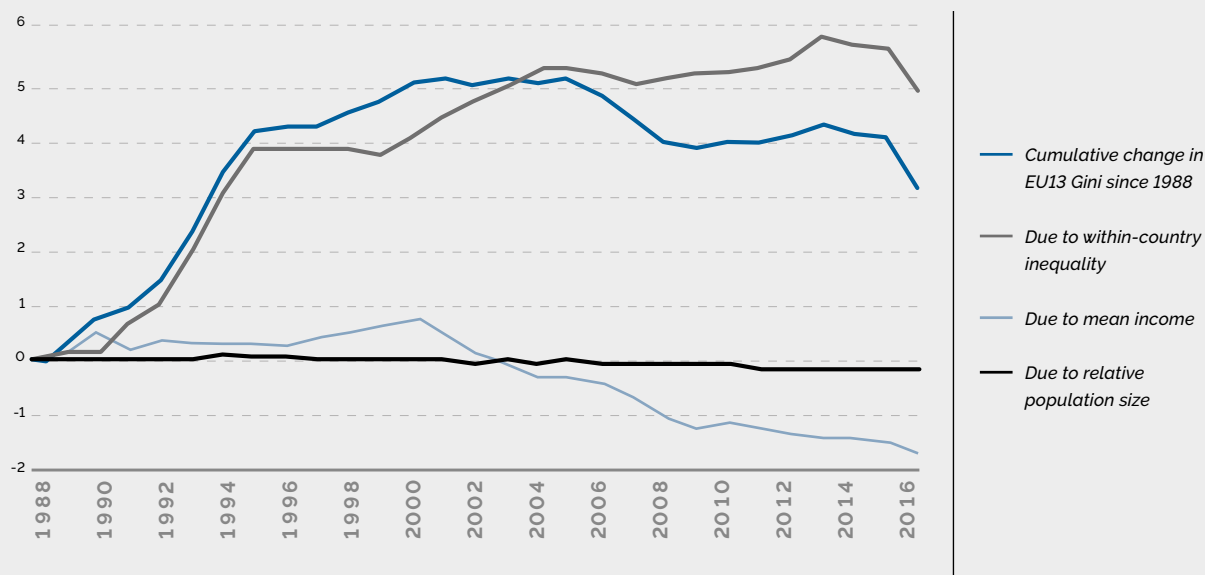
While the unique talents of these political figures are necessarily important, their success seems to also be closely tied to the openness of the voters in their societies to believe their narratives and support their tight grasp of political power, even when they personalise and take over key democratic institutions. At times, their public support even stems from their promise of such take-overs. While middle-class voters were generally considered to be the most reliable voters of establishment/centrist parties, recent years have seen them defecting in droves (JW Müller 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Middle-class voters still generally tend to prefer establishment political parties, but the change in their electoral preferences is gradually forcing these movements to spiral away from the centre in search of public support. Recent political research is more closely examining the changing nature of modern societies and the individual-level beliefs of the citizens which motivate their political choices.

Demand-side explanations

Discussions about population-level causes for the rise of new anti-establishment political forces circle around cultural and economic factors (Inglehart and Norris 2016). In this context, cultural issues are understood as individual cultural beliefs that motivate voters to favour populist parties. Such beliefs span from relative opposition to migration or acceptance of refugees/immigrants, beliefs about the nature of families, gender roles, even beliefs about child-rearing, to more abstract beliefs regarding ideology or reflections on particular moments of a society's history, especially opposition to the idea of Communism and post- or quasi-Communist institutional arrangements or styles of leadership. Overall, though, cultural motivations for the surge in populist parties are seen in large part as a reaction against progressive cultural change. This view is built upon the "silent revolution" theory of value change. This posits that economic advancement has moved younger generations in the direction of post-material values such as cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, environmental protection, human rights or gender equality. While this shift has been heavily documented in the past, more recent research has found evidence of a backlash against this movement, especially by white men of older generations, who see themselves as having lost out in relative terms because of the advent of these cultural changes.

On the other hand, the economic reasons are thought to stem mostly from growing economic inequality, which was accelerated by the recent financial crisis but is in fact part of a much longer trend. Many recent studies have pointed to the quasi-paradoxical fact that while global inequality seems to have greatly decreased in recent years, in-country inequality seems to be increasing at an unprecedented rate (Milanovic 2018). While the income of the average Pole is

FIGURE 1. INCREASED INEQUALITY IN NEW EU MEMBER STATES[3]

Cumulative change in EU13 Gini since 1988

Due to within-country inequality

Due to mean income

Due to relative population size

closer to that of the average Austrian than ever in the last 50 years, the incomes of the richest Poles, Austrians, British or Romanians are also farthest from those of their poorest countrymen than ever in the last 50 years. This inescapable dynamic has generated much resentment and grief, especially at the national level of politics.

People who feel left behind economically therefore start to resent the political establishment – national and international – that has supervised these trends and are 'thus perceived as 'responsible'' for it. As a result, the populations who feel forgotten become more susceptible to revolutionary political proposals, especially any which are clearly anti-establishment. By promising to dismantle the economic consensus that has generated their economic vulnerability, populist political parties are seen as offering a solution – not necessarily because their promises are thought to bring prosperity, but because their actions are thought

to level the playing field and potentially sanction those who have been benefiting for too long from globalisation.

While this essay cannot even begin to outline the debate concerning these types of causes, I will take advantage of the opportunity to note that the distinction between cultural and economic reasons for vulnerability to populism is somewhat artificial. There is absolutely no reason why cultural and economic explanations cannot interact and occur at the same time or even reinforce each other, with a helpful prod from astute politicians and supply-side explanations. The expansion of global free trade is inevitable, and most explanations include it among the causes for the rise of populism (Subramanian and Kessler 2013; Rodrik 2017). Similarly, the war in Syria and the subsequent refugee crisis in Europe – with refugees arriving from both Africa and the Middle East –are also included among the explanations (Mudde 2017).

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3. Calculations based on Bruegel data: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/05/european-income-inequality-begins-to-fall-once-again

The two exist independently of one another, and their effects on the sentiments of voters in Hungary, Poland, Romania or other countries cannot and should not be disentangled. Instead, they should be studied as an interaction of factors.

In the last part of this essay, I would like to address one cause of the current trend toward populism that fully illustrates the elusive interaction between economic and cultural factors. Many authors have spoken about the social risks brought about by technological change, but very rarely have these changes been directly linked with the growth of populism other than from the perspective of international political economy. In the following, I will try to briefly outline the mechanism of this influence, and the particularities of how this mechanism operates in Central and Eastern European countries.

How is technology enabling populism, especially in CEE countries?

Discussions about the labour-displacement potential of technological automation have been heard since the Luddite movement. These discussions have more recently started to take on an empirical turn (Autor, Levy, and Murnane 2003). In this and subsequent articles, David Autor explores how technological change mostly tends to affect labour that is repetitive, both cognitive and manual[4] . As most such repetitive labour – and our instinctual understanding of repetitive labour in general – tends to be placed at the lower rungs of the income distribution, the most common reading of literature around technological automation has been that it increases inequality by rendering lower-paid workers obsolete. The

truth is that the distinction between repetitive and non-repetitive labour is somewhat independent of income. Repetitive work may include that of a factory worker, normally seen as blue-collar, low-income employment, but it may also include the middle-class category, such as the labour of a white-collar law clerk or office worker, or even the work of an artist.

In this context, what technological change does is exploit the added value of automation, therefore focusing mostly on higher-income/cognitive-repetitive labour, i.e. that of more highly paid workers. Companies benefit more in savings from automating higher-paid labour, so they focus automating these categories of work. In time, this leads to a hollowing out of the middle-class – and of mid-level paying employment – through automation and substantial pressure on lower-level incomes to stay at a low-level, or even decrease (Autor and Dorn 2013). This leads to what is called the polarisation of the labour market between cognitive higher-level paid employment, which compensated for higher levels of education; and manual lower-level employment, where incomes are pressured to stay low because of a lack of other opportunities. Those in the middle have to either invest in acquiring skills that upgrade them to non-repetitive high-skill labour, downgrade to lower-skill non-repetitive or repetitive labour, or be left without employment (Acemoglu and Autor 2011; Oesch 2013). More simply put, the downwards move of mid-level employment leads to the polarisation of the labour market, while the move of mid-level employment upward leads to upgrading.

Obviously, these changes are likely to generate serious economic consequences, especially in the realm of income inequality. Societies

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4. While not fully correct, I will use the terms cognitive and manual interchangeably with **high-skill** and **low-skill**.

become richer as a whole, because technological change leads to greater productivity and the high-level paying jobs start paying much more highly. As a corollary, societies also tend to become more unequal in situations of labour market polarisation, which means the higher-paying jobs pay more highly, the lower-paying jobs stagnate or diminish, and the mid-level section of the economy evaporates.

This is where the interplay between the polarisation of the labour market and upgrading comes in, and becomes especially relevant for the political economy of countries most afflicted by populism. In order to upgrade skills, labourers require investment, access to education and a very solid welfare state. Where such conditions are not present, technological automation tends to lead to labour market polarisation, as has happened in Central and Eastern European countries and to some extent Great Britain and the United States. Where such support from the welfare state does exist, technological automation is more likely to lead to upgrading and a general move of employment toward the upper rungs of income, as in the Scandinavian societies and Northern Europe in general. Of course, even these countries will encounter some rising inequality and, separately or consequentially, some increases in the presence of populist parties – but this diversity of national political economy influences the variation of fodder for populist parties. While Scandinavian countries have seen minor movement of this type, toward 10-12% of the electoral share, we can safely say that the CEE countries have seen this rise to a much greater extent, with populist parties taking over half of the vote in elections.

Such people suffer from status deprivation rather than material deprivation, as they are almost never the poorest members of society – in fact, quite the opposite. The process of technological change is generally slow and

Societies become richer as a whole, because technological change leads to greater productivity and the high-level paying jobs start paying much more highly.

multi-layered, often accompanied by horizontal economic expansion. Even if a class of workers loses employment because their jobs entail routine activities, an economy in full expansion will likely easily find ways to re-accommodate them into employment. Similarly, an expanding economy will not adopt technological solutions abruptly, but will likely phase them out over time, in accordance with business cycles and private sector strategies. The opposite is true of economies that find themselves in times of economic compression, as they will much more likely adopt technological solutions in a sudden and potentially disorienting manner.

What is special about technological change in CEE?

In this context, the economic conditions paving the way for the surge of populist parties are difficult to pick up in macro-level data. On the whole, such data would show a booming recovery after the crisis, with many jobs created.

In a situation of labour market polarisation, the overall rise in higher-paid employment could also mask these economic effects through increases in GDP growth, while the contextual surfacing of routine cognitive employment (which we would expect to be more highly paid) would also partially mask the growth in inequality. In such a context, a decidedly economic vulnerability created by technological change leaving people behind, together with a weak state which is unable to pick them up again, would more likely be seen within a cultural framework, when the level of threat and instability felt by individuals finds an outlet in anti-globalist political attitudes and beliefs.

A series of articles from the Polish Institute of Structural Research points to the fact that most of the jobs recovered in CEE countries after the financial crisis have been jobs that are significantly vulnerable to technological automation (Hardy, Keister, and Lewandowski 2016; Keister and Lewandowski 2017). This ultimately means that citizens of CEE countries

FIGURE 2. THE EVER-INCREASING ROLE OF TRADE IN CEE

– even the countries that seem to have weathered the crisis well from a macroeconomics perspective – are likely to be vulnerable to impending changes. More so, these threats are relatively apparent to the workers themselves. Squeezed by a labour market pressure that they can scarcely understand, citizens are more vulnerable to facile scapegoating or fear-mongering. While they do not necessarily understand that technology is to blame for their vulnerability, they do feel an increasing sense of vulnerability and instability – which they easily attribute to factors regarding globalisation. The people affected generally keep their middle-class label, but they perceive a much higher level of threat to their status and economic situation. As a result, they tend to look to the things that have changed concurrently with their perceived economic safety – and mostly, the accompanying phenomena are related to globalisation and cultural progressiveness. Post hoc ergo propter hoc: they perceive their loss of status and safety as a result of globalisation and cultural revolution, so they ascribe the responsibility for the change to globalisation and the cultural revolution, and therefore become adamantly opposed to them, which makes them ideal supporters of populist parties.

The main problem for Central and Eastern European countries is that to a certain extent globalisation has also been part of the reason for their recent economic growth. Export-heavy economies such as the Visegrad group have absorbed a lot of the industry that used to function in Western Europe. This export-based model is one of the main reasons for the incredible economic growth that has been registered in CEE countries and, together with the lower wages, is at least in part the reason why the post-crisis employment recovery also featured routine jobs. These jobs, had they been required to remain in Western European countries, with Western European

> **The main problem for Central and Eastern European countries is that to a certain extent globalisation has also been part of the reason for their recent economic growth. (...) As such, we have the rather strange sight of political leaders in Hungary and Poland railing against globalisation, while at the same time introducing and maintaining a highly globalised and liberalised political-economic model in their own countries.**

wages, trade unions and branch contracts, would have likely been automated. By moving them to CEE countries instead, these jobs can survive – at least temporarily.

The problem is that this transition of employment also places political pressure on the leaders of CEE countries – all trying to emulate the Visegrad export-heavy model – to continue to offer de-regulation and liberalisation of their labour markets. This employment can only survive while the low wages and market regulations make automation an investment that is not yet worth the cost. As such, we have the rather strange sight of political leaders in

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Hungary and Poland railing against globalisation, while at the same time introducing and maintaining a highly globalised and liberalised political-economic model in their own countries.

What is to be done?

The quality of public services that a country has to offer – especially for people trying to readjust to the modern labour market – is key to understanding whether technological change will contribute to the increase in the populists' electoral share or not. Technological change is difficult to avoid, especially within a common market such as the European Union. The only short-term alternative to technological upgrade is poverty and marginalisation, which would likely lead to migration, and ultimately offer the same result in the long run, but with a heftier price.

Societies cannot choose to avoid technological change in order to preserve economic equality, even if they wanted to. Also, because of the nature of this change, societies can hardly choose to control the flow of globalisation without also in part sacrificing economic growth. The solution in this context would be to invest in high-quality public services, especially life-long education, which could to some extent mitigate the polarising effects of technological change; health care, to prolong the careers of workers and their quality of life; and other such services.

If these services are not developed or provided, populist political leaders will likely be in a good position to capture large swaths of a jaded and at times angry electorate. Unfortunately, the history and present of the CEE countries shows that such a transition is unlikely in the short run, and in the light of the current political offers, to compete against populism.

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'New World Order':

The "natural family" franchise goes global

By **Claudia Ciobanu** | Bucharest, Warsaw, Brussels, Zagreb

First gay marriage, then liberal democracy… As a global ultra-conservative movement brings its war of values to the Balkans, autocrats are paying attention.

At Saint Spyridon the New Church, the largest Orthodox church in Bucharest, the priest had an important message for his congregation.

Saint Spyridon the New Church Bucharest
© Photo by Andrei Stroe on Wikipedia

"*This is one of those moments in history when true Christians are separated from the chaff,*" he told worshipers during a two-hour mass, as children played on the floor in front of the altar. "*Those who consider themselves Christians must speak out today.*"

It was the Sunday of a weekend-long referendum in October on rewording Romania's constitution to redefine marriage as an institution only available to heterosexual couples. Turnout had been low and priests across the country were rallying the faithful.

Outside a polling station in the bustling centre of Bucharest, some heeded the call. "*I'm sure we'll succeed,*" Damian Joita, a 20-year-old law student, said after voting for the change. "*I've never been prouder to be Romanian than today.*"

Romanian men hold Christian icons during March of Normality, an event organised by Noua Dreapta, an ultranationalist far-right movement in Romania and Moldova. © Photo by Mihai Stoica

A Romanian woman holds a rainbow flag at March of Diversity, the culmination of a week-long festival dedicated to LGBT rights in Bucharest. © Photo by Mihai Stoica

Madalin Costache, a 24-year-old father of two, said he was voting to protect his children. *"If homosexuals adopt, their children will grow up thinking being gay is normal. But this isn't right. It's not how God meant it."*

In the end, turnout was well below the legally required threshold of 30 per cent and the October 6-7 referendum was for nothing. The constitution's gender-neutral definition of marriage as "between spouses" remains unchanged.

But the campaigning exposed fault lines through Romanian society that had been quietly cracking since 2016 when a little-known group called the Coalition for Family collected three million signatures to trigger the referendum.

Although Romania's civil code forbids gay marriage, the coalition persuaded many that legalisation was just around the corner. Once gay couples were legally married, they argued, what would stop them from adopting and "converting" children to homosexuality?

Made up of more than 40 local associations, the coalition depicted itself as a grassroots protector of Romanian traditional values. Its publicity materials made use of folk costumes and the blue, yellow and red of the Romanian flag.

But far from being a home-grown initiative, the coalition is part of a global ultra-conservative movement dedicated to rolling back more than gay marriage, rights groups and academics say.

From civil partnerships and abortion to assisted reproduction and sex education in schools, the movement is pushing to change laws and policies it sees as undermining what it calls "the natural family".

And it is getting organised. An investigation by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, BIRN, reveals how a growing network of ultra-conservative activists, lawyers and consultants is sharing strategy and resources across borders.

The movement draws inspiration and expertise from sources far removed from the voting booths and church bulletin boards of the Balkans. These include US evangelical groups close to the Trump White House and Russian oligarchs with ties to the Kremlin, according to insider documents and media reports.

Meanwhile, European populist leaders with an increasingly illiberal bent are finding it pays to jump on the movement's bandwagon. By imbuing their rhetoric with appeals to the so-called natural family, and crafting policies that seem to support it, they stand to earn votes and cement powers.

The result is an erosion of political and civil liberties in democracies that are edging towards authoritarianism, political analysts say.

Andrea Peto, a historian at the Central European University in Budapest, described the rise of groups like the Coalition for Family as "a nationalist neoconservative response to the crisis of the global neoliberal world order".

"*It's a fundamentally new phenomenon that was launched for the sake of establishing a new world order, so it should interest anyone who cares about democracy and human rights,*" Peto said.

Vlad Viski, president of Romanian rights group MozaiQ, put it more bluntly: "*The homosexual body is now a battleground.*"

'Gender ideology'

In an interview before the referendum, Mihai Gheorghiu, leader of the Coalition for Family, defended his organisation's goals.

"*We have the right to defend our values and way of life,*" he told BIRN. "*The natural family based on marriage between a man and a woman is the anthropological essence of who we are and the fundament for the existence of children.*"

Gheorghiu, a 51-year-old philologist, was sitting in the cafeteria of the Bucharest Museum of the Romanian Peasant, where he is deputy director. As he warmed to his topic, a group of hip young Romanians relaxed nearby on traditionally carved wooden chairs.

> "*The homosexual body is now a battleground*"
>
> **Vlad Viski**, president of MozaiQ

"*We knew the cultural and sexual revolution happening in the West would eventually reach Romania and we had to be ready,*" he said.

Gheorghiu has a name for the decadence he is fighting — "gender ideology".

Not to be confused with gender studies or any other mainstream academic discipline, it is a term invented by ultra-conservatives to evoke a worldview at war with fundamentalist conceptions of the natural family.

People wave flags at a rally in Bucharest in support of Romania's ruling coalition, which has promoted traditional family values as part of its political agenda. © Photo by Mihai Stoica

According to this line of thinking, gender ideology took root among elite Western intellectuals in the 1960s before infecting universities, courtrooms, parliaments and international institutions with what conservatives see as a dangerous moral relativism.

Those in the "anti-gender" camp see the advancement of gay rights and pro-choice policies as symptoms of a kind of neo-colonial takeover of God-given social norms.

"*Romanians have already lived through communism, when a minority thought it held the absolute truth and imposed it on others,*" Gheorghiu said. "*We cannot allow that to happen again.*"

The Coalition for Family is not alone in evoking the spectre of gender ideology.

Between 2012 and 2015, campaigners triggered referendums in Croatia, Slovenia and Slovakia to try to constitutionally define marriage as exclusively between a man and a woman.

They were successful in Croatia. Slovenians rejected gay marriage at the ballot box before politicians later made it legal. And in Slovakia, turnout did not reach the required 50 per cent.

In Poland, a petition to tighten the country's already strict abortion law forced parliament to take up the issue in 2016 until big protests prompted its rejection. This year, Bulgaria refused to ratify a Council of Europe treaty on tackling domestic violence after a social uproar, with conservatives saying its definition of gender relativised the boundaries between the sexes.

But it was not just an Eastern European phenomenon.

Since 2012, a French group called La Manif pour tous (The Protest for Everyone) has rallied supporters against gay marriage and assisted reproduction, inspiring similar movements in Italy, Germany and Finland.

"*The US actors bring knowhow*"

Neil Datta, secretary of the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development

A Helping Hand

In his book The Global Right Wing and the Clash of World Politics, political scientist Clifford Bob from Duquesne University describes how, in 2006, evangelical pastors in Romania sought the help of anti-abortion campaigners in the United States to campaign for "natural marriage".

When the Romanian pastors created an organisation to defend traditional marriage in 2007, the Alliance Defending Freedom, ADF, helped.

"*There was clearly a need and a desire there,*" Bob quotes ADF Chief Counsel Benjamin Bull as saying. "*We simply helped shape and define the organisation.*"

ADF resurfaced during the 2016 campaign for a referendum led by the Coalition for Family, filing an advisory document to the Constitutional Court, which was assessing whether the referendum was constitutional.

Other US groups specialising in litigation in favour of evangelical values, including Liberty Counsel, also filed submissions.

