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# Right-wing authoritarian innovations in Central and Eastern Europe

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## ABSTRACT

The decline of the quality of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe was facilitated by intellectual, ideological, and organizational innovations of a new authoritarian elite. In this article I discuss five such innovations: a particular combination of victim mentality, self-confidence and resentment against the West, the transformation of neighbor-hating nationalisms into a civilizationist anti-immigrant platform, the delegitimization of civil society and the return to the belief in a strong state, the resurrection of the Christian political identity, and the transformation of populist discourse into a language and organizational strategy that is compatible with governmental roles ("populist establishment"). These factors together point to an overarching ideological frame that I call paternalist populism.

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## Introduction

The events of 1989 and 1990 placed the Central and Eastern European countries on the orbit of a robust economic, social and political development. The EU-member states enjoy today – in global comparison – high levels of equality, education, security and economic growth, and many of the non-members have also experienced accelerated social and economic progress.

But exactly when the number of those socialized in the Communist era dropped below fifty percent, and therefore one could reasonably expect the disappearance of the last vestiges of the mental Iron Curtain, East and West started to diverge again. In the Eastern half of the continent the liberal democratic norms – typically associated with the West – ceased to be regarded as a set of evidently respected standards. At the end of the 2010s all relevant agencies reported a massive decline in the quality of democracy.<sup>1</sup>

International factors, such as American isolationism, the general impasse in the European integration process, the increasingly assertive Russia, and the growing shadow of China, all contributed to the weakening of the liberal democratic project. The process of de-democratization escalated after the 2008 economic crisis. The East–West divergence became manifest after the 2015 refugee crisis. Domestic factors, most eminently, the structural weakness of civil society, have amplified the pernicious effects of the new international environment.

Authoritarian-minded political entrepreneurs could, of course, always tap into the political potential of the negative cultural legacies, but, at the level of official norms, liberal democracy was the only game in town in the region until recently. During the 1990s authoritarian leadership (Iliescu, Milošević, Meciar, etc.) was typically present as a combination of the unfinished regime change and of the nationalist project of state creation. Once these processes have run their course, the openly authoritarian actors marginalized. During the end of the 1990s and during the first part of the 2000s alternatives to liberal democracy were largely non-existent. Nationalist-populist forces survived as niche parties whose life-span is expected to be short. Today such forces often dominate the domestic political landscape.

Seen from the vantage point of the fall of the Berlin Wall, this outcome is rather puzzling. Observers of the transition had different worries. They were typically concerned about the survival of the Communist ruling class, irredentist wars, the inability of the citizens and elites to grasp the principles of markets and competitive electoral procedures and to operate consolidated party systems, and the chaos caused by unexperienced political forces lacking linkages to the society (Staniszki 1990; Hankiss 1991; Bohlen 1990; Mair 1997). The optimists based their hopes on the strong regional commitment to a united Europe, the lack of significant racist movements, and the modernity of social structures, including the employment of women. History's irony is that none of the fears listed above proved to be well-founded, at least not for the entire region, while all the positive characteristics transformed into their opposites by the end of the third decade.

In this essay I will elaborate on the role of authoritarian ideological innovations in explaining these outcomes. Ideology is not an obvious focus for the study of de-democratization. The popular Dictator's Handbook, for example, considers ideology irrelevant. In the words of Bueno de Mesquita and Alistair Smith "where politics are concerned, ideology, nationality, and culture don't matter all that much" (Bueno de Mesquita and Smith 2012). Bálint Magyar's insightful mafia state theory also regards ideology to be of secondary importance (Magyar 2016). In order to complement this prevailing narrative, I will point at innovations that transformed discourse and thereby helped the development of new political configurations.