Asked what kind of support ADF offered to the Coalition for Family, Adina Portaru, a Romanian lawyer on staff at ADF International's Brussels office, replied in a written statement: "*As a Romanian lawyer I represented ADF International before the Constitutional Court to argue that this citizens' initiative should be allowed to proceed.*"

In another statement sent by email, she said: "*The Romanian Coalition for Family and ADF International are independent organisations.*"

*We co-hosted the conference Referendum for the Family: Analysis and Implications at the Romanian parliament in Bucharest in 2017 and a second conference in 2018 [in parliament] on the issue of national and international perspectives on marriage. The 2018 conference had six co-organisers, one of which was ADF International.***"**

Speakers at the conference in Romania's parliament argued for the urgency of organising a referendum. They included Croatian anti-abortion activist Zeljka Markic, founder of In the Name of the Family, and Ludovine de la Rochere, leader of French ultra-conservative organisation La Manif pour tous.

In Brussels, ADF International shares the same office, a rented apartment, with European Dignity Watch, EDW.

While EDW is an older group — founded in 2010, five years before ADF International — it appears to work in symbiosis with ADF International. Sophia Kuby, the former executive director of EDW, became EU advocacy director at ADF International in 2015, when the latter launched.

EDW organises communications and advocacy training for activists. Zeljka Markic has been a trainer for EDW. According to photos from the EDW website, Ana Corina Sacrieru, a lawyer representing Romania's Coalition for Family, attended EDW trainings.

According to EDW's annual financial records filed at the Brussels Commercial Court, EDW paid 1,324 euros to Zeljka Markic in 2015.

EDW did not reply to questions about the payment and the director declined interview requests. Markic did not respond to written questions or interview requests.

In Spain, HazteOir (Make Yourself Heard) has been militating against abortion, gay marriage and sex education in schools since 2013.

'Agenda Europe'

Experts say it is no coincidence that such initiatives sprang up at the same time.

Rewind to January 2013, when around 20 leading anti-abortion campaigners and strategic consultants from around Europe and the United States gathered in London's leafy Belgravia district for a two-day retreat billed as a forum for "developing strategies for the pro-life movement in Europe", according to a copy of the event's agenda obtained by BIRN.

Participants also left time for "spiritual reflection" sessions, mass at Westminster Cathedral and dinner at the exclusive Royal Automobile Club.

Agendas of three subsequent meetings — marked "strictly confidential" and also seen by BIRN — showed the London retreat morphed into an annual summit known as Agenda Europe. Summits took place in Munich in 2014, Dublin in 2015 and Warsaw in 2016.

"*Since its establishment, it [Agenda Europe] has grown to include the key pro-life and pro-family leaders in every European country,***"** the organisers wrote in notes accompanying the 2015 schedule.

Well-known US anti-abortion activists were listed as star speakers at the summits.

None of the attendees contacted by BIRN responded to interview requests.

"*The US actors bring knowhow,***"** said Neil Datta, secretary of the European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development, EPF, a network of European parliamentarians promoting reproductive rights.

"*The US movement has 30 years more experience. They tested out all these things.***
*They have policy norms at hand that can be adapted to the local context and outclass Europeans in strategic litigation.***"**

During the early 1990s, several big US conservative Christian groups — many founded by evangelicals — came to prominence as they fought to roll back what they saw as unwelcome victories by civil liberty organisations, especially on women's and LGBT rights.

"*Under the* [US President Barack] *Obama administration, the American Christian right felt it was losing the battle at home and expanded its commitment to 'the culture wars' overseas,*" said Peter Montgomery, a contributor at Right Wing Watch, which monitors the US religious right.

"*US courts sometimes borrow arguments from Europe. Conservatives used to get upset by the use of progressive international precedents, but now they see winning conservative rulings internationally as an opportunity.*"

One of the biggest conservative Christian groups in the United States, the Alliance Defending Freedom, ADF, moved to expand its Christian lawyers network into Europe in 2010. For the past three years, its annual revenue has exceeded $48 million, according to its **audited financial reports** and **tax filings**.

Annual forms filed to US tax authorities and **available online** show the organisation increased its funding to Europe to $2.5 million in 2016 from around $800,000 in 2013. During this time, ADF created ADF International, with offices in Belgium, Austria, France, Britain and Switzerland.

ADF's fortunes have since improved back home. In a 2017 **investigation** for The Nation magazine, journalist Sarah Posner showed how close the group is to President Donald Trump.

US Solicitor General Noel Francisco, appointed by the White House, was an ADF-affiliated attorney, she revealed. Former Attorney General Jeff Sessions, a Trump ally, consulted with ADF when drafting Department of Justice guidance on religious freedom. And Trump appointed four federal judges with ties to the group.

Meanwhile, US Vice-President Mike Pence, an evangelical Christian, is considered a high-level ally of groups trying to limit LGBT and women's rights.

"*Mike is a solid believer and understands these issues,*" ADF head Michael Farris **told the Catholic News Agency** last year. "*I think we'll have a listening ear in the Justice Department.*"

"*Expose gay marriage to ridicule*"

Strategy proposal in **Restoring the Natural Order. An Agenda for Europe**

One of the few publicly known funders of ADF is the family of Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, who are also major donors to the Republican Party. Most of the remaining individual and charitable donations making up ADF's revenue are secret.

"*American actors might give some money,*" said Datta from the EPF. "*That's not in itself a bad thing. But the conservatives [right-wing groups in Europe] are decidedly discreet as to where*

they get their money from. While progressives do list their funders, the conservatives don't. They engage in obfuscation of their sources."

Asked about the purpose of ADF's expansion into Europe, Adina Portaru, a Romanian lawyer on staff at ADF International's Brussels office, told BIRN: "*ADF International protects religious minorities from being persecuted and promotes human rights through their network of allied lawyers throughout the world.*"

She added that ADF International co-hosted, together with the Coalition for Family and others, two conferences on family in the Romanian parliament, in 2017 and 2018.

Another major American group expanding into Europe is the American Center for Law and Justice, ACLJ, founded by evangelical minister Pat Robertson, with an annual revenue of almost $20 million.

ACLJ set up the European Center for Law and Justice, ECLJ, in Strasbourg in 1998 and the Slavic Center for Law and Justice in Moscow around the same time.

According to ACLJ's **publicly available** forms filed to US tax authorities, the organisation has spent more than $1 million in Europe each year since 2009.

Jay Sekulow, chief counsel for ACLJ, is on Trump's legal counsel team and is in **charge of dealing** with Special Counsel Robert Mueller's probe into Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 US election.

Representatives of both ADF International and ECLJ have been regularly invited to Agenda Europe summits.

Anti-gender 'manifesto'

Prominent activists from the Balkans and Eastern Europe are also regular invitees to Agenda Europe summits.

Bogdan Stanciu, head of the Pro Vita Bucharest Association, an influential member of the Coalition for Family, is listed as a speaker. So is Zeljka Markic, founder of In the Name of the Family, which triggered the referendum that constitutionally redefined marriage in Croatia.

> "*Today children – children! – are taught in school that every- one can choose his or her sex*"
>
> **Pope Francis**

At the Warsaw summit in 2016, Markic was invited to chair a session on "current proactive marriage initiatives".

Neither Stanciu nor Markic responded to questions or interview requests.

Polish EU Affairs Minister Konrad Szymanski, from the governing Law and Justice party, PiS, was also scheduled to speak at the event that year.

Many of the ideas espoused by the conservative activists echo concepts found in a manifesto of more than 100 pages titled Restoring the Natural Order. An Agenda for Europe.

In an English copy of the manifesto, seen by BIRN, the unknown author describes a "civilisational decline of the Western world" brought about by the moral relativism of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Gender ideology is the main culprit, it says.

"*It is thus, for example, perfectly legitimate to strive for legislation that criminalises abortion, euthanasia or sodomy, or that rules out the legal recognition of 'same-sex marriages', even if there be some citizens who believe abortion, euthanasia or sodomy to be morally acceptable,*" it says.

The document spells out concrete policy goals, including the repeal of all laws allowing for divorce, civil partnership or gay adoption; the introduction of "anti-sodomy laws"; and defunding of "the LGBT lobby".

The strategies it lays out include petitioning at an EU and national level, encouraging activists to "expose gay marriage to ridicule" and informing people "about risks associated with sodomy".

"*When speaking about sodomy, consistently use that term,*" it advises.

Agenda Europe has no official spokespeople or officers but the **agendaeurope.org** website — registered to ADF International's director of alliance relations, Sophia Kuby — contains a statement disowning the manifesto.

Asked about the manifesto, Kuby reiterated that it had nothing to do with Agenda Europe and said the document had come to light via "illegal hacking" of Spanish organisation HazteOir. "*A criminal procedure is ongoing,*" she added.

Meanwhile, the Pro Vita Bucharest Association published in 2016 a Romanian translation of the manifesto, retitled An Agenda for Romania. In an accompanying note, it says it "symbolically took ownership" of the text.

The Zeljka Markic Effect

A Croatian business woman, former journalist and daughter of anti-abortion activists, Zeljka Markic heads what is probably the most successful ultra-conservative coalition in Eastern Europe.

In 2013, In the Name of the Family collected 750,000 signatures to trigger a referendum in Croatia that led to a constitutional change to define marriage as strictly between a man and a woman.

Since the referendum, Markic's ultra-conservative movement has become a force in Croatian politics, according to human rights activist Gordan Bosanac. While Markic's attempt to form a political party did not bring electoral success, her allies took up positions in centre-right governments led by the Croatian Democratic Union.

"*We have to pray [for] the liberal smoke to get out from Europe and America*"

Konstantin Malofeev, Russian Orthodox philanthropist

"*Through their people in government, they targeted culture, civil society and women's rights,*" Bosanac said.

Antonija Petricusic, a sociologist at Zagreb University, said the activities of In the Name of the Family and their allies had contributed to "an increasingly evident de-secularisation of society".

This year, In the Name of the Family received a three-year grant of taxpayers' money from the National Foundation for the Development of Civil Society to develop its programmes.

Markic declined to comment.

In 2016, the Pro Vita Bucharest Association collected donations on behalf of the Coalition for Family. It has since been removed from the list of members on the coalition's website.

'Broad alliances'

Whoever wrote the manifesto, experts say the worldview it expounds has been gaining ground in Europe since before Agenda Europe came into being, helped by a growing chorus of denunciation of gender ideology by the Vatican.

"*In Europe, America, Latin America, Africa, and in some countries of Asia, there are genuine forms of ideological colonisation taking place,*" Pope Francis said in a **speech** to Polish bishops in 2016.

"*And one of these – I will call it clearly by its name – is [the ideology of] 'gender'. Today children – children! – are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex.*"

In Catholic countries such as Poland or Croatia, **journalists** and **academics** have documented the church's involvement in anti-gender campaigns. And according to the EPF's Datta, intellectuals close to the Vatican were key in setting up Agenda Europe.

*Young people attend the opening party of
Bucharest Pride 2018. © Photo by Mihai Stoica*

Yet analysts say the anti-gender movement is neither exclusively Catholic nor even exclusively religious. In countries that are more secular or where the church's reputation has been marred by scandals, campaigners often downplay their links to organised religion.

According to Peto from the Central European University, gender ideology is the "symbolic glue" that "helped create broad alliances and united actors that have not cooperated in the past", including the different Christian churches, mainstream conservatives, far-right parties and fundamentalist groups.

The key calendar event for anti-gender activists from all over the world is the annual World Congress of Families, WCF.

Last year, the WCF took place in mid-September in Chişinău, hosted by Moldovan President Igor Dodon, who won elections in 2016 on a pro-Russian, pro-family agenda.

The event kicked off in Moldova's Republican Palace, replete with red marble and crystal chandeliers. For much of the opening ceremony, **streamed online**, dancers dressed in Moldovan folk costumes, or simply in white, carried a remarkably calm baby around the stage.

Dodon then launched into a speech about the "erosion and destruction" of the family amid an "anti-family ideology, which deprives mothers and fathers of their natural roles in the family".

Declaring 2019 the Year of the Family in Moldova, he said he would push for pro-family measures including an increase in maternity leave. He added that pro-gay "propaganda" should be "firmly condemned and even outlawed".

WCF President Brian Brown went on to read a message from Matteo Salvini, Italy's far-right interior minister.

"*In an age when we are witnessing destructive and irrational attacks on the founding values of our cultures, the efforts you are undertaking to*

In a 2014 **investigation** for US magazine Mother Jones, Hannah Levintova revealed how US evangelicals, notably actors from the WCF, helped develop anti-gay rights language and arguments for Russian activists and legislators, resulting in the adoption in 2013 of a federal law banning "gay propaganda".

> "*The new illiberal forces conflate liberal cultural and economic elites*"
>
> Sociologist **Elzbieta Korolczuk**

protect the natural family, as a vital element for the survival and development of human kind, are extremely necessary and worthy of appreciation," it said.

The Russian connection

The WCF was founded in 1997 by US anti-abortion campaigner Allan Carlson and two Russian academics from Moscow State University, Anatoly Antonov and Viktor Medkov.

Analysts say the Russian connection makes sense because traditional values chime with 'Eurasianism', an ideology that depicts Russia as a median between Europe and Asia and implies that ex-Soviet territories will eventually return to the fold. For the Kremlin, gender ideology is a feature of the decadent West.

"*This is a very interesting geopolitical offer,*" Datta said. "*Russia can now go to governments in its neighbourhood criticised by the West on human rights grounds and say to them: 'Don't worry, you are different.'*"

At the Agenda Europe summit in Munich in 2014, Alexey Komov, the representative of the WCF in Russia, was invited to share lessons from the "success" of the legislation, according to the agenda.

That year, the WCF was set to take place in Moscow, financed by two people considered close to President Vladimir Putin, according to the Mother Jones investigation: **Vladimir Yakunin**, former president of the Russian railways, and **Konstantin Malofeev**, an investment banker and Orthodox philanthropist.

Malofeev is also chairman of the board of directors of media group Tsargrad, a platform for Eurasianist ideas espoused by an influential far-right philosopher named Aleksandr Dugin.

The Moscow WCF did not take place in the end because the oligarchs funding it were put on EU and US sanctions lists after Russia annexed Crimea that year.

"*In Russia, our trend is back to Orthodoxy, tradition and Christianity,*" Malofeev says in a

2018 documentary by the Franco-German ARTE television channel titled Abortion: Backlash in Europe.

"*Europe is dying. The West, in [US President Ronald] Reagan['s] time … helped for this communism smoke to get out from Russia. Now it's our turn. We have to pray [for] the liberal smoke to get out from Europe and America.*"

'The future of Europe'

Beyond Russia, illiberal leaders have declared war on gender ideology.

Last year, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban hosted the WCF in Budapest and welcomed participants with a **speech** about "Europe, our common homeland, losing out in the population competition between great civilisations".

"*In the struggle for the future of Europe, stopping illegal migration is imperative,*" he said.
"*This struggle … is only worthwhile if we are able to combine it with a family policy that restores natural reproduction on the continent.*"

In October, in a move puzzling to many, Hungary banned gender studies degrees, calling the discipline "an ideology not a science". The Trump administration is also **pushing to remove "gender"** from UN human rights documents.

Italy's Salvini is proposing a similar mix of nationalistic, anti-immigration and pro-family policies.

"*We will defend the natural family founded on the union between a man and a woman. I will exert all the power possible,*"
Salvini **told Italian media** in August.

Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany entered parliament in 2017 with a **manifesto** promising a "commitment to the traditional family", opposing "gender mainstreaming" and pledging to counteract a shrinking population with "large families instead of mass immigration".

© Photo by Mihai Stoica
Vlad Viski, executive director of LGBT rights group MozaiQ, works in his office in Bucharest.

In Poland, PiS came to power with a potent mix of nationalistic and pro-family measures. Its signature policy is known as '500+', payments of more than 100 euros per child to families with more than one child.

"*The anti-gender groups active in Poland have been instrumental for the right-wing populists to win elections,*" Elzbieta Korolczuk, a sociologist at Warsaw University, told BIRN.
"*They mobilised people on the ground, in the parishes. They helped depict the liberal party [arch rivals the Civic Platform] as elitist and insensitive to people's needs.*"

Korolczuk continued: "*The new illiberal forces conflate liberal cultural and economic elites, so there's a sense that not only do those liberal elites want to take away your livelihood in economic terms but they also want to change your private life and turn your boy into a girl.*"

"*This sense of victimhood, of righteous anger, is a very powerful mobilising affect.*"

In 2018, former Trump political strategist Steve Bannon launched "the Movement" to help far-right and populist forces in the 2019 elections for the European Parliament. Salvini has pledged support for the Movement and Bannon has held talks with Hungary's Orban.

Experts say the Movement's likely participants can be defined by what they are against. They are anti-immigration, anti-EU, anti-globalist, anti-elitist – and anti-gender.

Back in Romania, critics say the fact that the government led by the Social Democratic Party, PSD, took up the referendum cause at all is a sign of its growing slide toward illiberalism.

PSD has also ushered in sweeping justice system reforms that opponents say hurt judicial independence and make it harder to stop high-level corruption.

"*Romanians refused to legitimise a discourse meant to discriminate against the LGBT community and question fundamental human rights,*" MozaiQ's Viski said. "*For the moment, we have managed to stem the conservative tide.*"

Romania's **permeability** to authoritarian tendencies

By **Codru Vrabie** | Bucharest

S ince the early 2000s, the influential heads of the Romanian executive have attempted to amass more power. Former PM Năstase (2001-04), former President Băsescu (2005-14, especially in partnership with PM Boc, in 2009-11) and former PM Ponta (2012-15) sought to either bypass the legislature, or to subordinate the judiciary. By trial and error a strategy emerged, to the apparent benefit of the ruling Social-Democrats' current chairman Liviu Dragnea (since 2015). The authoritarian tendencies seem to have been consolidated after the parliamentary elections of 2016, with a favorable Ombudsman, and a supportive majority on the Constitutional Court. Depending on the outcomes of the four rounds of elections in 2019-20, Romania may return to the democratic path, or simply allow the gradual installation of an authoritarian regime from now until 2024. Recently, Romanian MEPs sided with Hungary and Poland, opposing the European Commission's proposal to cut funding to member states that do not uphold the rule of law (**Bayer, 2019**).

In November 2018, the political satirist John Oliver dedicated a full episode of his show 'Last Week Tonight' to **Authoritarianism**. In that episode, Oliver synthesised sophisticated scholarly analysis in a list of three broad characteristics of authoritarian rulers – a system of reference as good as any and more user-friendly: projecting strength, demonising enemies, and dismantling institutions. Around the same time, in a **TEDWomen talk**, the pro-democracy activist Farida Nabourema presented five indicators of countries at risk of becoming dictatorships. These indicators relate to: concentration of power, propaganda focused on 'saving the people […] from some foreign enemy', the militarisation or instigation of fear, the suppression of institutions that enforce accountability, and human rights abuses (or 'cruelty', as Nabourema put it.)

Pop culture stars, democracy practitioners or theorists (such as **Meyer-Resende, 2017**; **Hopkin & Blyth, 2018**; **Witte, 2018**; **Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019**; **Polyakova, 2019**) all seem to be working within similar frameworks. Accordingly, when looking at Romania, they are either surprised at the very slow advancement of the 'illiberal' agenda, or remain unclear about the structural differences which may distinguish Romania from other countries. Following the critique in Meyer-Resende (2017) of the term 'illiberal democracy', this article looks at the authoritarian tendencies in Romania. Is Romania more resilient than Hungary or Poland? Does Romania really have specific safeguards against various forms of authoritarianism?
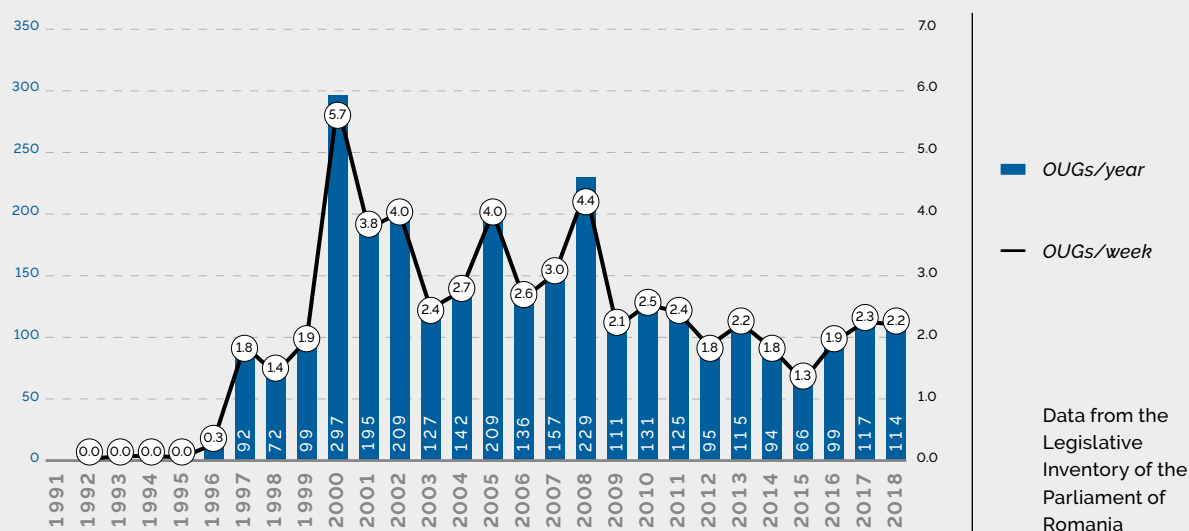
The short answer is 'no'; Romania is not really any different, and has no specific safeguards—indeed, quite the opposite may be true. Given enough time, the current rise of authoritarianism (or of the 'anti-values parties', as they were dubbed in **Butler, 2019**) may bring Romania closer to the results currently seen in Poland or in Hungary—and it should be noted that the neighbouring countries of Bulgaria, Moldova and even Austria seem to be moving in a similar direction. Nevertheless, the longer answer is that Romania does exhibit a somewhat different set of political circumstances. Let us look at three specific factors: the constitutional system, the politicians and civil society.

The Constitution

In Romania, the most toxic instrument of power is the constitutional provision that allows for the delegation of legislative powers to the Executive, in case of emergency (**art. 115, §4-6** of the 1991 Constitution, revised in 2003). In practice, emergency ordinances (Romanian abbreviation, OUGs) are an instrument of discretionary power that has been used by all the post-1989 cabinets at a rate that routinely exceeded 100 times a year (or at least once a week, for more than 20 years—see graph). Thus, since this practice of concentrated discretionary power remains largely unchecked and unbalanced, the OUGs alone indicate a clear propensity for authoritarianism in Romania.