The extreme cases of the considered group of countries are Poland and Hungary, once in the vanguard of democratization, now in the forefront of de-democratization. Being extreme, their example is not representative of the entire region (see Vachudova 2020; Bochsler and Juon 2020). Instead of the emergence of a single party capable of instrumentalizing the entire public-, and a significant part of the private-, sphere, for its own ideological goals, the setbacks in the consolidation of a level playing field were more typically due to state-capture by business-circles or the marginalization of the ethnic minorities (Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018, 49). But hardly any country in the region is exempt from an authoritarian transformation of the mainstream political discourse and from the appearance of effective authoritarian actors. The central message of this piece is that the discursive and ideological frames of the authoritarian actors contain many innovations that need to be mapped, analyzed and acknowledged. I will reflect on these frames with a focus on the Central European cases and with occasional references to the wider post-communist landscape.

Among the various intellectual, ideological, and sometimes organizational innovations, I consider six as particularly important and therefore my article is structured around them:

the combination of victimhood, self-confidence, and the resentment against the West; the transformation of neighbor-hating nationalisms into a civilizationist anti-immigrant platform; the delegitimization of civil society and the belief in a strong state; the resurrection of Christian political identity; the adaptation of conspiracy theories; and the transformation of populist discourse into a language and organizational strategy that is compatible with governmental roles (“populist establishment”). These factors together point to an overarching ideological fame that I call paternalist populism.

### Mixing self-confidence into victimhood

Historical grievances vis-a-vis the West have a long tradition in the political and cultural discourse of Eastern Europe. The specific content of the sense of victimhood varies across countries, but the feeling that the West owes something to the East – because the Westerners could live in freedom and wealth while the Easterners lived under Soviet occupation – is almost universal. The fact that no Marshall-plan was enacted after the fall of the Berlin wall and that Western companies were able to take over entire economic sectors, provided further fuel to the discourse of historical injustice. Frequent news indicating that multinationals supply lower quality goods for Eastern markets added insult to injury.

Clearly, the sentiment of being left behind, or being taken advantage of, has some objective basis, as attested by the remaining wage gap between Easterners and Westerners within Germany. The strong verbal but weak actual support given to anti-communist resistance (think of 1953, 1956, 1968, 1981, etc.) established the charge of Western hypocrisy. The unilateral decisions made by the government in Berlin concerning refugee-policies called into question the ability of the affected small countries to have their voice heard. The region between Turkey and Austria has been the buffer zone of the West against the Ottoman empire for centuries; now many of its citizens see a return of history, being again at the mercy of decisions made in far-a-way Western capitals.

These controversies fitted perfectly well into the culturally engrained sense of self-pity. Even in the strongest, and arguably most successful, country of the region, Poland, “victimhood became a legally protected value used to justify limitations of free speech and academic research” (Gliszczynska and Śledzińska-Simon 2018, 45). Memory-politics turned into an essential political battlefield, where the actors – both from the left and the right – use a post-colonial frame, risking “the danger of self-victimization – reiterating the image of a “martyr nation” persecuted by “alien” invaders” (Trencsényi 2018, 326).

Until recently, this resentment was not a particularly potent political force. What changed in the last decade is that it became infused with the perception of a failing West. One of the interesting innovations of the new generation of authoritarian-minded leaders was to insert a healthy dose of American-style “we can do it” optimism and self-confidence into the otherwise gloomy traditional mentality. After the refugee-crisis, in the midst of the proliferation of conflicts related to the multicultural social settings, self-pity turned into a pity of the West, without eliminating, however, the historical sense of victimhood.

According to the new narrative (which, of course, borrows a lot from the inter-war discourses), the West has abandoned those traditional values that made it so successful in the past. Turning its back on hard work, decency, respect for authority, national pride, and

stable, large and heterosexual families, the West became not simply decadent but also foolish. Westerners started to act contrary to their self-interest. Right-wing Hungarian politicians, who earlier complained about the selfishness of Germany, began to scold the German politicians for not standing up for German economic interests. The universalistic discourse of mainstream media and politics became increasingly regarded as artificially imposed on the spineless Western nations.