NUMBER OF EMERGENCY ORDINANCES (OUGs) PER YEAR, AND SUBSEQUENT AVERAGES PER WEEK

Data from the Legislative Inventory of the Parliament of Romania

The OUGs may not be challenged for legality in the regular system of administrative courts, for they enjoy the same legitimacy as Acts of Parliament. However, they may be challenged for constitutionality in front of the Constitutional Court (CCR), albeit only if the Ombudsman deems it necessary. About a dozen of the CCR's decisions (**Calistru & Vrabie, 2017**) have outlined the conditions and the limitations on the cabinet's right to issue a constitutional OUG, but the practice continues unabated (11 OUGs were adopted in the first 9 weeks of 2019).

CCR started to behave both like a third chamber of parliament (since 2016), and a mega-Court of Justice (since 2018). Thus, Romania may have lost its most critical safeguard for the constitutional separation of powers, and the cabinet in Bucharest may consolidate its authoritarian outlook.

The very large number of OUGs adopted before 2007 was 'justified' by Romania's process of accession to the European Union. After the accession date (January 2007), the new peak number of OUGs in 2007-2008 was 'justified' as a much-needed adjustment to EU membership. Very few of these situations were genuine emergencies, even during the financial crisis of 2008-2010. Nevertheless, the instrument is tempting, and also potentially damaging when coupled with the concentration of powers in the hands of the cabinet.

When both the Ombudsman and the CCR majority are favourable to the cabinet, OUGs are virtually unstoppable as an instrument of discretionary power. Since the parliamentary elections of December 2016, the Romanian political scene has been shaped by a combination of like-minded majorities in parliament and the CCR, with an Ombudsman that is supportive of the cabinet. As the Ombudsman is appointed by a parliamentary majority, political power may be concentrated and exercised without domestic limitations (external sanctions from the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg, or the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, usually come too late).

Similarly heightened levels of discretionary power have only been present in Romania once before (and that by accident), in 2011-12;

at that time, the overbearing President Băsescu was compensating for a fragile majority in parliament. The key differentiator between the two periods (2011-12 vs. 2017-19) lies in the politicians' approach to the CCR's prerogative of solving political conflicts ('legal conflicts of a constitutional nature' in **art. 146, let. e** of the Constitution, introduced in 2003). This particular prerogative comes a close second in Romania's toxic instruments of power (loosely referred to in **Dima, 2015**).

As the CCR's decisions appear definitive and may not be appealed domestically, the natural (albeit defective) tendency was for subsequent Presidents and Legislatures to appoint justices that would secure them a political majority on the CCR. Once such majorities were achieved, the CCR's decisions began to favour the concentration of power in the hands of the Executive. With only three cases of 'legal conflicts of a constitutional nature' in 2012, the CCR's decisions nudged the concentration of power away from the cabinet (and the corresponding majority in parliament) towards the President. In contrast, with eight decisions in such cases throughout 2017-18, the CCR reversed the balance back towards the cabinet of ministers.

In the process, the CCR started to behave both like a third chamber of parliament (since 2016), and a mega-Court of Justice (since 2018). Thus, Romania may have lost its most critical safeguard for the constitutional separation of powers (see also **Vrabie, 2018a**), and the cabinet in Bucharest may consolidate its authoritarian outlook. In Nabourema's words (2018), concentration of power is almost complete, along with the effective suppression of an institution that was called to enforce constitutional accountability. From John Oliver's perspective, though, projecting strength and dismantling institutions require a little more effort from politicians.

The Politicians

Hollywood wisdom says 'no villain, no story'. While it is tempting to single out the leaders of the current coalition in government, that would be misleading. Mateescu (**2017**) describes very aptly the 'Balkanic Rural-Industrial Communism' (CRIB) that permeates political action in Romania across all political parties.

© Photo by Mircea Moira on Shutterstock

To over-simplify the political landscape, Romania's authoritarian forces may be embodied by one individual: Liviu Dragnea, president of the Social-Democratic Party (PSD), chairman of the Chamber of Deputies, and de facto prime minister (ruling through various proxies such as successive PMs Grindeanu, Tudose and Dăncilă).

Along with Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu, president of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Romania (ALDE), and chairman of the Senate, Dragnea maintains a nominal 54% majority in parliament. This majority may increase on some issues, for example upon negotiations for support from the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (about 7%); or decrease as some MPs of the PSD-ALDE coalition defect to the newly established (2018) Pro Romania Party of former PSD president and (at the same time) former PM Victor Ponta (2012-15).

With voter turnout at roughly 40% in the December 2016 parliamentary elections, Dragnea's ability to project strength has some limitations. Inside the party, he promotes only loyalists, disregarding their levels of education, skills or preparedness; he employs the same tactic for any other positions allotted to the PSD by the political algorithm (including most ministers). Outside the party, he employs the OUGs discussed in the previous section. Beyond Romania's borders, however, Dragnea's capacity to project strength is limited to a narrow range of parliamentary diplomacy and cooperation.

In the words of Simon Sinek (**2009**), Dragnea is quite apt at projecting strength at the levels of 'what' and 'how', but fails constantly at the level of 'why'. Dragnea cannot articulate an ideology to drive actions; his 'why' seems terrifyingly pragmatic. On the one hand, he fights to avoid being jailed, as he has already been sentenced to two years (suspended), and he may face another sentence of 3½ years (**Păun, 2018**).

Ultimately, what prevents Dragnea from getting his way? In truth, the street protesters, a few civil society organisations, one political party (the USR), the President and the EU/CVM officials have formed a conjunctural alliance that has no actual power.

On the other hand, he is closer to an authority figure by nature, rather than to a leader. The absence of an ideological 'why' makes it difficult for Dragnea to appeal to a larger public and amass followers.

For these reasons, Dragnea relies on die-hard PSD voters, and employs strategies that may increase their share in overall voter turnout. Buying loyalties is easy to achieve through OUGs which increase minimum wages at the expense of other economic indicators (national debt, inflation), and this is his preferred tool for projecting strength. Propaganda, spread mainly via TV, attempts to loyalise PSD and ALDE voters (roughly 3.5 of the 18 million potential voters),

while discouraging the voters of the opposition parties, along with the undecided and first-timers (to keep the turnout at about 7 million).

Demonising enemies and instigating fear are the tools which achieve both objectives— they enforce loyalties and discourage opposition. Adding insult to injury, Dragnea uses propaganda to fight the judiciary, as this is his most pressing vulnerability. It is thus unsurprising to witness the efforts to dismantle or suppress institutions focused on the anti-corruption prosecution (DNA), the General Prosecution and the Supreme Court. Consecutive OUGs have targeted these judicial authorities, gradually chipping away at their

Protest against corruption - Bucharest 2017 © Photo by Mihai Petre on Wikipedia

powers since February 2017, with the most notable developments in October 2018 and February 2019, when the Executive attempted to subordinate the General Prosecution to the minister of Justice.

The existing conditions may be ripe for authoritarian rule in Romania, if we consider the constitutional system and the electoral landscape. Dragnea fares quite well on John Oliver's (2018) characteristics for authoritarian rulers, and may have already checked three more indicators on Farida Nabourema's list (2018): an attempt (still suspected, not yet proven) at militarisation and human rights abuses, with riot police intervening against protesters (**EurActiv, 2018a**), as well as an attempt at instigating fear and other human rights abuses with the anti-gay referendum (**RFE/RL, 2018**).

In the political opposition to these authoritarian tendencies, two actors are worth mentioning, though they both have limited powers: President Klaus Iohannis (installed in December 2014) and a small party - the Save Romania Union (USR), established in 2016, currently holding 9% of seats in parliament). The President may act on three levels to counteract Dragnea's attempts at authoritarian rule:

- international relations, especially on the EU front;

- procedural battles with the CCR and parliament;

- and media, on the front of public opinion. The USR may act only in parliament and the media, aiming to gather more votes in the next elections.

As early as January 2017, the President advised the cabinet to renounce an OUG aimed at disrupting the course of Dragnea's pending trials. The cabinet, however, adopted the OUG in February, but then repealed it when faced with mass protests (**BBC, 2017**). Throughout 2017, the USR employed unconventional tactics in parliament to delay the adoption of legal amendments that would suit Dragnea's interests directly. The President also played his cards at the CCR, effectively postponing the judicial 'reforms' for about a year, until September 2018.

The judicial 'reforms' finally came into force in October 2018, through a combination of laws passed by parliament and OUGs decreed by the cabinet. Still, Dragnea's interests have not yet been satisfied, so additional changes to the Criminal and Criminal Procedure Codes

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have been planned, to make it more difficult for prosecutors to gather evidence and indict crimes. Such legislative manoeuvres set Romania at odds with the European Commission (CVM Reports **COM 851** and **SWD 551**), the Venice Commission (Opinions **017-e** and **021-e**) and GRECO (**AdHocRep**), as well as the European Parliament (**Resolution 2844**).

Dragnea's propaganda has received support from the media moguls who had already 'suffered' at the hands of the judicial system (corruption charges resulting in sentences of up to 10 years in prison and confiscation of assets exceeding €60 million). TV 'infotainment' shows have implied that street protesters, some civil society organisations and the USR are financed by George Soros; portrayed Iohannis as an anti-Semitic fascist and a tax-dodging, greedy landlord; and accused the EU's Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) of double standards in assessing Romania's judiciary.

Despite everything, Klaus Iohannis may win another term in the presidential elections of November 2019, and the alliance which includes USR aiming to win upwards of 15% in the May 2019 elections to the European Parliament. Applying John Oliver's characteristics (2018) to Romania, it seems that demonising enemies and dismantling institutions are easy to achieve, and they prop up the projection of strength. Yet, the tendencies apparent from Farida Nabourema's indicators (2018; militarisation, instigating fear, human rights abuses) are even more disquieting.

The Civil Society

Ultimately, what prevents Dragnea from getting his way? (*Nota bene* the caveat from the previous section: Mr. Dragnea is representative for the CRIB (**Mateescu, 2017**), a mere shorthand, an over-simplification.) In truth, the street protesters, a few civil society organisations, one political party (the USR), the President and the EU/CVM officials have formed a conjunctural alliance (**Vrabie, 2017**) that has no actual power. As of February 2019, this informal alliance also seems to include several associations of magistrates which have protested against the latest OUGs directed against the judiciary (**Ilie, 2019**; **Forumul, 2019**).

Romania's civil society has a weaker tradition and notably more limited funding than those in Hungary and Poland. Yet over several years, Romanian civil society scored a series of consecutive 'wins'

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against political power: reinstating a deputy minister (**BBC, 2012**), stopping the adoption of legislation detrimental to the fight against corruption (**Cernea Clark, 2013**) and halting shale gas explorations (**Cristel, 2013**), overcoming nationalist excesses in the 2014 and 2016 electoral campaigns, changing the electoral laws (**Pelin & Popescu, 2015**), and even achieving the resignation of PM Ponta (formerly of the PSD) in the aftermath of the 'Colectiv' fire (**Ilie, 2015**).

When compared to Hungary or Poland, indeed, Romania displays a different set of political circum-stances, but no specific safeguards against authoritarian-ism – Romania is simply slower to act.

The momentum accumulated during five years of consecutive wins has created an aura of power about and within Romania's civil society. That aura is a special circumstance that differentiates the situation in Romania, as civil society was able to summon volunteer resources against Dragnea's authoritarian tendencies. A similar and notable circumstance relates to the USR (created after the 2015 relaxation of the electoral laws), which encompasses a variety of long-time civic activists. While civil society organisations are keeping a healthy distance from the USR, their ideas of good governance and rule of law are clearly represented politically. Without such representation in parliament, Dragnea may have been able to achieve more success, at a faster pace.

In retaliation, the majority in parliament passed new legislation to impede the functioning of civil society organisations and independent media by increasing the bureaucratic burden of reporting their sources of financing (**Reich, 2018**). Journalists have been harassed with impromptu financial controls by the tax authorities (**Insider, 2017**), as well as lawsuits that attempted

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to disclose their sources of reports against Dragnea and his 'lackeys' (**Benezic, 2018**). However, civil society organisations and independent media still resist, possibly drawing upon European values (see **Butler, 2019**) or, perhaps, hoping to relive the joy of 'sticking it to the man' one more time after the 1989 Revolution. The latter explanation seems very much in line with the popular support for Ms. Kövesi's bid to head the European Prosecution (**EurActiv, 2019**), after she was ousted from the DNA (**Burtea, 2018**).

However, this informal, conjunctural and effectively powerless alliance simply cannot prevent the cabinet from adopting any OUG, including the amnesty regulation that would help Dragnea directly (**Strupczewski, 2019**). The EU has no direct power in Romania's decision-making, the USR has no clout in parliament, the President cannot block OUGs, the protesters cannot occupy and stop the functioning of all institutions, organisations and journalists are unable to shame Dragnea into halting his behaviour, and the magistrates are ultimately sworn to obey the law. Oddly enough, assuming that Dragnea had no limitations coming from within the governing coalition, the possible explanations are either that Dragnea is still exercising some restraint, or that the propaganda has not yet reached the desired tipping point.

By the same token, the 'alliance' is vulnerable in its inability to respond cogently to accusations that the judiciary may have been engaged in abuses against politicians, with undue influence from the domestic intelligence services, at least during 2005-18 (**Vrabie, 2018b**). Thus, whether demonised or not, civil society is rather ill-equipped to resist the current process of dismantling institutions, and is not yet in a position to offer a viable alternative to prospective good-faith politicians, just in case better times come along. But Farida Nabourema and John Oliver did not cover this hypothesis.

Conclusion

The tactics of demonising enemies and dismantling institutions have converged most harshly on the judiciary. The Constitution has certain weaknesses that allow authoritarian tendencies to consolidate. The possibility of abuse becomes more apparent when the cabinet, the Ombudsman and the majority on the Court belong to the same political coalition—such a situation first occurred in 2011-12 by chance, then was deliberately consolidated after 2016-17. The Romanian drive towards authoritarianism employed this synergy to create a variety of regulations aimed at dismantling

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institutions that have already been demonised—and the judiciary has fallen prey, bit by bit, despite the process being delayed to the longest extent possible by all the other political actors.

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Dismantling the judiciary includes ousting the three chief prosecutors, limiting the abilities of prosecutors to gather evidence and indict crimes, disrupting the course of ongoing lawsuits on procedural grounds, making retirement more attractive for high-performance judges, and undermining the powers of the Supreme Court. Decisions taken by the Constitutional Court (political appointees, political majority) may gradually prevent the Supreme Court (impartial, independent and immovable magistrates) from trying politicians. High-performance judges and prosecutors, disgusted with the political pressure, may simply choose to retire, benefiting authoritarian politicians, regardless of whether they are corrupt or not.

The move against the judiciary was predicated on a breach of trust (and the principles of the rule of law) that goes back at least to 2005, when several judicial institutions started cooperating with the

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intelligence services. That cooperation has puzzled the attentive public at least since 2015, and was ultimately uncovered in 2018, when suspicions were raised about the convictions pronounced against various politicians charged with corruption.

Such cooperation was sufficient to demonise the judiciary, and to justify (at least in part) the work of dismantling the top judicial institutions.

The OUGs adopted in February 2019 show that Romania's authoritarian tendencies will not diminish while the country holds the rotating presidency of the EU Council. Hence, one may expect these tendencies to tarnish the electoral campaigns for the European Parliament (May 2019) and for the presidency of Romania (December 2019) as well. Sociological trends suggest that the 'anti-values parties' (**Butler, 2019**) may lose the local and parliamentary elections in June and December 2020 respectively (**Mateescu, 2018**). However the real danger is that by 2020, the parliament and local governments may be deprived of their powers by means of OUGs.

When compared to Hungary or Poland, indeed, Romania displays a different set of political circumstances, but no specific safeguards against authoritarianism – Romania is simply slower to act. In the period from 2020 to 2028, Romania will have a single (mega-) electoral year: 2024. The obvious danger is that authoritarianism may be firmly consolidated by 2028, or that another violent revolution may ensue. The 'alliance' discussed above should seek the political means to amend the Constitution by 2024, to improve accountability in all branches of government, to eliminate OUGs, and to replace the adjudication mechanism for political conflicts. If successful, authoritarianism may be averted in Romania – but that goal may require cooperation, vision and leadership at levels and intensities never before witnessed in Romania.

■

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The resilience of systems of **government against populists' autocratic legalism**

By **Bogdan Dima** | Bucharest

The present article is built on two core assumptions.

The first is that populism refers to a specific understanding of political power which tends to be similar across liberal democracies around the world. If we reduce this concept to its essence, it reveals an anti-pluralist political ideology favouring the concentration of political power in the hands of a political leader or political party which wins free elections, be they presidential or parliamentary.

The second is that on a very general note, the systems of government refer to the conceptualisation of the relationship between executives and legislatures (see the studies by Ginsburg, Cheibub, Elkins).

Thus, if populism deals with a specific understanding of political power, a system of government deals with the institutional design of political power.

Populism and autocratic legalism

Over the past decade, the consolidation of democracy all around Europe has been put on hold, or in some cases even backslid. Recent major events[1] have forced the expansion of repressed

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1. The financial crisis in 2008, the Greek bailout, the new wave of migration which exploded in 2015, recent insidious terrorist attacks with large-scale media impacts, and the referendum on Brexit and the subsequent harsh and intricate negotiations between the UK & the EU.

political parties have won seats in parliaments, participated in parliamentary and governmental coalitions, or achieved absolute victory in general and/or presidential elections. Even the mainstream parties of the moderate centre-left or centre-right have pushed forward more radical political agendas, influenced by the spectre of populism which haunts the democratic world today.

Many recent studies about populism describe what appear to be its common features, document its history and predict its future (see selective bibliography at the end of the article). In the context of this broader literature, I will use the term 'populism' to describe a political phenomenon specific to current modern representative democracy which, among other features, strongly champions popular sovereignty and majority rule, but opposes minority rights and pluralism.

As Mudde and Kaltwasser put it, populist leaders are not at odds with democracy itself, rather with liberal democracy, especially with its specific feature of pluralism. Their main ideological argument is based on splitting society into two antagonistic groups: on one hand, the 'pure people' represented exclusively by the populist leaders, and on the other, the 'corrupt elite' against whom they struggle. This so-called ideology of populism inevitably generates specific anti-pluralist constitutional and legal reforms. The aim of these reforms is the elimination or curtailment of control mechanisms inherent to any classical constitutional liberal democracy, such as independence of the judiciary, guarantees and protection mechanisms for fundamental human rights and liberties, independence and powers of constitutional tribunals, the role and autonomy of independent regulatory agencies, the role of the parliamentary opposition, etc.

One major consequence of the populists' constitutional and legal reforms is called autocratic legalism. Scheppele argues that autocratic legalism appears when electoral mandates plus constitutional and legal change are used in the service of an illiberal agenda.

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Basically, populist leaders become legalistic autocrats, seeking to use their democratic mandates to launch constitutional and legal reforms that remove the checks on executive power and parliamentary majorities, and limit possible challenges to their rule. Thus they undermine the very essence of liberal constitutionalism, which was always to prevent the tyranny of the majority.

Populist leaders are not at odds with democracy itself, rather with liberal democracy, especially with its specific feature of pluralism.

The present analysis focuses on certain countries in Central and Eastern Europe, offering some general examples of what the constitutional and legal reforms by populists in power from Hungary, Poland and Turkey look like.

Populists' favourite first victims are constitutional justice and the judiciary power. For example, populists in power limit the prerogatives of the constitutional courts, and change the appointment procedures and selection criteria for constitutional

An operational definition of illiberalism

Illiberalism is most evident in the way that the governing party - backed by real or imagined popular "majorities" - claims that it does not need to share the political space with those with whom they disagree. Illiberals have all of the answers and are eager to impose them on all. They de-legitimate the political opposition, capture all political institutions and do not recognize either expertise or the independence of the transparency and checking institutions (first, the judiciary - but also the media, civil sector organizations, election commissions, media regulators and so on).

In short, they aim for a mono-vocal political environment in which only their own views are heard or matter. They hate pluralism; they hate those who disagree with them. They want a univocal politics with room only for their own voices to echo back to them as "consent" of the governed. Illiberals target the system of checks and balances because that is the political technology through which the voices of others have to be heard. They are not interested in listening to these voices so they close down the institutional spaces of pluralism.

Kim Lane Scheppele, Professor of Sociology and International Affairs Princeton University, interview by Octavian Manea published in Revista 22, November 2017

judges in order to diminish the role and the independence of these fundamental institutions (Hungary and Poland).

Populists in power tend to adopt legislation changing the appointment and dismissal procedures for judges on the Supreme Courts (and even the lower courts) in order to eliminate unwanted magistrates from the judiciary systems (Poland, Turkey). Also, populists in power tend to limit the prerogatives and to change the composition of the Judiciary Councils, which are essential institutions for disciplinary action against magistrates and for the independent management of magistrates' careers (Poland).

If populists win elections in a European Union country, they tend to promote a nationalistic and sovereign discourse in relation to EU institutions. They fight fiercely against European rules and ECJ decisions when these are not compatible with their political views (Poland, Hungary). They are always ready to beat the drum about their national interests being violated by European unelected bureaucrats (see the discourses of Orbán or Nigel Farage).

Populists in power tend to change the electoral laws in order to favour their re-election, thus limiting the opposition's chances of fair electoral success (Hungary, Turkey).

Lastly, populists in power promote provisions regulating stronger control over civil society and curtailing freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, freedom of assembly, limiting rights for different minorities, e.g. for LGBT or ethnic minorities (Hungary, Turkey).

A full-scale investigation of the content of the constitutional and legal reforms undertaken by populists in power from Hungary, Poland, Turkey and other countries might reveal a wide range of' creative' solutions to limit or even eliminate institutional checks on executive power and parliamentary majorities.

But what systems of government might make it more difficult for populists to impose their anti-liberal reforms?

Systems of government and the consolidation of democracy

Until the mid-twentieth century, the traditional taxonomy of systems of government was based on a dyad of presidentialism (of which the USA was the ideal model) as opposed to parliamentarism (with Great Britain and post-war Germany being the ideal models, the former for constitutional monarchies, the latter for constitutional republics).

Presidentialism means a system of government where there is a rigid separation of powers between the executive and the legislative branches of government, with a popularly-elected president who is also the leader of the cabinet, and a popularly-elected Parliament. The cabinet is politically accountable to the President and not to the Parliament.

Parliamentarism means a system of government where there is cooperation between the executive and legislative branches of government. The chief of state is not popularly elected (he/she is a hereditary monarch, or a president elected by the legislature); and the cabinet, led by a prime minister, is politically accountable only to the parliamentary majority resulting from parliamentary elections. The prime minister and the cabinet also need a vote of confidence from the parliament in order to exercise the executive mandate.

Starting with the works of the French political scholar Maurice Duverger, a third type of systems of government (semi-presidentialism) was launched in academic debate around the 1980s (France's Fifth Republic being the ideal model of semi-presidentialism). However, comparative studies on semi-presidentialism exploded after 1990s, mainly because many former Communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe as well as Asia opted for this specific system of government after the collapse of the Communist regimes. According to one well-established definition, semi-presidentialism means a system of government where the constitution includes both a popularly-elected president and a prime minister & cabinet accountable to the parliament (see Elgie).

understand which one is more conducive to stability and the consolidation of democracy. Even though there is no full agreement among scholars, there is a general tendency among classical political theorists to consider parliamentary systems of government more prone to sustain and consolidate democracy in the long run (see the works of Linz, Sartori and Lijphart).

When dealing with semi-presidential systems of government, some authors consider that the premier-presidential sub-type[2] of semi-presidentialism is better equipped than the president-parliament sub-type[3] of semi-presidentialism to sustain and consolidate democracy (see Shugart and Carrey).

If democracy is consolidated and the values of liberal constitutionalism are deeply rooted in society and protected by an independent judiciary, even a populist leader who wins presidential elections cannot overpass the constitutional checks on his decision-making power.

In addition, despite the notable exception of France's Fifth Republic, a directly elected president with strong formal and informal powers is not the best choice for constitutional designers in countries facing democratisation processes. Semi-presidentialism tends to work when presidents are not too powerful, and when there is an efficient balance of powers between the president and the prime minister (see Elgie, Sedelius).

Regardless of the multitude of comparative and country-related studies on systems of government, there is no clear proof that any given system of government can of itself fully guarantee the preservation of liberal democracy and its consolidation. The collapse of the Weimar

Many books, articles and studies have tried to define and better categorise these three main systems of government, as well as to

2. A premier-presidential sub-type of semi-presidentialism means that the prime-minister is politically accountable only to the Parliament.

3. A president-parliament sub-type of semi-presidentialism means that the prime minister is politically accountable both to the Parliament and the President of the Republic.

Republic is the classical example of how a democratic system of government broke down and turned into the most gruesome totalitarian regime in recent history.

The study of institutional designs (systems of government) accounts for a small piece of the never-ending puzzle that might at some point show us exactly why some democracies thrive and others die. Thus, one should always keep in mind that institutional design is only one among a multitude of other variables which influence political outcomes and the structures of social behaviour.

The resilience of systems of government against populist politics & policies

Political scientists usually ask which system of government or sub-type of a specific system of government is more conducive to democratic consolidation. In this context we should reframe the question, taking into consideration the new populist politics and policies facing liberal democracies. The question becomes rather: which system of government and which sub-type of a specific system of government is more resilient to populist policies tending towards the introduction of autocratic legalism?

We are not focused on finding out which features of which system of government are more effective for the advancement of democracy in terms of stability of the government, consensus building or the efficiency of political intra-executive and executive-legislative decision-making. Our interest lies in observing those specific features of a system of government which hinder (or at least delay) the adoption and implementation of populists' constitutional and legal reforms aiming at eliminating or limiting the institutional checks on executive power and parliamentary majorities.

The first assumption is that parliamentary systems of government tend to concentrate executive power in the hands of a prime minister who is usually the leader of the parliamentary majority, hence the mutual political dependence between the parliamentary majority and the executive. To populists, this specific institutional design fits them like a glove. Once populists have won the general elections, the whole political decision-making mechanism of the state is at their disposal. If the general elections are won with a qualified majority by a populist party, the incentive to change the constitution in order to fit the needs of the populists becomes greater (the case of Orbán and Fidesz in Hungary is quite relevant).

The second assumption is that presidential systems of government are also quite vulnerable. Since the writings of Juan Linz onwards, it has become clear that one major disadvantage of presidential systems is the possibility that outsiders might win presidential elections and exercise full executive power without constraints. However, if democracy is consolidated and the values of liberal constitutionalism are deeply rooted in society and protected by an independent judiciary, even a populist leader who wins presidential elections cannot overpass the constitutional checks on his decision-making power. This is the case in the United States where the flamboyant and ever-unpredictable Donald Trump succeeded in winning presidential elections, but he has not succeeded in implementing all his reforms and ideas, due to the US's complex and unique constitutional system of checks and balances, and its specific two-party system.

Of course, a less democratic country with a presidential system of government, with a long authoritarian past, a strong president and a weak party system can easily be hijacked by populist political forces. Thus, the election of a powerful populist president might bring along changes in the parliamentary majority followed by populist constitutional and legal reforms enhancing autocratic leadership (the cases of Fujimori in Peru and Chavez in Venezuela were iconic).

It seems easier for populist leaders and political parties to hijack liberal democracy in countries with parliamentary and strongly presidentialised systems of government, because these systems of government favour the concentration of power by design.

Turkey under Erdoğan is also a relevant case concerning the rapid breakdown of liberal democracy under populist rule. I shall not enter into debates on the specific case of Turkey's democratic adventure in the course of the twentieth century. A populist leader winning elections has changed the system of government, and imposed an excessively presidentialised system of government with few to zero checks on the executive power and the parliamentary majority. If the presidential elections are held at the same time as the parliamentary elections, it is even easier for the populist presidential candidate to influence the parliamentary elections in favour of his/her supporting political party or electoral alliance.

The third major assumption is that a balanced semi-presidential system of government, with separate elections for the president and the parliament, seems more resilient to contemporary populists' politics and policies than parliamentary or presidential systems of government.

Of course, if the popularly elected president represents the same populist political party which also won a strong parliamentary majority, reforms limiting institutional checks on executive power and parliamentary majority are prone to occur. The case of Poland is straightforward. However, even in such a situation, the dual popular legitimacy of the president and the parliament will eventually generate different clashes for supremacy within the main political populist framework. Because the president is popularly elected and stands in a more direct relation with the people than the prime minister, who is always dependent on the political support of the parliamentary majority, difference of opinions on sensitive topics will eventually appear. The dual executive structure of semi-presidentialism requires constant political negotiations between the political factions of the political majority. In the end, there are always two relatively strong leaders of the executive. This institutionally in-built power split within the executive branch of government is a fundamental guarantee that some sort of mutual control will develop within the majoritarian political force controlling the parliamentary majority, the government and the presidency. As an example, even though Poland's President Andrzej Duda was supported

in the 2015 presidential elections by the Law and Justice Party, and he supports the politics of this party, in 2018 he vetoed two laws that formed a key part of Law and Justice's controversial attempt to reform the judiciary, a political move that provoked fury among the party's leaders.

Moreover, if we consider the case of Romania, the mandate of the President was extended from four to five years (due to a constitutional amendment in 2003), thus eliminating the practice of holding parliamentary elections on the same day as the first round of presidential elections. This decision induced long periods of cohabitation, with presidents usually opposing the parliamentary majority either by sending the adopted laws to be re-examined, or asking the Constitutional Court to judge the constitutionality of laws before being promulgated. For example, President Iohannis used these prerogatives extensively in 2018 (e.g. more than 40 constitutionality complaints against the laws adopted by Parliament were sent by the President to the Constitutional Court). Thus, one of the most important disadvantages of semi-presidentialism (the possibility of inducing cohabitation) becomes one of the strongest weapons against the populists' urge to concentrate political powers and to eliminate or limit institutional control mechanisms.

Indeed, if the presidential elections are won by the same populist political forces which won the parliamentary elections, the chances of imposing legal and even constitutional reforms promoting autocratic legalism will surely rise. However, as I have stated above, one can expect political debates, conflicts and negotiations between political factions within the winning political majority. These constant processes of negotiation guarantee that no single leader or institution can concentrate all political power in their hands, thus allowing future splits and re-arrangements within the political spectrum.

Lastly, in a parliamentarised semi-presidentialism, due to the fact that the president has symbolic formal prerogatives, the executive power is concentrated in the hands of the prime minister, who is supported by and accountable to the parliamentary majority. Cohabitation periods are not as conflictual as they are in balanced semi-presidential systems of government, mainly because the presidents do not have relevant powers to effectively block the decisions taken by the parliamentary majority supporting the government. Even the intra-executive negotiations between a

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president and a prime minister representing the same political party are not as relevant for parliamentary semi-presidential systems of government as they are for balanced semi-presidential systems. The main reason for this is that the president has no relevant formal powers, and the whole political system is trained to revolve around the decisions of the prime minister as the leader of the parliamentary majority. Thus, even with an actively opposing president, the chances of populist leaders winning parliamentary elections to eliminate or limit institutional control mechanisms through constitutional and legal reforms seem higher in parliamentary semi-presidential systems of government than in a balanced semi-presidential system of government.

Conclusions

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, unprecedented economic, political, cultural, military and security challenges have profoundly affected the ecosystem of liberal democracy around the world, and offered a favourable context for democratic backsliding in Central and Eastern Europe too.

In countries where populists have won elections, constitutional and legal reforms have been undertaken with the aim of eliminating or curtailing the very essence of liberal constitutionalism, meaning the institutional checks on the exercise of political power.

Despite various comparative studies on the relationship between systems of government and the consolidation of democracy, the institutional design cannot by itself guarantee the preservation of liberal democracy and the stability of a specific democratic regime. At the most, when comparing institutional designs, it seems that a specific system of government or a specific sub-type of a system of government tend to be more conducive to democracy than others.

However, when asking what system of government is better equipped to resist against populists' politics and policies of autocratic legalism, the answers are quite surprising if one takes into consideration the experiences of countries from Central and Eastern Europe.

It seems easier for populist leaders and political parties to hijack liberal democracy in countries with parliamentary and strongly presidentialised systems of government, because these systems of government favour the concentration of power by design.

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A balanced semi-presidential system of government with differentiated mandates for president and parliament, thus capable of inducing cohabitation and intra-executive conflicts, seems more resilient in the long run to populists' reforms aiming at the curtailment or elimination of institutional checks on political power.

Future in-depth research agenda should test all these assumptions using a fully operationalised methodology that clarifies problems such as criteria for selecting countries, the time period under analysis, the content of the constitutional and legal reforms of the populist leaders and political movements in power, scoring the formal and informal powers of the presidents, establishing other variables for analysis such as the duration of the presidential mandate, the electoral formula used for parliamentary elections, the type of party system, the nature of the parliamentary political parties, etc.

Populists like power and they like to exercise that power without constraints. Therefore, at least from the point of view of institutional theory, one can argue that the more complex the constitutional and legal design of checks on executive power and political majority is, the more difficult it is for populists winning elections to impose constitutional and legal reforms degrading liberal constitutionalism. Yet, as reality in some countries has already showed us, it is not impossible, especially when the populist leader of the executive is also supported by a strong parliamentary majority.

Until then, it is clear that populist ideology acts like an enticing drug for economically challenged, politically manipulated, militarily scared and culturally uncertain democratic societies in our times.

In those countries where populists in power have succeeded in pushing forward their constitutional and legal reforms, liberal democracy itself is at risk. One way to defend it is to protect by all means those institutional guarantees against the tyranny of the majority, as has always been the case when democracy was under fire.

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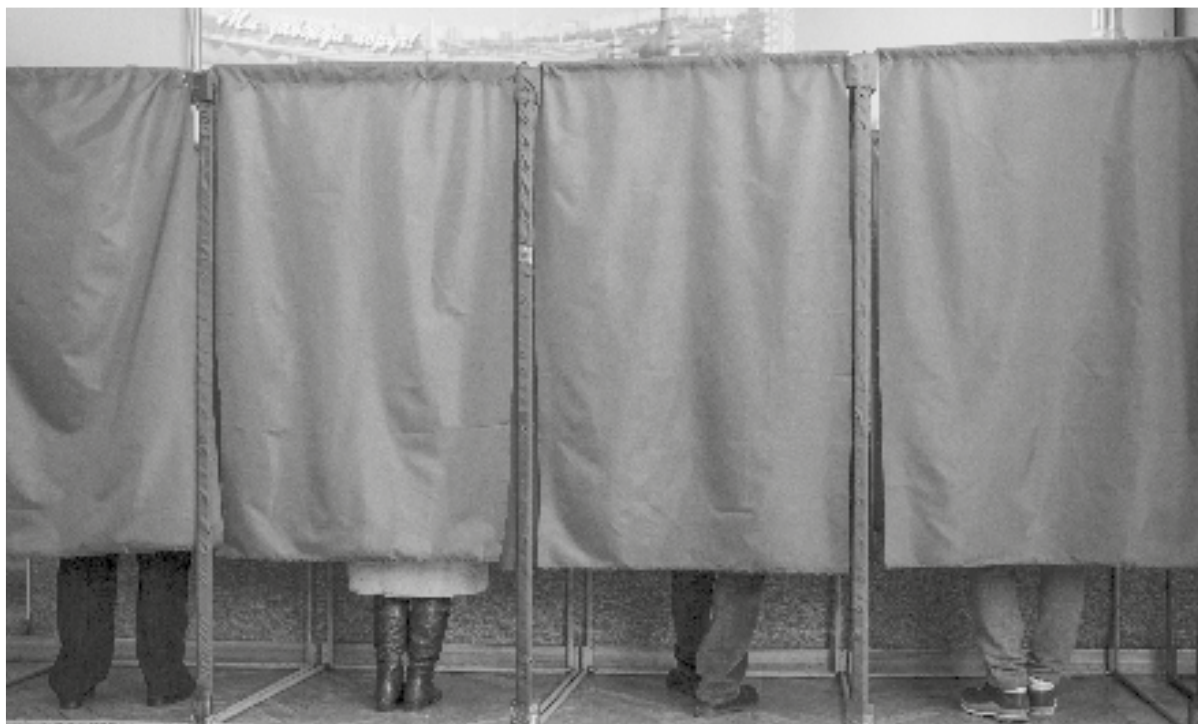
Slovakia:
Voters' burning desire for change?

By **Andrej Matišák** | Bratislava

For a relatively small country, as Slovakia is usually described, February 2019 was a month of massive diplomatic importance. On this very rare occasion, several top-level politicians visited over a span of few weeks.

First, it was German Chancellor Angela Merkel's turn. Slovakia was able to attract her not just for a bilateral visit but also for a meeting of the Visegrád Group during Slovakia's one-year (July 2018-June 2019) presidency of the V4. Interestingly, Slovakia was successful in organising a visit by Merkel while Hungary failed to achieve this aim – and, according to various diplomatic sources and experts, not for a lack of trying. "Berlin clearly acknowledges that, while the V4 positioned themselves strongly as a group during the refugee crisis, the four countries clearly differ among themselves on many other accounts," said Jörg Forbrig, Senior Transatlantic Fellow for Central and Eastern Europe of the German Marshall Fund. Senior Policy Fellow of European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) Josef Janning echoes this. "Berlin is acutely aware of the differences which exist among the four countries, notably some unease in Prague and Bratislava about the very vocal positions of the Polish and Hungarian government vis-a-vis Brussels."

Second, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Bratislava in February. And while you can sense a profound scepticism among diplomats and experts directed at President Donald Trump's administration, Slovakia has tried to position itself as a country that values its trans-Atlantic link very much, but whose interests are intimately connected to the success of the European Union project.

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This is a quite a bold strategy, taking into account that the EU is not the most popular subject in the White House.

The third high-profile event that took place in Slovakia in February can be described more like the cherry on top. The format and meaning of the Bucharest Nine is still somehow under construction, but at the end of February Slovak President Andrej Kiska had an opportunity in Košice to welcome not just his eight colleagues from Central and Eastern Europe, but also NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

However, according to Artur Gruszczak, Associate Professor of Political Science at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, there are also some divergent views inside the Bucharest Nine. "The group has reflected a regionalist approach to security advocated by its founding members, Poland and Romania. Both are staunch U.S. allies and both have been recently at odds with the EU's principles and laws," Gruszczak explains. "The group is a conglomerate of Central and East European countries which share a strategic location, membership in NATO and the EU, as well as a Communist past. They pretend to speak with one voice in key security matters in the region despite their divergent views on specific issues of security, regional stability and cooperation."

All politics is local

In the end, all politics is local. And there are divergent views on specific issues even among friends, partners and allies. Slovakia is going through some turbulent times. Since the murder of the journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in February 2018, we have witnessed a revival of the debate over where Slovakia belongs.

Is it a loosely knitted camp of 'illiberals' that is gravitating towards the ideas of Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán? Or is it in the more pro-Western, pro-EU camp? Of course, to divide all political decisions into two categories is hugely simplistic. These two camps have various

Lajčák (right) with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in February 2019
(State Department photo by Ron Przysucha / Public Domain)

subgroups, and Slovakia in particular is very well known for its pragmatic approaches which have many times been based on the country's special place in the Visegrád Four, as Slovakia belongs to the Eurozone and the others do not.

But do pragmatic policies still work for Slovakia? Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák openly admits that the foreign policy consensus is falling apart. It is good that he is not trying to hide this. On the other hand, it seems that he is only saying something that has been quite evident for a long time. Not to mention that Lajčák is the foreign minister in the third government in which Smer-Sociálna demokracia (Direction–Social Democracy) has had the dominant position. One way or another, he himself has been part of the process of losing the foreign policy consensus.

The foreign policy consensus is falling apart in Slovakia.

And following pragmatic policies is also clearly not enough for the voters. Again, all politics is local. It seems that 26 years after creating an independent state and 15 years after joining NATO and the EU, Slovaks would like to see a new vision for the country. Slovak voters have hardly been specific in explaining what kind of change they want, but the burning desire is there – and they are fed up with the seemingly never-ending stream of cases of (alleged) corruption and misuse of public money.

There is no doubt that this desire has also been influenced by the above-mentioned murders of Jan Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová. Under the banner of 'For A Decent Slovakia' it led to the biggest protests since the fall of the Communist regime in 1989. But it also led to widespread conspiracy theories trying to 'explain' the horrible crime. These attempts are not confined to dark, disinformation sites online. Now the former PM Robert Fico is their promoter-in-chief.

He has started to blame the philanthropist George Soros, a billionaire of Hungarian origin, for supporting the demonstrations, as after the murder it quickly became clear that the protesters wanted to see Fico's resignation.

One year after the murder, Slovakia is in full election mode. Voters went to polls in November last year for the regional elections, and in March, Slovaks voted in presidential elections. May is the date of the European Parliament elections, and parliamentary elections should take place in spring next year, though voices claiming that the vote might be held earlier are intensifying.

It also means that the political fight is intensifying, and this could create some surprising outcomes. At the time of writing this article, it was unclear who would become the new President of Slovakia. The incumbent Andrej Kiska had decided not to run again, which left the field open for other candidates. Smer led by the ex-PM Fico, who is still chairman of the party, had desperately been trying to find its own candidate. They failed to convince FM Lajčák, so it was up to Maroš Šefčovič, the European Commission's Vice-President for the Energy Union, to enter the frame. He was running as an independent, or so he liked to claim, but he had the clear and vocal support of Smer. This seemingly independent candidacy allowed Šefčovic to somehow distance himself from Smer, but on the other hand he was able to use Smer's resources.

But Smer is probably yesterday's news. Fico's party is still the most popular, polling at around 20 percent, but Šefčovič only received 18.66 percent of votes in the first round of the presidential elections. And until the very last moment some political commentators were speculating that Šefčovič could be beaten into second place by Štefan Harabin, a judge on the Supreme Court and ex- justice minister in Fico's first government, and a radical populist who openly despises NATO and the EU.

In the end Harabin received 14.34 percent of the votes – not a bad result, taking into account the fact that the neo-Nazi candidate

> **Slovakia has tried to position itself as a country that values its trans-Atlantic link very much, but whose interests are intimately connected to the success of the European Union project.**

Marian Kotleba finished fourth with 10.39 percent, and there is a clear crossover between Harabin's and Kotleba's voters. "There is a mood for a big change in the air. But the problem is that different people see this change differently. The political and public elites believe that when we talk about a paradigmatic change, we talk about decent Slovakia and liberal democracy. It might not work that way. Harabin and Kotleba represent an increasing power," prominent Slovak sociologist Michal Vašečka said for the daily Denník N, explaining the success of the radical candidates.

Enter Zuzana Čaputová

The 45-year old lawyer is a different face of this paradigmatic change. "Firstly, people are desperate and tired of the emptiness of current Slovak politics; secondly, by bad governance and overwhelming corruption; and most importantly, by the ugliness of public life, which is full of aggressiveness, rough interactions, and an almost psychopathic brutality. In such a world, Zuzana Čaputová almost seems like a divine revelation to many people," Vašečka told the Slovak Spectator newspaper.

Čaputová won both rounds of the presidential election with a commanding lead: 40.57 and respectively 58.4 percent. As an activist and judge she has focused on the promotion of the rule of law in cases of environmental protection and corruption in public life. While relatively well known in some circles, she entered politics only in 2018, as a real novice, when she became deputy chairman of the newly-established liberal, pro-EU and pro-NATO party Progressive Slovakia.

Does Čaputová's victory mean that Slovaks are massively revolting against the tide of populism, against the anti-EU, anti-NATO, anti-migrant, anti-Soros and pro-Putin narratives? Partly. There is no doubt that Čaputová's core voters are pro-Western orientated urban liberals. But it seems Čaputová's success could be better explained by the call for a change that is much more universal.

She was able to attract the biggest share of the youngest voters. No comparison is perfect, but only three years ago this age group clearly supported the neo-Nazi Kotleba in the parliamentary elections. That probably does not mean that Slovak young voters are suddenly rejecting populism and entering the ranks of the European Solidarity Corps. It perhaps says more about Čaputová's abilities to communicate with them, and that after years of Smer governments and a struggling opposition, which was unable to use the opportunity

> **Čaputová can set the tone of the political debate, but she cannot profoundly change the political scene, not to mention the country as a whole. Only a government with a working parliamentary majority can do this.**

Zuzana Čaputová and Robert Mistrík
© Photo by TASR

it received in 2010, people want to see something different. Remarkably, at least according to polls, there are even significant numbers of Harabin's and Kotleba's voters who are willing to support Čaputová.

What does this mean for Slovak politics? Frankly, it is hard to say. Čaputová can set the tone of the political debate, but she cannot profoundly change the political scene, not to mention the country as a whole. Only a government with a working parliamentary majority can do this. The viable prospects for the upcoming parliamentary elections are pretty unclear. There is a good chance that Smer will end up winning the elections, albeit with a clearly reduced number of MPs. Still it could be enough, and they could try to form the new government. Or will the fragmented opposition get its turn? They might be able to work together, but as things look now, it would require the cooperation of between four to seven parties, ranging from pro-EU liberals to moderate Eurosceptics and populists.

Asking for a change but getting more of the same, either in the form of a Smer-led government or an incoherent government of opposition parties similar to 2010-2012? Yes, it might easily happen. Many Slovak voters accept this, albeit grudgingly. But some surely do not. How big could this group be, and how will it channel its anger? That is anybody's guess. But it would be foolish not to pay attention to them, as Čaputová is really only one face of this change.

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Reframing geopolitical competition: a battle for influence and narrative

To play with China might be **dangerous for Central Europe**

By **Martin Ehl** | Prague

There was a pre-Christmas news storm in the Czech Republic last year. The Czech cyber-defence agency (NUKIB) published a warning to the state administration that hardware provided by the Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE could pose a potential danger to national security. Immediately thereafter a clash broke out among Czech politicians, between those who share a similar opinion about China and those who support a closer relationship with the Chinese regime. The trouble is that the second group includes President Miloš Zeman, whose official advisors include Ye Jianming, the head of the Chinese CEFC group, who is now jailed somewhere in China and has had his company taken over by the state.

Meanwhile the Czech Huawei affair continued. Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, a super-pragmatic businessman who lost a great deal of money in China some years ago, was privately visited by the Chinese ambassador in Prague. No official statement was produced, but the ambassador published a picture and a couple of sentences on the Embassy's webpage in which he said that the Czech government did not share its security services' critical opinion of Huawei. That was later denied by Czech officials. The Chinese ambassador, for his part, was simply acting as a protector of the interests of a great empire in a faraway province.

But then, a Huawei employee was arrested in neighbouring Poland and accused of spying, together with a former Polish intelligence officer. The US secret services have received the support of some of their allies in Central Europe in their quest to check the worldwide expansion of Chinese influence. During heated debates in both Czechia and Poland, the local elites have started to realise what had previously only been apparent to experts, some intelligence services and a minority of democratic politicians: China's

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influence in the region is expanding, and could pose a threat in the future as the Asian country develops powerful modern technologies which will offer its leadership almost total control over its population (as has recently been reported in much of the global media).

China has already been courting Central European states for some time as part of a broader attempt to increase its economic, cultural and political influence, to build up long-term positions and relationships with local politicians, to divide the common stance of the European Union, and ultimately to create vassal relations with smaller states which need investments and business opportunities. This is the underlying logic behind the Belt and Road (BRI) initiative; countries such as Sri Lanka or Pakistan have given China opportunities to build great infrastructure projects, but these indebted the local governments to such an extent that the recipients of the loans had to yield to Beijing's will – for example, leasing its own port (Pireus) to the Chinese as it happened in Sri Lanka. In the Balkans, Montenegro with its ambitious project to run a highway through the mountains is on the way to a similar outcome.

According to the French expert Nadège Rolland, the BRI serves China's overall long-term interests – the achievement of China's unimpeded economic and geopolitical rise. "It should be understood as Beijing's principal instrument to expand its political influence outwards, to (re-)establish itself as the preponderant power of a region where US and Western influence has considerably receded, and to reclaim its historical position as the leader of a Sino-centric order," Rolland said in an interview with Hospodářské Noviny, the Czech economic daily.

According to Rolland, Beijing is not seeking to change the political regimes of the countries involved in the BRI, nor does it want other countries to become replicas of the Soviet Union; but it is using its economic power, including investment and financial rewards (and the withdrawal thereof) as leverage to influence the decision-making processes of local countries in a way that is more favourable to Beijing's interests. In Europe, the PRC does not use military coercion to achieve its political aims, but rather its economic power, which can be used both as incentive and coercion.

The 16+1 family picture

In order to facilitate this kind of relationship, Beijing has created the 16+1 group, including the states that stand between Germany and Russia which in theory have been given privileged access to Chinese leadership, funds and plans. In addition to offers of cultural cooperation, access to the enormous Chinese market and (supposedly) connections via rail links through the continent are on the table. Everybody – from the port of Riga to the port of Piraeus (which is already in Chinese hands) would like nothing better than to be the trading gate between Europe and China, and vice versa. Certain investors from Central Europe, such as the PPF Group owned by the richest man in Czechia,

© Photo by Jin Rong for China Daily

Petr Kellner, already conduct a great deal of business in China and need a friendly environment to continue doing so; that is why they support politicians like Zeman who have close ties to Beijing. Hungary's close relations are still founded on the creation of a visa-free regime with China between 1988 and 1992; that resulted in the creation of a several thousand-strong Chinese diaspora in Budapest, where thousands of Chinese companies are still registered and operational. The first branch of any Chinese bank in Central Europe was

opened in the Hungarian capital, as well. These state banks are now expanding elsewhere, in Poland and Czechia among others. In his quest for contacts and allies around the globe, under the umbrella of the 'Eastern opening' policy after he gradually lost his support among Western allies, Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán also courted Beijing, but with limited success; China was unable to help him with direct loans, but has promised to make investments, as it does elsewhere.

According to François Godement, director of the Asian and Chinese section of the European Council on Foreign Relations, the 16+1 format is only a way of taking group pictures. "China manages the real negotiations one to one because that gives it the whip hand. And if those countries do not know what their neighbour is doing with China, then they compete with each other," said Godement in an interview with the Chinfluence.eu portal managed by the Association for International Affairs, a Czech NGO, which monitors Chinese activities in Central Europe. There one can find also interactive analyses of Chinese influence among the elites in some countries of Central Europe, such as Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary, as well as reports of the influence of Chinese media investment on the content of media companies.

Central European politicians – the Czech president included – have a feeling that they have gained exclusive access and cooperation, even though in the Czech case – and not only – the promised investments have yet to materialise. Yet those same politicians are more than willing to compromise when dealing with Chinese politics or business. This could result in an increase of Chinese influence in Europe at the expense of relations with liberal democracies and allies in the Euro-Atlantic space. Such an outcome could affect the global position of the European Union in the future, at a time when the bloc could be struggling with its unity, demography and economic prosperity.

Not just the Russians

Central Europe has so far been primarily focused on the Russian threat, which seems both more brutal and more imminent. The geographical proximity of the threat also plays a role. American

While the Russians showcase their tanks and missiles, China is working on the development of ultra-modern technologies like 5G networks and artificial intelligence, which – if they master them well ahead of the US or Europe – will give Beijing an enormous advantage, if not global dominance.

experts have developed a new frame of understanding for both Russia and China's attempts to increase their global outreach – the concept of 'sharp power', as opposed to the older American idea of 'soft power'. In this perspective both the Russian and Chinese approaches are similar in the sense that they use power to achieve their ultimate strategic goals in the global 'great power' competition which is becoming increasingly visible and potent. The authoritarian Chinese government, in comparison with the Russian Tsarist autocracy, thinks more conceptually and in the longer term, following its long civilisational tradition measured in thousands of years. While the Russians showcase their tanks and missiles, China is working on the development of ultramodern technologies like 5G networks and artificial intelligence, which – if they master them well ahead of the US or Europe – will give Beijing an enormous advantage, if not global dominance. The recent development in China, where President Xi Jinping obtained almost absolute power, might lead to an assumption of what kind of regime Beijing wants to support.

Huawei has become a symbol of the struggle that democratic states face, as to whether to allow or not a proxy company connected with a totalitarian state and rising geopolitical power to build the most modern communication technologies, on which the infrastructure, economy and security of those same states will depend.

The recent Central European tour by US State Secretary Mike Pompeo has drawn attention to US-China relations. According to official and unofficial proclamations, the reason for the visit and the return of the US interest to Central Europe is China's increasing activity in the region. The Huawei case was an example of how to attract attention in Washington D.C.: the Czech Prime Minister was 'rewarded' with a long-awaited visit to the White House. Czechia and Hungary are seen as more pro-Chinese by the Americans than Slovakia or Poland, but there are no big differences in the approaches of these governments to possible Chinese investment – all of them would welcome it. The Huawei case has only demonstrated that the Czechs (and others as well) are aware that in their relations with the US, a transactional policy is more important than a values-based one. Definitely, after Pompeo's visit, Poland in particular will ease off on its previous Chinese-oriented economic activity because the government in Warsaw considers its relations with the US as its most important strategic relationship.

We should look at the spat over Huawei in Czechia and Poland through this global optic of great-power competition, as it could be decisive in establishing who will impose the next world order, using revolutionary technologies that seem to change the way we live, work, think and vote. This struggle for influence goes far beyond the borders, not only of a single state, but the European Union itself. And this issue also goes beyond current trade issues and the incentives of the Chinese market, where – despite all the external pressures – China keeps foreign companies in a less privileged position than domestic ones, while Chinese companies are given equal status to local ones on European markets. This will most likely change, as a result of pressure to introduce legislation which would check foreign investment in critical infrastructure throughout the EU, as well as at the member states level. In this respect, again, the Chinese have tried to influence the upcoming regulatory framework through their allies in the 16+1 group; yet more proof that Europe needs to develop such a framework as a necessary form of strategic defence.

Huawei has become a symbol of the struggle that democratic states face, as to whether to allow or not a proxy company connected with a totalitarian state and rising geopolitical power to build the most modern communication technologies, on which the infrastructure, economy and security of those same states will depend. This is a struggle for our freedom in the future, because these tools have the ability to control not only the political system, but also the economy and society in general. To understand how China uses its modern technology, closer attention must be paid to how China is increasing its control over its population, thanks to the development of artificial intelligence and the use of social credit and other methods.

Relatively small countries such as those in Central Europe should look around and choose what they would prefer in the long term, even if that means that the introduction of superfast 5G networks as a backbone of future economies is postponed. Even Germany has admitted that security reasons trump technology.

Such strategic thinking requires the support and involvement of both politicians and the public in this debate, especially in the year when we commemorate the events of three decades ago which led to the fall of Communism in the name of freedom.

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Exploring **Putin's strategic narrative**

By **Iulia-Sabina Joja** | Berlin

Russia's foreign policy is President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy. It's a one-man show. This is partially due to the super-presidential system of the country. However, it is also a one-man show because Vladimir Putin himself, now in his fourth term, has a firm grip on his country and a strong vision for foreign policy. Hence, when endeavouring to scrutinise Russian foreign policy, we have to analyse Putin's discourse and actions.

Strategic narratives are defined by Miskimmon et al. (2012 p. 3) as "means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors." These narratives have a strong temporal dimension, and formulate a resolution or a projected outcome; they help construct connections between events. Furthermore, they are a highly effective tool of soft power. Szostek (2017 p. 572), writing on Russian strategic narratives, points out that they "allow state-led attacks on critical others and the self-promotion via 'nation-branding' to be seen as different but related to the same end." At their most effective, strategic narratives can structure the identity of the actors and the experience of international affairs itself. The utility of strategic narratives is that they help to explain how "different actors project and contest narratives of the international system, which highlights how existing and emerging powers seek to impose a shared meaning of how the international order does, or should, function." (Miskimmon & O'Laughlin 2017 p. 113)

During the 2012 election campaign in Russia, Vladimir Putin shifted his foreign policy discourse. While the first two terms and Medvedev's presidency were marked by a discourse of 'pragmatism', Putin has gradually ideologised Russian foreign policy, a

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process which reached its peak with his speech on the annexation of Crimea in March 2014.

The shift from a pragmatic foreign policy to a profoundly ideologised one, marked by normativity, exceptionalism, messianism and spirituality, was triggered by the protests against Putin during the 2012 election campaign. In response, Putin constructed a complex strategic narrative of blaming the West, which targeted initially the domestic and later the international audience.

His strategic narrative is built on the foundation of national identity. The easiest way to construct narratives around national identities is to establish an oppositional relationship between 'us' and 'the other'. Vladimir Putin created a national identity narrative focused on the West (with the United States as its leader). In this discourse, not only is the "West" crucial for Russian national identity, but the Russian strategic narrative would simply not exist without it. The threads in Russia's strategic narrative which emphasise rivalry with the West have a constitutive effect on Russian national identity (Szostek 2017 p. 579). By constructing his opponent as an identitarian threat, Vladimir Putin has securitised the West[1]. He points out the West's shortcomings, falsely interprets its intentions, and magnifies the erroneous consequences of its actions. Thus, the Kremlin constructs Russia's image as a better alternative to 'the West' – a moralising, value-laden, spiritual and conservative power.

The invasion of Ukraine in 2014 is the event around which Putin has built his foreign policy narrative of juxtaposing the West with Russia. This narrative has served to justify his actions and to consolidate Russia's revisionist role on the international stage. Moscow claims privileged

rights in the countries of its former empire. An analogous situation would be if the United Kingdom, for instance, invaded and incorporated parts of Egypt or Somalia into the United Kingdom because these were former colonies.

Let us now turn to Moscow's motivations as expressed in the country's foreign policy narrative. Putin's strategic narrative has complex and powerful implications for the way we understand foreign policy in the Western world.

The sub-narratives of Russian foreign policy discourse

01. Russia the moraliser

In the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs insists 19 times on the importance of respecting international law. Moscow also strongly links the lack of respect for international law to the West. The Kremlin emphasises the rule of law on the international stage – typical of discourses such as those of the EU or Canada. However, the importance of international law in itself constitutes a sub-narrative on the West's contempt for international law. The juxtaposition of the West with Russia has perhaps the most serious implications for our collective acceptance of universal values. The Kremlin's narrative directly entails the classical antagonism of good versus evil: by implying the West's disrespect for universal values, Moscow constructs an image of itself as a moral authority. This self-image is further amplified by pointing fingers to the West; Russia becomes a moraliser that holds the West – the creator of universal values – accountable for its own hypocrisy. Thus, Putin's narrative seeks to emphasise a collective belief in the West's double standards.

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1. For the process of securitisation in foreign policy see Buzan et al. (1998).

The irony of Moscow's 'Western double standards' consists in the Kremlin's double talk itself. Russia uses international law to highlight the West's misdeeds, and thus discursively transforms it into an immoral body. By showcasing the West's double standards, Putin justifies his own brazen violations of international law, such as the disregard for territorial integrity and sovereignty in the case of Ukraine, and the sovereignty of Western states by meddling in elections. Putin stated in 2014 (Kremlin 2014b) that "the allegations and statements that Russia is trying to establish some sort of empire, encroaching on the sovereignty of its neighbours, are groundless."

The Kremlin takes its narrative on morality a step further. In the 2014 Concept of Cultural Policy, Moscow asserts that the state ought to distinguish between good and evil, and should ban cultural content that contradicts Russia's established system of values. Tolerance and multiculturalism, the document states, are detrimental to Russian identity. The Russian narrative has serious implications; such an assertion of the state's power and its capacity to distinguish between good and evil, and to claim the specificity of the 'Russian value system' (as opposed to the universal one), belongs to the realm of totalitarianism, just as reserving the

right to ban cultural content that contradicts specific values belongs to the realm of Orwell's fictional account of dictatorship in *1984*.

Fascism constitutes an important element of Russia's narrative on the West. Putin states that the West supports "a very dubious public ranging from open neo-fascists to Islamic radicals." (Kremlin 2014b) Fascism is defined as "a political system based on a very powerful leader, state control, and being extremely proud of country and race, and in which political opposition is not allowed." (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.) In tandem with the strategic narrative described above, this definition seems to apply politically and legally to the Russian state – in contrast to Putin's projection of said Western 'fascism'. Ideologically the West has, after the painful experience of WWII, become defined by anti-fascism. Timothy Snyder (2018) highlights the key role which the political ideas of fascist thinkers such as Ivan Ilyin play for Vladimir Putin. According to Ilyin, "Russia as a spiritual organism served not only all the Orthodox nations and not only all the nations of the Eurasian landmass, but all the nations of the world." (Ilyin, cited in Snyder 2018). The collective will instead of individualism, a distinct spirituality, and messianic elements: these are pillars of fascist political thinking. These concepts have also served as rhetorical

> **The shift from a pragmatic foreign policy to a profoundly ideologised one, marked by normativity, exceptionalism, messianism and spirituality, was triggered by the protests against Putin during the 2012 election campaign.**

touchstones in Putin's speeches legitimising the annexation of Crimea and Russian foreign policy in general.

'Russia's value system' is juxtaposed in the Concept of Cultural Policy (2013) to the "European concepts of multiculturalism and tolerance" that Russia should "reject". With this discriminatory narrative, Putin proclaims a "distinct spirituality" and "value system." Thus, he sets a precedent for a self-proclaimed democracy to infringe on human rights and outlaw contrarian cultural content. Speaking to far-right voters worldwide, Putin's

Vladimir Putin © Photo by Dimitro Sevastopol on Pixabay

strategic narrative is morally authoritative, though sophistic: he simultaneously condemns and upholds moral exceptionalism; he eviscerates and at the same time endorses universal values; he castigates and yet champions non-universal values.

02. **Russia the sovereign**

Sovereignty is a major topic of the Russian strategic narrative as projected into foreign policy. As the very principle of the international system since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, it is also, in international relations theory, a concept upheld by Realism, which instils a special legitimacy and rationality upon the concept. Without sovereignty, so the logic goes, there are no states, and thus no order in the international system.

Vladimir Putin has discussed and emphasised this concept. In his speech on the annexation of Crimea (Kremlin 2014a), the Russian president mentions the term four times, and in his speech to the Valdai club in 2014 (2014b), eight times, linking the concept to the very existence of the Russian identity and nation: "Either we remain a sovereign nation, or we dissolve without a trace and lose our identity." At the same event a year earlier, he discursively connected sovereignty to Russianism: "This is because the desire for independence and sovereignty in spiritual, ideological

and foreign policy spheres is an integral part of our national character." (Kremlin 2013) Putin thus transforms sovereignty from a legal and political term into a spiritual and ideological concept (Makarychev & Yatsyk 2015 p. 144).

As the Russian identity becomes inseparable from the concept of sovereignty, it is also juxtaposed to the Western world. While Russia respects and is defined by its sovereignty – so the strategic narrative goes – the West opposes it. Russia is the backbone for sovereignty, while the West violates it by 'invading' countries. Putin accuses the West of double standards: "We see attempts to somehow revive a standardised model of a unipolar world and to blur the institutions of international law and national sovereignty. Such a unipolar, standardised world does not require sovereign states; it requires vassals." (Kremlin 2013)

In Putin's strategic narrative Russia becomes a principled power opposing the West's hypocrisy. The Kremlin thus assumes a double role – both defender and victim. Putin discursively creates an emotional image of anxiety by emphasising persecution by the hegemon, a characteristic of dictators' narratives. As Putin formulates it (Kremlin 2014a):

We have every reason to assume that the infamous policy of containment, led [by the forerunners of 'the West'] in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, continues today.

They are constantly trying to sweep us into a corner because we have an independent position, because we maintain it and because we call things like they are and do not engage in hypocrisy.

Moscow's role of 'sovereignty bearer' in the face of Western conspiracy dissolves into self-contradiction when it comes to the case of Ukraine's sovereignty. Putin has rhetorically upheld Ukraine's sovereignty: "I have never disputed that Ukraine is a modern, full-fledged, sovereign, European country." (Kremlin 2014b) At the same time, highlighting the West's hypocrisy legitimises Moscow's great-power identity: because the Kremlin takes similar actions, and regardless of international protestations, it acts as a great power too. (Szostek 2017 p. 579)

03. Russia the conservative

With the shift from a pragmatic strategic narrative to one inculcated with normativity and values, Putin defined the Russian identity and the system of values it adheres to as something unique. In order to create an effective juxtaposition, he contrasts them to the Western values of multiculturalism and tolerance. Defending Russian values has been transformed into a narrative warfare against Western values:

A serious challenge to Russia's identity is linked to events taking place in the world. Here there are both foreign policy and moral aspects. We can

> **In Putin's strategic narrative Russia becomes a principled power opposing the West's hypocrisy. The Kremlin thus assumes a double role – both defender and victim.**

see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. They are denying the moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan.
(Putin, cited in Zevelev 2018 p. 10)

First, the narrative renders the West as immoral, and thus unfit to lead the world. Second, it juxtaposes a narrative of 'moral' values (as opposed to immoral ones) and legitimises conservative values. Third, he creates a profoundly toxic narrative with nationalistic and fascist connotations, by driving social, cultural and biopolitical features into foreign policy. Lastly, through his narrative, he explicitly expands his audience, addressing not only the 'Russian civilisation', but worldwide adherents of conservatism.

Putin's narrative of conservatism is focused on religious faith (Orthodoxy specifically and Christianity more broadly) and traditional social features. The myth of traditionalism he proposes is heavily ideologised and exudes nationalism. It excludes and discriminates those that are secular, tolerant, non-Caucasian, identify with a different civilisation or LGBTQ. With his strong emphasis on (a selective and, by default, subjective interpretation of) history, Putin upholds Russian civilisation and religion as values within foreign policy, as most prominently reflected in his 2014 speech on Crimea (Kremlin 2014a):

To understand the reason behind such a choice, it is enough to know the history of Crimea and what Russia and Crimea have always meant for each other. Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location where Prince Vladimir was baptised. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilisation and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

By moving social and religious problems to the front of foreign policy, Putin expands his audience to worldwide conservatives. At the same time, he conflates problems of international law with social and religious issues. His foreign policy also speaks to nationalistic audiences that reverberate with ethnos, 'cultural matrices', 'historical

By moving social and religious problems to the front of foreign policy, Putin expands his audience to world-wide conservatives.

codes' and genes, as highlighted by Foreign Minister Lavrov's essay on the ideology of Russian foreign policy. Lavrov (2016) argues that the Russian people should "decide their own destiny despite the European West's attempts to subjugate Russian lands and deprive them of their own identity." He continues: "I am convinced that this wise and far-sighted policy is in our genes." The Russian cultural ministry's move to propose the ban of cultural content that does not conform to national values speaks to this conviction.

Conclusions

To make sense of Russian foreign policy we need to look at the strategic narrative. Strategic narratives help explain how powers

Russian opposition protest in Moscow, 26 February 2017 / Public domain

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seek to impose a shared meaning of how the international order does, or should, function. They also help us understand how discourse can structure identities and the experience of international affairs, and how state-led attacks on critical others and the self-promotion via 'nation-branding' can be part of the same effort.

Putin's foreign policy narrative is profoundly ideologised, marked by normativity, exceptionalism, messianism and spirituality. His discourse is built around national identity and a juxtaposition of the West as 'the other'. Putin's strategic narrative encompasses contradictions between embraced (and universally accepted values) and policies. The Kremlin constructs its role as an enabler of specific, non-universal values, although in its discourse Moscow embodies universal values. Putin defines Russia as sovereign by default, blames the West for violating sovereignty, and upholds Ukraine's sovereignty while invading it. In Russia's foreign policy narrative, values are both specific and universal, both good and bad, both applicable and non-applicable.

Putin's identitarian, profoundly ideologised narrative, securitises the West by presenting it as inherently immoral and threatening. Russia's strategic narrative has complex and powerful implications for the way we understand foreign policy in the Western world.

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Interview Dimitar Bechev (North Carolina):

Orbán as an export product – and **the high demand in South-East Europe!**

*Interview with **Dimitar Bechev**, research fellow at the **Center for Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill** and non-resident **Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council**. In 2017, he published **"Rival Power. Russia's Influence in South-East Europe"** at Yale University Press.*

What are the structural conditions in south-eastern Europe that make the environment susceptible to Russian influence? What can Russia weaponise in this space?

The structural conditions have less to do with the structure of military power in the region and more to do with the domestic situation. Domestic conditions probably predominate. The weakness of the institutions and the deficit in the rule of law create a lot of openings for Russian influence, as many people are willing to cooperate with Russia for private gain. There are plenty of examples to that effect, especially in the field of energy, where Russia has a lot to offer. To make a long story short, it is the embedded corruption and the lack of rule of law that creates so many openings for Russia in its mission to disrupt Western influence across the region, but also particularly in Bulgaria. From this perspective, the first line of defence is investing in the rule of law framework, in transparency, checks and balances. At the end of the day, good governance matters for defence policy too. If the rule of law is guaranteed, there would more transparency and a greater degree of agreement on what the priorities are and on how to allocate limited resources,

Moscow © Photo by Michael Siebert on Pixabay

so the defence outcomes in Bulgaria would be better than what we have right now. This is partly because of the embedded corruption and a military that has been linked to the Russian military-industrial complex, especially when it comes to more high-end weaponry. This creates a vicious circle: Russia is influential because Bulgaria is corrupt, and Bulgaria is corrupt because Russia is used to projecting its influence across sectors in the country.

A special character in your book is Konstantin Malofeev. He is like a Balkan ghost; he is everywhere. What role do such oligarchs and proxies play in the Kremlin's broader grand strategy for the region?

He is certainly an entrepreneurial force. He is a supporter of conservatism, not necessarily the Kremlin's man, but he does work occasionally for the Kremlin. That was the case in the Donbas in the early days, where his networks were critical in spearheading the rebellion that fortified Moscow's local position, and he had the Russian state behind him. The same thing happened in the Balkans with Malofeev and his proxies and allies in many places, certainly in former Yugoslavia, but also in Bulgaria. Sometimes those people are contracted by the Russian state to perform tasks, or in some cases they are the ones who bring their know-how to the security establishment for various projects built from the ground up. I think that was the case in Montenegro[1] in all likelihood. It was a freelance operation that was later taken over by the state.

The more general point is that Russia operates this grey area where the line between public and private is blurred. It is like in Russia, where there is a very fuzzy line between the Kremlin's official policy and where the private interests and business endeavours of the elite start. The same applies in the conduct of its foreign policy.

Dimitar Bechev
research fellow at the Center for Slavic, Eurasian, and East European Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

1. On October 15, 2016, the day before Montenegro's contested legislative elections, Podgorica authorities thwarted an alleged coup attempt. They asserted that the conspirators (former security operatives and nationalist activists from Serbia and Montenegro) aimed to prevent Montenegro's NATO accession and even assassinate Prime Minister Milo Đukanović. Podgorica blamed Moscow as the main instigator and accused the plotters that they were in close contact with GRU officers.

There is a limited cultural affinity that makes Russian inroads in this region more likely. Who are the local vectors able to project Russian soft power in this broader purpose of influencing public opinion?

Propaganda is very flexible. In a country like Romania it won't be about Russia as a force for good because there is no purchase for the story. But there are other stories – the West being hypocritical in punishing Romania, Soros and liberalism undermining traditional society and values. There are so many openings. Russia doesn't need to be in the picture in order to project this negative policy of disruption. In a region like Central and Eastern Europe, and also the Balkans, there are so many openings that it is like preaching to the converted. Putin doesn't need to plant those attitudes. They are already in place.

> If Serbia tomorrow becomes a member state, you could very well see Vučić as a carbon-copy of Orbán. He will be talking about modernisation, he won't be anti-Western per se, but he will control the media, he will use the EU's financial resources to entrench himself in power. You don't have to go the full Erdoğan. But he can certainly be an Orbán.

A geopolitical spoiler

In the former Soviet space, Russia has a positive agenda, needs to provide certain public goods, and is prepared to spend resources in order to achieve its strategic goals. Beyond the Soviet space, in Europe in particular, the Russian agenda is negative, based on disruption and spreading disarray. In this world of competition, the weaker and more disunited the West is, the more powerful Russia becomes, and the more leverage Russia has. If there is a rift in Europe, if there is a wedge between the US and European powers, Russia stands to benefit. This is the kind of environment where Moscow can maximise its leverage.

It is certainly easier in places where Russia is accepted and you don't need to disguise the message. In Serbia and in the former Yugoslav space, you have Sputnik Tv on the ground. If you are a local radio station in Kragujevac, you can access content for nothing as you can broadcast Sputnik's news bulletin several times a day. There is an apriori receptivity in these societies. The resonance is there. You can see a similar trend even in places like Turkey, which historically hasn't been a friend of Russia; but because anti-Westernism is so much entrenched these days, anything that tarnishes the US or EU can get a great deal of attention. It is not so difficult to be a Russian propagandist. It is also about demand, not only about supply. People sometimes miss the demand side.

Almost 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there is a broad crisis of democracy in the CEE region. Is south-eastern Europe secure, especially in a time when illiberal role-models and temptations are proliferating – Orbán, Putin, Erdoğan?

I don't think that Putinism and Erdoğanism are exportable models that have much appeal. Orbán is a different matter. It is a more dangerous paradigm. At the end of the day, Hungary is a member of NATO and the EU. But this kind of personalised regime where the oligarchs around Orbán and Fidesz are fed by EU subsidies, and where the EU becomes a huge resource provider that you can milk, is very attractive. If Serbia tomorrow becomes a member state, you could very well see Vučić as a carbon-copy of Orbán. He will be talking about modernisation, he won't be anti-Western per se, but he will control the media, he will use the EU's financial resources to entrench himself in power. You don't have to go the full Erdoğan. But he can certainly be an Orbán. The conditions are not that radically different.

One thing that explains the Orbán phenomenon is the illiberal legacy that remained entrenched in the region. If we go back in history, Hungarian nationalism and anti-liberalism did not spring out of nothing in 2010. It had been around before, and it had been overshadowed. Certainly that can be seen in Serbia and in other Western Balkan countries as well. If the rule of law is rigged and the pressure from outside that has driven many of the reforms in the 1990s and 2000s is weakening too, the outcome is a little cocktail where illiberal attitudes and policy entrepreneurs are trying to scapegoat the West, but also benefiting from its resources. The end result is Orbanisation. It is a trend across the region, one that is especially dangerous in the Western Balkans because the democratic experience is more limited and there is an active legacy of conflict. There is another dimension that is missing - this whole narrative of democratic consolidation and economic prosperity working in sync is not there. The level of policy creates more instruments for state capture. The public sector remains critical for providing employment opportunities in these

> **If the rule of law is rigged and the pressure from outside that has driven many of the reforms in the 1990s and 2000s is weakening too, the outcome is a little cocktail where illiberal attitudes and policy entrepreneurs are trying to scapegoat the West, but also benefiting from its resources. The end result is Orbanisation.**

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economies. If you control the state, then you control people's lives because you can distribute resources and jobs. The ruling elites are incentivised to use the state as a tool for control. This is how Russia comes into the picture. Putin knows how to operate in this type of world.

In the age of the return of great-power competition, who has more leverage in organising and harnessing a counter-balancing resistance? The EU, NATO or both?

It has to be both by definition. You cannot ignore the military dimension, so hard power is key, especially in the short term, but this is barely enough. At the end of the day you have to look at the domestic political trends, robustness of institutions, the rule of law, accountability and transparency. This is not NATO's business. I see it holistically, but in the long term, the EU is absolutely essential.

The interview was conducted

*by **Octavian Manea***

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Source kremlin.ru

The Kremlin's hybrid troopers

In both former Soviet space and regions of strategic interest (the Balkans), the Kremlin is cultivating, co-opting and instrumentalising a 'sleeper cell' network of wealthy Russian businessmen (such as Konstantin Malofeev or Vladimir Yakunin), who become tools of statecraft, when needed. These (geo)political entrepreneurs are at the forefront of some of its 'active measures' campaigns. As seen in Crimea, Donbas or Montenegro, they are able to mobilise proxy (local) support to advance the Kremlin's interests. Thus, in the words of Mark Galeotti, *"business is often politics by other means, just as politics is frequently business by other means"*.

Dossier

EU in the Western Balkans:

What's left of the sticks...

© *Photo by Vasko Hristov on Unsplash*

if the carrots are stale?

"A time of monsters once more":

The danger of losing the Western Balkans

By **Jasmin Mujanović** | North Carolina

"How does Slobodan Milošević's will begin?" asks a Serbian joke from the 1990s. *"In the unlikely event of my death…"*

Anti-regime protest in Serbia, Belgrade
© AP Photo/Darko Vojinovic

As the anti-regime protests in Serbia enter their third month, that sardonic quip captures much of the mood on the streets of Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac and dozens of other towns across the country. For weeks, thousands have been airing their grievances against the increasingly autocratic government of Aleksandar Vučić and his Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), often by drawing direct parallels between the current president and the former strongman, under whose tenure the former served as Minister of Information. Much has changed in the Western Balkans' most populous state, the popular sentiment runs, but too much has remained the same. And what remains at issue in Serbia - the incomplete nature of its political and democratic transformation since the end of the Yugoslav wars - is likewise at the heart of the broader crisis of democratic governance in the Western Balkans as a whole.

As such, the events in Serbia constitute a popular reaction to the perceived failures of democratic transition in the Western Balkans since the end of the Yugoslav wars. These manifestations are only the latest chapter of a wave of protests that has gripped the region since 2012. Beginning in Slovenia, an EU member state since 2003, and winding through Bosnia & Herzegovina (BiH), Macedonia, and now washing over Serbia - with smaller eruptions in every

other state in the region - the past decade has been defined by a two-fold crisis: popular exasperation with the lack of substantive political transformation in the region on the one hand, and the continued attempt by entrenched elites to resist just such change, on the other.

However, since about 2014, the resulting maelstrom of political confrontation has also taken on an ominous geopolitical dimension. Faced with mounting public dissatisfaction, dimming Euro-Atlantic prospects, and anaemic economic conditions only further exacerbated by their own endemic corruption and by precipitous rates of emigration, the local elites have gradually begun turning to an assortment of foreign authoritarian powers to shore up their wobbly regimes. Chief among these are Russia, Turkey, China, and the petrol monarchies of the Persian Gulf. Each of these polities has, to various degrees, begun to make clientelist inroads among this regional elite and, in so doing, has started to give shape to the Western Balkans'' (possible) post-Euro-Atlantic future.

The post Euro-Atlantic trajectory

What kind of future will this be? One in which increasingly reactionary elites more and more openly reject the aegis of the EU and US in exchange for a fraction of the financial and material support received from the West, but with major gains in the political license and international backing they deem necessary to openly brutalise their citizens and thus maintain their precious grip on power.

And that latter fact is, indeed, the top concern among virtually all Western Balkan rulers. They are political zombies, who have perfected the art of switching ideological mantles, without ever loosening their grip on power.

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It is a phenomenon I describe as 'elastic authoritarianism' in my **recent book** on the region's democratic backsliding. Vučić, the erstwhile ultra-nationalist turned EU champion, is an avatar of this practice. But he is far from being the only one.

Milo Đukanović, the long-time ruler in Podgorica, has ensured that Montenegro has not seen a democratic change in government since he rose to the fore in 1991. The Croatian HDZ has only lost two parliamentary elections since 1990. In BiH, thanks in large part to the sectarian Dayton constitution, there has not been a single state-level government formed since the end of the Bosnian war without the support of at least one of the three leading reactionary blocs. The deeply illiberal, if not outright authoritarian tendencies of the regime in Belgrade are thus merely a particularly acute variation on a regional theme.

Thus, to suggest that these recalcitrant elites value their own power and privilege over the

Euro-Atlantic perspectives (and preferences) of their citizens is no grand claim. Even so, those who doubt their willingness or capacity to use violence to ensure the survival of their respective regimes, and that taken together with the growing influence of malign outside powers, such a turn would constitute the dawning of a new political era in the region, would do well to take sober stock of events on the ground.

Consider that the amalgam of citizens on the streets currently in Serbia is broadly the same sort of coalition that toppled Milošević: a heterodox assortment of students and youth groups, opposition and reformist movements, as well as members of Serbia's influential ultra-nationalist camp. The latter, it should be noted, has declined as an electoral force; but their ideological project remains largely mainstream, visible most obviously in the administration of Vučić himself, formerly a long-time member of the far-right Radical Party. In a society in which a true historical reckoning with Belgrade's central, authorial role in Yugoslavia's collapse has never occurred, such bizarre combinations are very much par for the course, and at present, are likely the only possible form of resistance to a government that has built a terrifyingly efficient one-party state in just over seven years.

Vučić and his cohorts certainly understand the threat. It is why his government has tried in every possible way to discredit, undermine, and marginalise what is clearly a growing popular

movement. Admittedly, they have as of now stopped short of violence. But in neighboring BiH, in the country's Serb-dominated Republika Srpska entity, the government of Milorad Dodik, a long-time appendage of both Belgrade and Moscow, the regime successfully dismantled a surging protest movement through overt police repression; and the ruling Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) has continued to engineer the harassment of activists, journalists, and even elected opposition leaders since then - all with nary a whisper of critique from Brussels or Washington.

Nor should we forget recent history. The long-awaited breakthrough in the Macedonian name dispute has rapidly accelerated Skopje's path towards both NATO and the EU, and the reformist government of Prime Minister Zoran Zaev continues to win praise from the international community. But the triumph of this progressive option was anything but a foregone conclusion.

Under the tenure of Nikola Gruevski, the previous Prime Minister, North Macedonia (then still the Republic of Macedonia) was on the brink of becoming a virtual police state. The revelation of a massive, government-sponsored wiretapping scheme eventually led to the collapse of Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE government - but only on the back of nearly two years of intense social protest and mobilisation and belated EU (and, more importantly, US) mediation. And even after the Zaev-led Social Democrats (SDSM) and their ethnic Albanian

> **All Western Balkan rulers are political zombies, who have perfected the art of switching ideological mantles, without ever loosening their grip on power.**

partners were able to agree to a new government coalition, following a contentious election campaign, VMRO-DPMNE supporters stormed the parliament, bludgeoning and assaulting the assembled legislators.

Had the worst occurred, as was absolutely within the realm of the possible, and Zaev or any other leading reformist leader had been killed on the floor of the *Sobranie*, Macedonia might well have plunged into outright civil war or, at least, low-intensity civil strife. In other words, what has emerged as some of the best news in the Western Balkans in recent years was within a breath of setting the political and security situation in the region back by decades.

Similar concerns were thrown up during violent anti-government rioting in BiH in 2014, and even more strikingly by the Russian-sponsored coup attempt in Montenegro in 2016. In fact, the Macedonian experience still looms darkly over BiH, where the **latest reports suggest** that the Dodik regime has built up expansive parallel security structures in cooperation with both Russian-trained paramilitary groups from Serbia and with Russian security officials directly.

Quite simply, those who are convinced of the absence of violence, or the unwillingness of local regimes to use violence against their political opponents, are misinformed about what is already happening in these societies. The question is therefore not whether violence is

Skopje, Macedonia © Photo by ExplorerBob on Pixabay

possible again in the Western Balkans, but how much worse the current level of violence is likely to become. The answer, given both the local and international climate, is that that the potential for escalation is significant.

A failed European leadership

This is hardly the kind of political dynamism that EU primacy in the region was supposed to deliver when Brussels took over the reins of international leadership from the US at the Thessaloniki summit in 2003. Indeed, it became a veritable axiom of European policy in the region by the decade's end that the EU was 'the only game in town'. But even when critics began to note that, in practice, Brussels' approach to the region amounted to little more than an embrace of **'stabilitocracy'**, genuine reflections on what a post-EU paradigm might look like have been essentially non-existent, both among EU policymakers and observers.

That is what makes the ongoing tumult in Serbia much more volatile than a mere anti-government mobilisation, although to be clear, it is a legitimate and necessary manifestation of popular democratic will. Because what has happened since 2003 is that institutional, procedural, and political legitimacy in the Western Balkans, which has not yet recovered from the trauma of the war years, has begun a new centrifugal cycle. And these protests are as much a cry of dissent against the likes of Vučić, as they are a rebuke of a Western community that has allowed political conditions to deteriorate to this point where revolutions, rather than elections, appear to be the only plausible means of progress.

Worse, while resentment and desperation are rising among ordinary citizens, parliamentary opposition blocs in most of the region have struggled to articulate any kind of compelling alternative vision. And those with any modicum of clarity tend to be the extreme nationalists, whose critique of the existing establishment amounts to little more than a call for more repression. Little wonder then that at the last Serbian presidential elections, a performance artist playing an oafish provincial kleptocrat came in third.

Protest in Belgrade © Photo by Geologicharka

It all has the troubling markings of Gustav Messiah's **assessment** (via Antonio Gramsci's words) that the old world is dying, while the new struggles to be born. Policymakers in Brussels and Washington would do well to take heed of the moment, however, lest this become - a time of monsters once more.

A new Euro-Atlantic project for the region

The EU and US must urgently articulate a combined commitment to the region's continued security and democratic transition. Not only would this be an important signal to send to the region, but it is an opportunity for a sorely needed reset of the trans-Atlantic relationship. The core of such an initiative must be a commitment to genuine democratisation and popular legitimacy which can harness the percolating energy of the Balkan *demos* to enact substantive change.

This should be combined with a determined confrontation against entrenched, bad-faith actors, in particular those that have begun to overtly threaten violence, and who preside over the region's vast patronage economies. The sanctions recently imposed by the US against Dodik and his underling Nikola Špirić are an exemplary step in this regard, and must be **followed by EU member states**.

The West's overall posture in the region must shift towards an embrace of sincere democratic values, but in tandem with a clear-eyed, realist pragmatism. In the greater scheme, this means recognising that there is no substantive difference between affirming that we are, once more, in an era of great power competition and revitalizing the political West's historic commitments to liberal democracy. In fact, if the Atlantic community and its friends and allies are to persevere in the former struggle, they must

unequivocally advocate for and support the proliferation of the latter.

Thus, shepherding Skopje fully and formally into NATO is imperative, but the EU must do its part too. The French-led sabotage of the opening of accession talks with both North Macedonia and Albania last year cannot be repeated. And now that NATO has greenlit the activation of BiH's Membership Action Plan, Western diplomats must work with officials in Sarajevo to make sure that Serb nationalist elements do not, at the behest of either the Kremlin or Belgrade, jeopardise the country's Atlantic prospects. They have been explicit in their secessionist ambitions; they have already recruited paramilitary forces, and militarised the police forces under their control; for these reasons, the threat they pose to BiH, the region, and the continent is unique and must be taken seriously.

Finally, both Brussels and Washington must make a decisive pull away from the politics of accommodating the elites in the Western Balkans. The most glaring and alarming example of this is the continued chatter over the possibility of a 'border swap', that is, a (re)partition deal between Kosovo and Serbia. There could be no more catastrophic development in regional affairs, short of outright war, than if such **ill-thought out adventurism** were to be endorsed by the West. And if it were to occur, then the irredentist and nationalist frenzy it would unleash would doubtlessly have as its product actual inter- and intra-state violence across the region.

This, of course, is all premised on the idea that the EU and US still want to remain a relevant factor in the Western Balkans. If they do not, they need only continue with their languid indifference of the past decade and a half, and leave the local elites, with the help of their new foreign backers, to suffocate the last of the region's democratic spirit.

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Europe's blind spot: **the streets rising up against local autocrats**

By **Ana Maria Luca** | Bucharest

In mid-February thousands of opposition supporters clashed with police in an anti-government rally against Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama's cabinet, demanding its resignation and early elections. Although Albania is set to start its accession negotiations with the European Union, Rama's rule has backtracked in terms of democracy and the fight against corruption and organised crime.

For weeks in a row, thousands of demonstrators have been marching in the Serbian capital of Belgrade to voice their anger at corruption and the rule of President Aleksandar Vučić, who they believe is becoming increasingly autocratic.

In Montenegro, which has been getting the praise as the frontrunner for the EU integration – as elusive as that might seem considering the current state of affairs in Brussels – 'dissatisfied citizens' also took to the streets in February to demand the resignation of President Milo Djukanović, who has been in power for nearly 30 years.

Despite getting less international spotlight, people have been taking to the streets in Banja Luka, Republika Srpska, for almost a year. The alleged cover-up of an young man's apparent murder in April 2018 has triggered a long series of protests against corruption in the administration of Bosnian Serb nationalist leader Milorad Dodik.

North Macedonia has already been through its wave of turmoil in 2015-2017, with protests against the government of the then

PM Nikola Gruevski. In 2018, Gruevski was sentenced to prison for corruption, but he vanished right before incarceration and reappeared in Budapest, where no-one, the EU included, has dared to bother him.

Across the Western Balkans, people have been voicing the anger they gathered in the past two or three decades, while their countries have seen little progress. This burst is their cry for help before they give up and leave.

But is this some 'Balkan Spring'? Most likely not. It is not necessarily state control or autocrats that they are trying to fight. Vučić, Djukanović, Rama, Dodik, Gruevski and their increasingly authoritarian policies, their grip on the media, have just been the triggers for the street movements.

For what these young Serbians, Montenegrins, Macedonians, Albanians and Bosnians want is not just to oust one leader. They want to expose and change the deeply rooted system that has bred and groomed autocrats in recent times. But consolidated autocracies are just one effect of a generalised structural cause.

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Overlooking reforms of essence

If one looks at the political organisation in the Balkans, they might think that the reforms have worked: political parties have changed, some factions have died out and new ones emerged, governments changed, new institutions have appeared, everybody talks about democracy, European integration, reforms, stability.

For years, the governments in all the Western Balkan countries have set up democratic institutions, organised mostly free elections, dissent has been allowed, and everything seemed to be going in the right direction. The EU opened negotiations with Serbia and Montenegro, was ready to start talking about it with Macedonia and Albania, and all that seemed unwell in the region was the remnants of ethnic conflicts and territorial disputes such as the one

© Photo by AJ Colores on Unsplash

between Belgrade and Prishtina, as well as the name conflict between Skopje and Athens. The EU chose to focus on these political aspects because they were simply more visible.

But this is where the shortcomings of this political analysis lay: a deeper look at the political ethnography of these countries might paint a completely different picture. The state is not just the institutions, but also the people.

Some people in the Western Balkans have been taking to the streets, and despite changes in government in some places, they remain utterly unhappy with their lives and no-one seems to look at exactly why.

The reason that anyone in the Balkans will tell those who ask is that reforms have been done 'for show', and not 'for real'. Political leaders and their clusters of support have simply adapted and found a new approach to preserving the same old patron/client system under the pretence of building democratic institutions. Nikola Gruevski's escape from Macedonia in

November 2018 is the most recent example: underlings who still hold public office in the country are the ones who made it possible for him to cross the border.

Sure, the institutions are real, but they have been infiltrated by the patron/client networks which competed for power. And that is the 'Balkan mafia'– a large number of politicians who get rich when they come to power, and tend to not let go of it. Anyone in the region can write books about it.

A social structure that survived

After the wars, the Balkans seemed to attract international attention because of a rise of increasingly autocratic or nationalistic leaders. The fear that the region might fall back into turmoil survives among the international political elites and decision-makers.

But all these politicians are the result of social and political practices cultivated by centuries of colonial rule by the Ottoman Empire, an agrarian patron/client system which during Communism adapted to different means of production, and which survived and was even boosted by ethnic conflicts and political turmoil in the 1990s and afterwards. In Kosovo, for instance, where unemployment is as high as 30 percent, politicians are the richest people in the country, and can afford to hire personal drivers and bodyguards without being questioned on where the money comes from. Companies that wish to survive know they need a politician's backing to receive contracts and repay the favour with millions of dollars. The model is the same in other Balkan states, including Albania, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro.

What we call corruption is, in fact, the same agrarian, pyramidal patron/client system that

now works so well at the political level: the landlords are now top politicians, and their clients are local politicians or businessmen who adhere to a pyramid in order to ensure the survival of their business. The smaller patrons control networks of people through contracts with the state or jobs in administration, while the members of the network owe the patron favours and votes.

Most ruling parties in the region are run this way: the top politicians channel state funds to the local administration members loyal to their party, while they tweak public tenders to allow loyal companies to thrive. People adhere to these networks because they need jobs, so they give up their votes in exchange for the security of tomorrow's meal.

Removing a top politician, trying and sentencing him to prison –as in the case of Gruevski in Macedonia – might lead to a glorious nowhere. The network, which is already deeply rooted in the state administration, will even allow him to escape the country. Later on, he will be replaced with a different man. Patrons in the Balkans are not always politicians; they can be businesspeople who like to wield power from the shadows, where the risk of compromising themselves is much lower. But the system works the same nonetheless.

It is hardly rocket science to see why people adhere to this type of social order: partly it is out of fear of confronting the octopus, partly because it is much simpler and comfortable to fall in line than to oppose a huge force. If you fight a giant like this, you are most likely not going to be a hero like David, but the village fool.

This is nothing new in the world. The Balkans and, by extension, Eastern Europe, are not that special. Former colonies in South-East Asia,

such as Indonesia, Malaysia or Vietnam have employed this type of patron/client politics for decades.

These clusters of patrons and clients might differ from one region to another, or from one country to another through local traditions. But the essence is the same: removing the top patrons does not solve the problem, the system will fight back, it will replace them and it will survive. In Bosnia, Bakir Izetbegović is in his own way a patron with a pool of loyal followers. He served as the Bosniak member of the tripartite presidency during 2010-2018, but during last year's elections he decided to let his deputy, Šefik Džaferović, run in his place and the latter won the elections. Izetbegović's followers simply followed the will of the patron.

Why drivers of change need to be locally engaged

With no support from outside, faced with many of their fellow citizens obeying and accepting the patron/client system for fear that they will be left to perish without the network's backing, they will either choose to exit or to become part of the system.

Most, as seen in the recent statistics on emigration from the Balkans, choose the opportunity to exit. The young and educated leave these countries and settle somewhere else, sending money to the families they left at home.

And that is why this recent burst of anti-corruption protests is a miracle that needs encouragement and support.

In some circles, migration of human capital is seen as a driver of change and development: the remittances boost economies and, when the migrant workers and specialists come

back to their home countries, they set up new businesses and push for progress. But, in fact, the theory has a blind spot: this push for progress by the returnees – if they ever return – will be much more difficult, after their remittances have fed the economy of the patron/client system and the implicit corruption.

Reforms have been done 'for show', and not 'for real'. Political leaders and their clusters of support have simply adapted and found a new approach to preserving the same old patron/client system under the pretence of building democratic institutions.

The gap between the returnees who are supposed to be drivers of change, and the people who stayed behind and survived the patron/client system, will grow and will divide society.

This has not happened in the Western Balkans yet, where countries are smaller and migration has not divided society the way it did in neighbouring Romania or Bulgaria (the latter lost 1.5-2 million out of its 7 million population, which as a percentage is worse than Romania), for instance. But the lesson to be drawn from these countries' experience with the brain drain is that the EU's policies in terms of its approach to development are flawed.

In recent years, Brussels has been focused on big political projects which are almost

impossible to achieve, such as reaching a deal between Serbia and Kosovo. It would be a great achievement, a deal indeed, but a deeply rooted ethnic conflict is difficult to solve through politics alone without making any efforts at the grassroots level. Meanwhile, reforms and development have been stalled.

Serbians concerned by Vučić's increasingly authoritarian policies are taking to the streets. Prishtina boxed itself into a corner by imposing tariffs on Serbian and Bosnian goods, pushing its EU visa liberalisation off the agenda. Macedonia's name deal was great, but also merely a political gain. Skopje needs to catch up on reforms.

Meanwhile Brussels, focused on land swaps that no one believes are feasible, has forgotten to pay attention to whether the Western Balkan countries still aspire to become functional democracies. EU officials have said nothing about Vučić's authoritarian policies, refused to comment on Gruevski's escape to Budapest, and have not criticised Rama's media censorship initiatives. They have been too busy dealing with rogue EU leaders such as Viktor Orbán, and have forgotten about the Western Balkans as if they were on a different continent.

At the political level, the EU, whose main interest lies in having a friendly democratic neighbourhood in the Western Balkans, has mostly engaged with political leaders, completely disregarding the drivers of social change. Indeed, it's difficult to talk to crowds, and the lack of clear leadership in these protest movements is difficult for traditional diplomats to wrap their heads around.

But attitude is the key here. No-one in the Balkans had any illusion that EU integration was round the corner. The Juncker commission has made it clear since 2014 that this would not happen any time soon. In 2018, Brussels even says that Serbia and Montenegro, the forerunners might – just might – be ready to join in 2025. But the EU has been vehemently criticised by civil society in the Balkans not only for putting the integration of the region on the back burner, but for practically playing with people's hopes for change by allowing authoritarian leaders and patrons to continue running their countries and engaging with them at the political level.

The answer has been, invariably, that it is the Balkan states' fault for not undertaking the necessary reforms. There hasn't been a clear message of support for civil society and the progressive movements, probably for fear that it would be seen as an infringement of sovereignty.

But the bottom line is that people are taking to the streets, and they are demanding social change. Political change they've had plenty and they know it doesn't work, so stop telling them to simply vote.

Sure, the social change and development that could kill off the patron/client system will not happen overnight. It takes decades. But decades have already passed, while the people in the Balkans haven't seen any change whatsoever. This has happened in the absence of proper holistic policies based on the social reality on the ground. About a decade ago, when the EU told them about their prospects for integration, they had hope. But reforms and development in the region have occurred only because these drivers of change in civil society and the private sector fought against the patron/client system, counting on external support.

Engaging local political patrons with authoritarian tendencies was short-sighted of Brussels because it simply disappointed and confused these small but important allies in civil society.

At the next protest in the Balkans, one has to watch the banners. They will probably say 'Vučić thief' and 'Your time will end'. But replace the name with anyone else's, and the message remains the same: it is the 'thief' part which is the problem.

■

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Time to learn from what has worked

By **Kristof Bender** | Vienna

The EU accession process can inspire reforms, increase prosperity, strengthen democracy and help transform the politics of the Western Balkans. In order to achieve this, it needs to be credible and fair. It needs to provide clear guidance to politicians, inspire civil servants and help them to focus, and signal to civil society where a country stands in any given area of reform. Currently the EU accession process does not achieve this.

First, there is an obvious problem of credibly assessing the state of reforms in various Balkan countries. The front-runner Montenegro has opened 31 out of 35 chapters, Turkey has opened 16, and Macedonia has not opened a single one. However, the annual assessments of the European Commission suggest that Montenegro, Turkey, and Macedonia are all at the same level in the priority areas covered by the Commission's 'fundamentals first' approach (see box). This is not useful guidance to anyone, reformers or outside observers, and needs to be improved.

Second, based on the Commission's existing assessments, the ongoing process is not delivering reforms, even in those countries that are currently negotiating and thereby expected to benefit from the full transformative power of the accession process. Reforms in Serbia have slowed down in many areas since the country opened negotiations in January 2014. The rule of law is no more advanced in Montenegro than in Bosnia and Herzegovina. One reason for this may be the lack of clear feedback and credible assessments.

THE STATE OF PLAY IN PRIORITY REFORM AREAS

Chapter/issue	Turkey		Macedonia		Montenegro		Serbia		Albania		Bosnia		Kosovo	
	16	18	16	18	16	18	16	18	16	18	16	18	16	18
Public administration reform	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	5	5	4	4
Functioning of the judiciary	4/5	5	4	4	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	5
Fight against corruption	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5/4	5/4
Fight against organised crime	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	5	5
Freedom of expression	5	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4/3	4	4	4	4
Existence of functioning market economy	1	1	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	5	5	5	5
Capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces in the EU	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	5	5	5	5
OVERALL SCORE	23.5	24	24	24	24	24	25	25	26	25.5	31	31	32.5	32.5
AVERAGE	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.4	3.6	3.6	3.7	3.6	4.4	4.4	4.6	4.6

*This table shows the **European Commission's** assessments for the areas covered by the **'fundamentals first'** approach presented in the **Commission's 2016** and **2018** reports. The Commission uses a five-tier standard assessment scale to describe the level of preparedness. For the purpose of readability, the grades are presented here in numbers and three different colours:*

- ● ***well advanced*** *(1, light blue),*
- ● ***good level of preparation*** *(2, light blue),*
- ● ***moderately prepared*** *(3, blue),*
- ● ***some level of preparation*** *(4, black),*
- ● ***early stage*** *(5, black).*

As a result, the formal status of a given country (potential candidate, candidate, negotiating), or whether a certain chapter has been opened or not, does not say much about that country's preparedness to join the EU.

A model: visa liberalisation

When we look back at the EU's approach towards the Western Balkans over the last decade, there is one model that worked well: the visa-liberalisation process for the Western Balkans.

This was based on a simple principle: First, develop a comprehensive list of criteria and present it to all countries. Then, put together teams of experts, including from member states, to regularly assess all the criteria in all countries, regardless of their formal status in the accession process. Finally, make the assessments available in a systematic and comparable way, using clear and unambiguous language.

When we look back at the EU's approach towards the Western Balkans over the last decade, there is one model that worked well: the visa-liberalisation process for the Western Balkans.

This approach led to substantive reforms in all countries, including in those which were initially lagging behind. It also helped to convince sceptics in EU member states. Credible assessments convincingly showing that the criteria had indeed been met convinced even sceptical European politicians to grant visa-free travel.

The visa-liberalisation model was based on motivational tools which everyone who has ever tried to master a challenge is familiar with: clear goals, detailed and continuous feedback, and an element of competition and comparison with peers.

The accession process as we know it today does not yet do enough to have the same effect. There is not enough quality feedback.

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This makes comparisons, benchmarking and positive competition between Western Balkan countries in specific reform areas impossible.

An agenda for 2019

The European Commission has recognised these problems, and has also begun to move in the direction of addressing them, but it has not yet gone far enough. Here is how it could do so.

First, it would be good to establish clear common criteria based on the *acquis* (or a 'core' *acquis*) in the form of reform roadmaps in key areas, such as public procurement (Chapter 5), food safety (Chapter 12), or statistics (Chapter 18), which could later be extended to more areas.

Second, it could appoint teams of experts, including some seconded by member states, to regularly assess the progress on these roadmap criteria in all Western Balkan countries. These assessments should be made publicly available, in a comparable fashion and in clear language.

This would put the European Commission's reports at the centre of reform debates in the Western Balkans, as the most credible analysis of reform implementation. It would convince sceptics in EU member states that when progress is reported, it is based on thorough assessments.

Most importantly, it would strengthen the hand of the reformers in the Western Balkans. At the same time, more easily understandable and more comparable information on reforms can empower opposition groups, media and civil society to expose shortcomings more easily.

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Interview Nikola Dimitrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Republic of North Macedonia:

"The EU accession process is a coaching exercise to transform North Macedonia into a proper European democracy"

*Interview with **Nikola Dimitrov**, **Minister of Foreign Affairs, Republic of North Macedonia***

You have reached a historic agreement with your Greek counterparts on the name issue. But has it come at the wrong time for the EU? There seems to be a sense of panic in Brussels that whatever is to happen about the Western Balkans needs to happen before the European elections or it may not happen at all, if the populists and nationalists register significant wins. Are you going to have enough support from within the EU as you implement the reform process?

The timeline of the EU decision-making process is more or less already set. One scenario is to publish the reports by the Commission after the European parliamentary elections. In any event, we have to consider that the result of the European elections will be part of this decision-making process. In the case of Macedonia (soon to be North Macedonia) there are two important elements. The first one is that we have been locked in the waiting room since 2005 as a candidate country, yet since 2009 we had a stream of positive reports from the Commission that concluded that Macedonia should start accession talks, but there was no political consensus because of the name issue. We are now focused on the start of the journey. The process matters more than the goal of joining, because if we join today we are still the same country, so we need to use the process, which essentially

What we strive for is to have functional strong institutions and proper checks and balances.

is a coaching exercise, to make our country a proper European democracy. We have to have a performance-based process because accession always fails if you politicise it. We need to have a rigid, strict assessment of the progress or lack of progress. The more we deliver, the less difficult it is going to be for EU member states to make the case for their public opinion.

Nikola Dimitrov
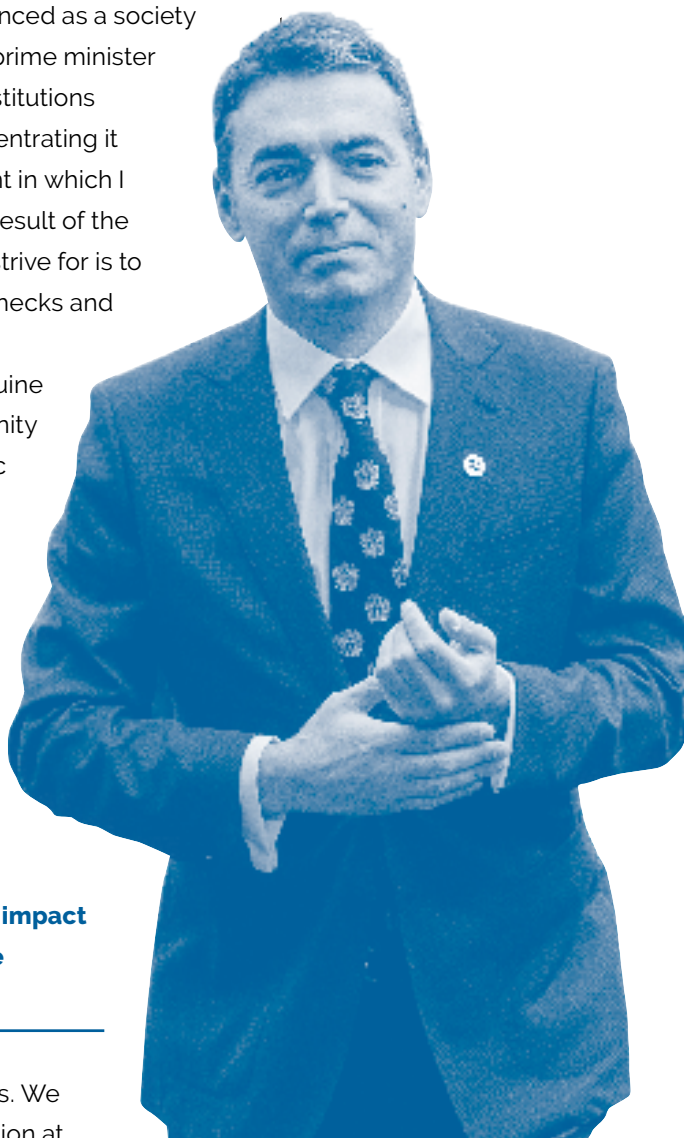Minister of Foreign Affairs, Republic of North Macedonia

Are you confident that the agreement hasn't come too late for Macedonian society either? Do you feel that it can energise people who have seen their expectations frustrated again and again? Can you secure the political will and the social support for the painful reform process?

The agreement is only one driving factor that finally removes the obstacle to moving forward. The other driving factor is provided by the painful experience of what we have experienced as a society locked in the waiting room, when our previous prime minister essentially lost his moral compass. He made institutions weak and personalised political power by concentrating it around him and his inner-circle. The government in which I serve is in its 20th month, and was born as the result of the mobilisation against this very model. What we strive for is to have functional strong institutions and proper checks and balances. It is not only the EU that is driving the dynamic here. It is also the experience of a genuine crisis of weak institutions, and a culture of impunity and corruption indicating strong abuse of public offices. Our society is ready, public opinion is very critical and the tolerance for mistakes is very low. This creates a good incentive for the government, as well as the challenge of managing high expectations. Implementation is critical. To me as a citizen, this is a different society when it comes to media environment as the influence of public opinion remains very strong.

Will NATO membership status for Macedonia impact the relationship with Albanian? Will that ease relations with Albania?

For us NATO membership is unfinished business. We should have been there. We expected an invitation at

the Bucharest summit in 2008, but Greece objected at the time. Part of the process of political maturing that we have undergone is the realisation that becoming a NATO member means we need to be wanted by those of our neighbours which are already in. This means that we will be allies, and we will have common legal obligations under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. This is a huge step towards certainty.

The message is that this country is here to stay within its borders; that makes us more predictable for the big international corporations in terms of investments. This is something that Montenegro has witnessed since they joined NATO. Together with Albania and Croatia we were part of the so-called Adriatic Charter, a format that gathered momentum before the NATO Summit in Bucharest and which is still operational. 84% of our citizens support our NATO bid. This is not a move against any country, but a reflection of the internal consensus among all the major political stakeholders since 1993 (the time when we first articulated that NATO and the EU were our strategic goals). A quarter of a century later we are close to realising one of those objectives. We have shared the burden already, as at some point Macedonia was the 4th largest per-capita contributor in terms of troops to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan, but we have not shared the benefits of membership.

You can't win if your neighbour is suffering.

Is Macedonia's EU integration its national responsibility alone, or more of a regional issue? Is the EU Agenda for the Western Balkans appropriate in treating the region as a whole? Or should it be more tailor-made state by state?

Probably both. If you hold up country A because of country B, the process fails. If you politicise the accession process, how do you convince the public opinion in the member states that the process is actually fair, strict and merit-based? On the other hand, we cannot be a successful, stable, prosperous country if our neighbours are struggling. We have all the interest in the world, for selfish reasons, to wish the best for Albania, Serbia and Kosovo. We all suffer if there is a major problem in the region. If there is a major success it is not only an inspiration for others, but also adds value to how the region is perceived. You can't win if your neighbour is suffering.

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Interview conducted by

Oana Popescu *and **Rufin Zamfir..***

Interview Nikola Dimitrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Republic of North Macedonia: "The EU accession process is a coaching exercise to transform North Macedonia into a proper European democracy"

Greek prime minister Alexis Tsipras (left) and FYROM prime minister Zoran Zaev (right) ©
Photo by Nake Batev/EPA

The return of traditional great power strategy

Interview Elbridge Colby (Washington):

"The US has an enduring interest in preventing Europe from falling under a potentially hostile hegemon"

Interview Elbridge Colby (Washington):

"The US has an enduring interest in preventing Europe from falling under a potentially hostile hegemon"

*Interview with **Elbridge Colby**, Director of the Defense Program at the Center for a New American Security. He was Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Force Development from 2017 to 2018, during which time he served as the lead official in the development of the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) and the DOD's principal representative in the development of the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS).*

Let's unpack the notion of principled realism at the core of both the NDS and the NSS. How is the world perceived through the lens of principled realism? What type of international order is envisaged?

Principled realism focuses through a realist lens on building a free, open, and dignified political order within the international system. The logic is that America needs to play power politics so that we don't live in a power politics world. Principled realism accepts that power and especially the agglomeration of power determines international outcomes. But it seeks to adapt that reality in the service of positive ends. Principled realism diverges from other contending conceptual camps – progressive transnationalism, security communities, or the so-called rules-based order approach – in recognising that the state as a political unit and military power and wealth as the currency of international politics remain fundamental. These other camps believe that, if one could properly construct security communities or cultural compatibility, one could escape interstate competition.

These approaches, then, tend to see the melting away of the state as inevitable, and the state and its military and economic power as less and less important. Idealism about transcending war and the state reflects the progressive views of world politics. But principled realism reminds us that the state will remain the primary player in the international arena. In this sense, the 2018 National Defense Strategy is really more an empirical assessment of the primacy of the state. But it is not a *Machtpolitik* strategy; it does not seek power

maximization for its own sake or to dominate others. Rather, it seeks an enlightened sense of national sovereignty to promote a free and open order in which countries can determine their own fate, consistent with America's interests in independence, sovereignty, and non-domination of countries in the key regions, particularly Asia and Europe. The NDS is clear-eyed in recognising that interstate competition is the key dynamic driving today's strategic environment, and that preventing the rise of a regional hegemon that can project power against us or exclude us from fair terms of trade is our highest national imperative.

To what extent is the worldview embedded in the NDS and NSS building on the previous conceptualisations, such as the rules-based order? In the end, the post WW2 liberal international order was based on both power and rules, power legitimised through rules.

Elbridge Colby
Director of the Defense Program at the Center for a New American Security.

What's wrong with the 'international rules-based order' language is that rules per se do not define international order. 'Rules-based order' sounds like conceiving of or attempting to turn the international environment into a domestic environment. But a domestic environment requires the preponderance of power by a sovereign, which is incompatible with the preservation of meaningful state sovereignty. The other problem with the 'rules-based order' phrase is that it tends to focus people on violations of the 'rules' rather than the real issue, which is power. My favorite example is the South China Sea. If the Chinese could create artificial features, militarise them, and achieve military dominance in the South China Sea – and do this all legally – we would still have a problem with it. The issue is the attempt to dominate the South China Sea and beyond that South East Asia, not the rules per se. Just like the American Constitution, it is the checks and balances system that matters more than the particular rules, which are subject to change. That is why I prefer the term 'a free and open order'.

There is another aspect here: Americans are jealous of our sovereignty. We don't want to dissolve our sovereignty in transnational organisations; we want to retain flexibility.

The NDS and the NSS reflect a different vision from the Obama administration - maybe not a 180 degree shift, but a fundamental distinction in that the Obama administration aspired ultimately toward a pooling of national sovereignty toward trans-nationalism.

President Obama was instrumentally inclined toward some element of realism, i.e., prudence, but his administration's basic approach was not principled realism. It was a progressive administration that was in some respects instrumentally prudential.

You said recently that "from a strategic perspective, in many respects we face a situation not unlike the one in the late 1970s when there was a real perception of the decline of the Western deterrent." That context was the one conducive to the developing of what has been called the Second Offset Strategy, and to a bolstering of the conventional deterrence posture in Europe (through forward presence, reinforcement, rapid reaction forces and pre-positioned equipment). The second part is what we've seen in Europe after 2014 through the European Defense Initiative and the other steps taken by NATO. To what extent would you expect the 3rd offset strategy initiated by the previous Administration to continue? Where are we in the development of the Third Offset Strategy, as well as in addressing the problem sets that were at the core of its development? In the end, its emphasis on new comparative advantages and edge is everywhere in the NDS.

Certainly, the Third Offset is very much alive, and I would say that the whole effort has been expanded. In some sense, the problem statement that the Third Offset focused on, which is the decline of the American conventional deterrent vis-à-vis China and

Russia, has become the problem statement for the whole Department now. The popular perception is that the Third Offset was very much focused on leap-ahead technology. The NDS, while still very concerned about technology, is a little more agnostic about the balance in importance between operational concepts and force employment on the one hand, and technology on the other. But the bottom line remains: the Third Offset is being carried on and matured.

The late 1970s is the right analogy because you had the decline in the superiority of the Western nuclear deterrent, the erosion of American conventional forces in Europe because of Vietnam, and in particular the growth of the Soviet strategic arsenal and the capability of their conventional forces. This together led to the decline in the viability of NATO's heavy reliance on the first use of nuclear weapons as a deterrent against a Warsaw Pact assault. In this context, the Second Offset was the answer. It exploited the West's, particularly America's, major economic and technological edge for conventional forces as well as the recapitalisation of the nuclear deterrent, a pillar often forgotten in the offset discussion. This period is comparable now because our massive conventional advantages have eroded, in part because of China and Russia's focus on undermining our advantages, and also our unwillingness to adapt, instead placing our attention elsewhere (particularly in the Middle East and South Asia). What's different this time, particularly vis-à-vis China, is that we face a competitor that, unlike the Soviet Union, is not binding itself to a foolish and a self-defeating economic system and that possesses an economy that rivals ours in size.

As in the 1970s and '80s, the United States extends deterrence to allies and partners in

the highly exposed front-yard of a great power competitor with both robust conventional forces and survivable second-strike forces capable of waging a limited nuclear war. Our response has to be an integrated conventional-nuclear strategy and posture. And I think we struggle with that. This is the context in which I make the argument that we have to face the problem of limited war, including limited nuclear war. We must adapt our strategy to face an opponent prepared to escalate with nuclear weapons. If we don't have an option below the level of strategic nuclear war and the Russians can effectively escalate with limited nuclear use, we will be at a potentially decisive disadvantage. In the 1980s we were good enough along the conventional-nuclear spectrum: the REFORGER exercises, the AirLand Battle operational concept, the Army's Big Five modernisation program, Pershing II IRBMs and GLCMs, etc.. Back then, the United States invested in both strategic and tactical nuclear weapons and contemplated strategies for limited nuclear use, but it also developed conventional capabilities designed to offset the Warsaw Pact's much larger conventional advantages. Ultimately the idea was also to reduce our reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence and defense, though they always played a crucial role.

The difference between then and now was that nuclear weapons were so proliferated in Europe that any large conflagration would have almost invariably led to a strategic exchange. Today, however, nuclear weapons have been largely marginalized. Most people probably could imagine a purely conventional war with Russia or China. In fact, most of them would probably assume that it would stay conventional and largely limited to a relatively confined theater–so we need to deal with this reality.

There is this emphasis on eroding the military competitive edge that affects the ability to wage the American Way of War. What core dimensions of the Desert Storm model are in jeopardy? What are the implications for providing regional reassurance and a deterrence umbrella for US allies?

Our interests are in favourable regional balances of power and alliances are designed to sustain these favourable regional balances of power.

Both the Russians and the Chinese saw that the Americans had a very effective way of war – the Desert Storm model. So, when the Iraqis attacked Kuwait and stopped there, we deployed light formations and took six months to build a coalition to assemble the iron mountain of capability. Once the whole operational architecture was ready, the U.S. launched an aerospace campaign to shut down Iraqi defense systems, establish full spectrum dominance over Iraq, and then launch the 100-hour ground invasion to achieve our focused objectives and terminate the conflict on our terms.

Over the last twenty to twenty-five years the Chinese and the Russians have taken note and invested in new capabilities, as well as concepts of operations that challenge the Desert Storm

model. Now we are facing potential adversaries that can contest our ability to defend our forward allies. What has changed today is the development of Russian and Chinese conventional forces, which allows them to potentially execute a fait accompli strategy. Basically, the main problem that we face is that the rational strategy for an aspiring hegemon like China, and to some extent Russia, is to try to fight small wars on the periphery of the potential coalition against it to split off those territories and eventually turn the balance of power in its favour. Essentially, it is about waging small, limited wars to shift the preponderance of power. Historically this is how Bismarck built the German empire. First, he fought the Danes, then the Austrians, and then the French – and before anyone knew it, the Germans were the potential hegemon in Europe.

Generally, the NDS emphasises that we need to have a theory of victory that is able to beat their theory of victory. Their theory of victory is the rapid seizure of allied territory that presents the perception, through nuclear or conventional coercion, that the costs and risks of ejecting them from their seizure would be too great and too daunting to be contemplated, because such action could split the alliance or at the minimum tame our response sufficiently to negate its effectiveness.

This is largely about deterrence, not assurance. The point is to develop combat-credible forward forces (whether American or allied) that can blunt the adversary's aggression so that they cannot consummate the fait accompli, so that they cannot seize territory or hold on to it. Ideally the alliance will deny the adversary their attempt at localised aggression so the adversary cannot achieve the fait accompli. Then, the adversary will face the terrible choice between accepting failure (a blunted and denied local aggression)

or continuing the conflict, but in ways that are so manifestly aggressive, unreasonable and brazen that these actions will catalyse our and our allies' resolve to fight harder and enlist support, direct or indirect, from fence-sitters.

In a (maybe) forgotten book, Maritime Strategy or Coalition Defense (1984), Robert Komer (who ended up as an instrumental policy maker during the Second Offset Strategy era) made the case for a sound/credible coalition defense focused on a "balanced land/air/sea strategy and posture aimed at helping our allies hold on to such areas of vital interest as Northeast Asia, the Persian Gulf and Western Europe." Is this also the optimal overseas posture in the current operational environment – a sound integrated network of allies with the right capabilities in the A2/AD age? More broadly, what is the role of the allies and alliances from the NDS perspective?

Komer was basically right. He had a very acute sensibility for how the military balance and our political interests are properly related. He well understood that the purpose of the U.S. military posture vis-à-vis Europe was to fortify the European defense and fight the conflict on the terms that were most advantageous to the political solidarity of the Alliance and to the deterrent effectiveness of the Alliance. In that sense he supported more the defense in the Central Front in Germany against the Maritime Strategy. He argued against strategies of horizontal escalation that would have lost the main battle (although the Maritime Strategy was not actually one of true horizontal escalation).

This point is very relevant for the NDS, which is oriented on defending alliances and particularly defending the vulnerable allies in a way that is politically sustainable and credible, in the sense

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that it would be a plausible way for the U.S. and its allies to fight and, within reasonable limits, prevail. This involves limiting the conflict in ways that are advantageous to us, and if the adversary seeks to expand or vertically escalate the war – well, that would be their initiative and would demonstrate their broader aggressiveness and unreasonableness, which would improve our position.

From a principled realist perspective, alliances are not an end in themselves. Both the NSS and NDS articulate that our interests are in favourable regional balances of power, and that alliances are designed to sustain these favourable regional balances of power. Doing so will sustain free and uncoerced regional orders and tend towards the promotion of dignified, open systems of government, an ecosystem beneficial to our way of life but also to our allies. It's an enlightened sense of self-interest. The NDS enables us to most effectively and credibly defend that alliance architecture, in a way that elicits more effort by our allies, and that is more equitable and puts less strain on our economy and society. If we can have stable regional balances of power in a way that

frustrates aspirations for regional hegemony by the Chinas and the Russias of the world, then the ultimate attraction of free forms of government will likely prevail.

In the second half of the 1970s, Robert Komer concluded that "there is really no such thing as a NATO defense posture, only a collection of heterogeneous national postures which differ in their equipment, organisation and procedures." Is enabling a common, more networked defense posture between allies the way to achieve a stable and credible balance of power in Europe?

That should be our strategic objective. There's a broader point here. In the near term, due to the inadequacies of European defense, the United States needs to augment its posture in and investments for Europe in a combat-credible way. Over time, however, there should be no reason why the Europeans cannot essentially defend themselves, with the Americans providing the most advanced capabilities and monitoring the situation. The United States must be a crucial player in the European security

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balance because we have an enduring interest in preventing Europe from falling under a potentially hostile hegemon or a large European war, but that doesn't mean a large standing military presence in Europe. The Russian threat is severe, but focused and limited. Europe could readily handle most of it. Germany for instance should play a much larger role in collective defense. It is a very serious failure in their obligations that they are not bearing the burden in providing for the collective defense of the Eastern states. They have made progress, and deserve credit for that, but they could do much more.

A more balanced relationship in which the Europeans take primary responsibility for defending themselves is a more natural and sustainable equilibrium. This was ultimately Eisenhower's objective: America has an interest in a Europe of sovereign states that are able to collaborate and defend themselves, backed by America's commitment. There is no reason that they should rely on the United States to provide the bulk of their defense.

Poland is pushing for a Fort Trump on its territory. Others in the East want a Fort NATO that covers the whole Eastern Flank. In a way this is a consequence of the original sin of the post-Cold War enlargement, when the alliance preserved its in-depth posture while leaving its eastern flank exposed. In today's security environment the situation is no longer sustainable, as it could encourage a fait accompli strategy. Should the concept of presence be rethought in an A2/AD-centric world?

Central Europeans need to understand that the 1990s and 2000s model of presence as an intrinsic virtue and military forces as symbols of reassurance is over. We can't afford it; it is expensive; it doesn't work. I am sympathetic to a more combat-credible presence in the East because the security environment has changed. The NDS is very clear that the purpose of the Joint Force is to deter by ensuring that the Russian and Chinese do not

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see a plausible theory of victory. In particular, that means denying a fait accompli and blunting the adversary's aggression, so that they cannot lock in their gains and escalate to de-escalate. So forward presence makes a lot of sense, but it should be a combat-credible forward presence that is consistent with very significant demands across the globe, particularly in the three major theaters – Asia, Europe, and the Persian Gulf. The United States' presence in Europe should be focused, lethal, and adapted to the Russia threat rather than an anachronistic reflection of the pre-1989 geopolitical situation. We don't have enough forces to be everywhere all the time. Romania, Poland and the Baltic states should be much more focused on exercises, on making sure that U.S. forces can arrive and fight effectively, stationing of equipment, ensuring that roads, bridges, railways are ready. We should see future versions of the REFORGER exercises, not a static Maginot-line type of posture, designed to show that reinforcing American forces can arrive very quickly, join allied and U.S. forces already there, and blunt Russian aggression in a very short amount of time. Rotational or stationed forces may make sense but they should be examined from a military perspective. That is: is this going to contribute to our ability to delay or deny a Russian offensive?

Central Europeans need to understand that the 1990s and 2000s model of presence as an intrinsic virtue and military forces as symbols of reassurance is over. We can't afford it; it is expensive; it doesn't work.

For years Russia has been investing in niche military competitive advantages. One example is building its A2/AD complexes along NATO's eastern flank (especially in Kaliningrad and Crimea). To what extent can these bubbles be used to intimidate and coerce the frontline allies?

People tend to bifurcate political influence and military force. Of course, the real objective of having a military advantage is to develop political influence without having to use military force,

or using it in a very efficient way. Influence comes from the understanding that if you challenge the other side you will lose. If the states of the East are under the shadow of Russian power, including their A2/AD capability, and they perceive that the U.S. and the rest of the Alliance don't have a credible and plausible way of defending them, then they will face strong pressure to defer to or even bandwagon with the Russians. The NDS is a big step in the right direction by saying that we are not going to abandon you, that the Russians are not going to be able to use that military power effectively to coerce you. But this requires a great deal from the Europeans as well.

How should the US approach the idea of developing an antidote to a competitor's A2/AD-centric posture?
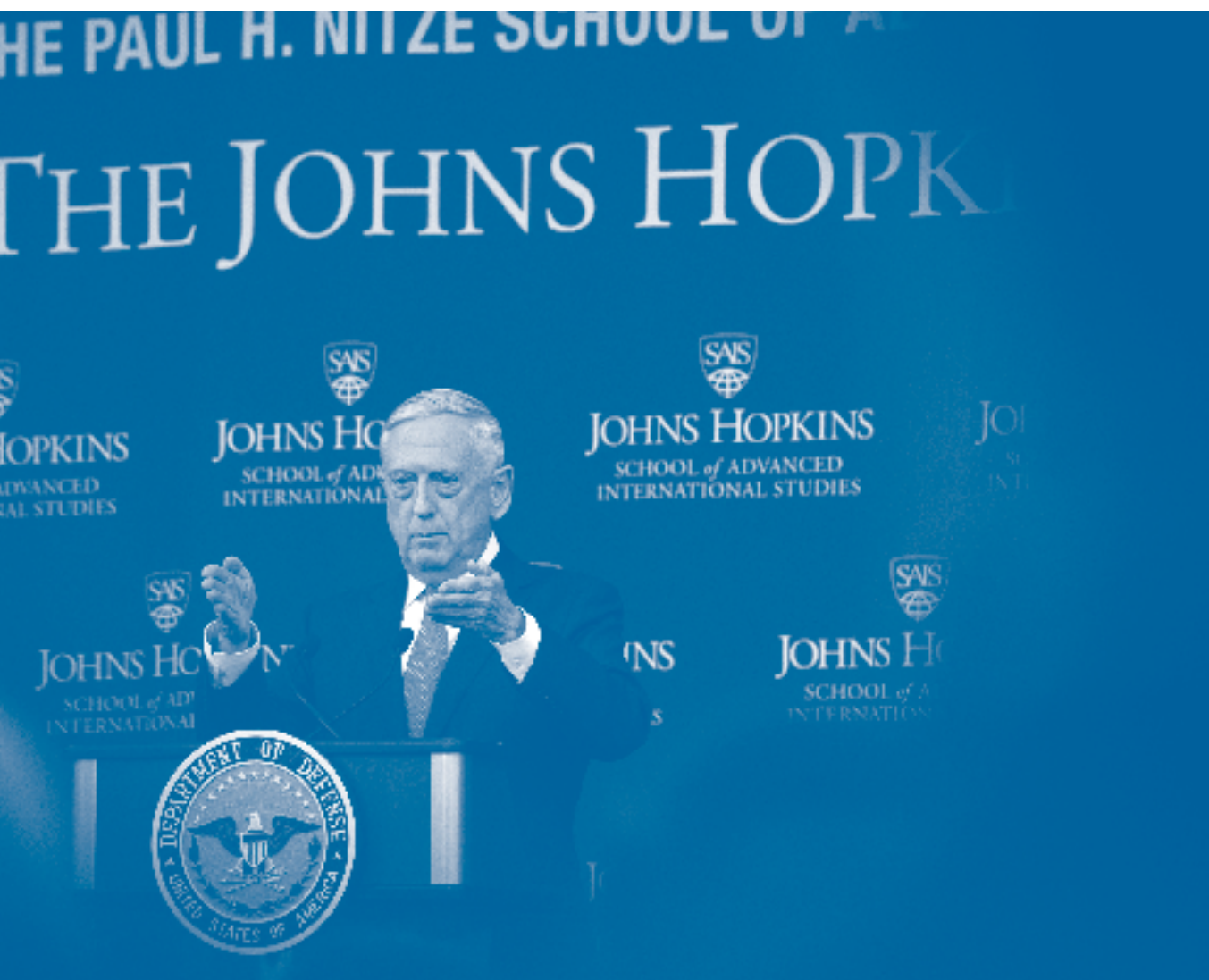
We are facing potential adversaries that have the real ability to contest our ability to defend our forward allies and partners. Our objective remains essentially defensive. If you have established A2/AD battle networks, then you are probably going to have an operationally defensive-dominant situation. We need to shift our power projection focus from one in which the military assumes that we will achieve full-spectrum dominance to one where we are focused on lethality and resilience from the outset, without full-spectrum dominance, while having the ability to frustrate, degrade, and ultimately block Russian and Chinese attempts to seize allied territory. It is essential that our conventional forces have the capacity to contest and deny Russian ability to secure the fait accompli. But we must figure out how to blunt and reverse Chinese or Russian gains without the kind of dominance the United States used to have.

What do the Russian and Chinese Ways of War (how they are structured, and ultimately the strategies they are deploying) tell us about the (changing) character of war in today's environment?

I am interested in the political aspects of the changing character of war, which I think is becoming operationally defense-dominant as the advanced states are able to obtain and deploy the necessary technology. You can be strategically offensive in an operationally defense-dominant world, though, as Germany demonstrated in World War One. In an operationally defense-dominant situation, the fait accompli is a viable strategy. In an offense-dominant situation, a fait accompli is less effective because the aggressor is highly vulnerable. This is how I think we are going to think about that.

*The interview was conducted by **Octavian Manea** and first published in **Small Wars Journal**, 19 January 2019.*

*Secretary of Defense **James N. Mattis** announces the*
National Defense Strategy at Johns Hopkins University School of
Advanced International Studies in Washington, Jan. 19.
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