Universalism is claimed to be artificial because it denies a fundamental fact of politics: that someone must come first, and that this someone must be “we”. Accordingly, Trump, who is more popular in Eastern than in Western Europe<sup>2</sup>, is praised for his courage to consider “America first”. Ethnic particularism is presented as natural, while universalism is condemned as unsustainable. The failures of the European Union to hold together and to maintain its traditions are seen as evidence indicating that the liberal dogmas and taboos placed European civilization in danger.

In this approach the West appears as weak and totalitarian at the same time. The latter adjective is primarily used to capture the oppressive nature of political correctness, “ideas like gender equality and resettling refugees.” (Ost 2016). The acceptance and “celebration” of homosexuality, euthanasia, abortions, separation of children from parents and the attacks on traditional Christian values in general is labeled a culture of death (Kazharski 2019). Easterners cannot stop Westerners from committing suicide, but they can refuse to copy their example. The rejection of Western intervention is built on the “moral high ground” of the East (Orbán 2019a).

The role of the tensions within the European Union, and specifically the confusion concerning how to relate to the refugee crisis, cannot be underestimated. As an observer of Orbán’s politics put it, “Hungarian ideological entrepreneurship can be interpreted as attempts to redefine the meaning of Europe through discursive interventions into an already somewhat destabilized European project.” (Kazharski 2018, 774) The open discourse in Western societies about the fact that immigration may be a solution to demographic problems is interpreted as sign of decadence. The lavish spending of Polish, Czech and Hungarian governments on family-support is a symbol of trust in one’s ability to reproduce.

The audacity of the new authoritarian discourse is impressive. In September 2016 Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński jointly announced their intention to bring about a “cultural counter-revolution”. Ryszard Legutko, the co-chairman of the Conservatives and Reformists in the European Parliament and head of the PiS delegation asserted that “Poland is indeed in a position to make a difference in Europe. Whether in the long-term this will alter the European political landscape remains to be seen. But for the time being, we are a stronghold of Christianity in Europe.” (Lusch 2017) Orbán routinely calls Central Europe the future of Europe. He directly borrowed the “shining city on the hill” phrase from the standard American political rhetoric (Orbán 2019b).

Authoritarians of the past, Iliescu, Meciar, or Milošević, wanted to be left in peace. The active, proselytizing approach of Orbán constitutes a sharp departure from this attitude. He conducts surveys in all member states to assess the strength of his European rivals and allies, regularly sends his foreign minister to international meetings to scold the proponents of open society, and occasionally writes op-eds in Western media to the same effect.

But the mixture of Eastern background with pan-European ambitions is not unique to him. Another relevant example is PEGIDA, Germany’s anti-immigrant movement. The

abbreviation stands for “Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the *Occident*”, even though most members and activists came from the Eastern side of the Iron curtain. Its organizers see the “Wessies” to be too soft in defending the values, interests, and the way of life of the West.

The intellectual development of Czechia’s elder statesman, Václav Klaus, exemplifies a different trajectory, but with a similar outcome. Klaus was always an EU-skeptic to some degree, but originally he rejected both the Central and the Eastern European labels in favor of European integration. In the early 1990s he wrote, for example, that “We Czechs do not preach about Eastern European “specificities” produced during the fifty years of Communist dictatorship. We are for European integration and cooperation, and consider as self-evident that the West European pattern is a model for us.” (cited by Štěpánovský 1994). Today, however, he is an opponent of the European Union, considers Western hegemony to be “evidently over”, laments the fact that the U.S. “is infected by the virus of progressivism”, and supports Orbán against Western criticisms.<sup>3</sup>

### Cross-nationalisms

Yet another innovation of authoritarian politics was the coordination across national particularisms. The Visegrad four is a prime example of this new approach. In order to realize the significance of this initiative, it is helpful to remember the tensions between Slovakia and Hungary during the 1990s and 2000s. These tensions caused major concerns in Washington and Brussels, where Fidesz and Smer were seen as two nationalist parties at loggerheads with each other over the rights of Hungarians in Slovakia, the use of national symbols, and double citizenship. The ascendancy to government of these two parties was considered potentially destabilizing for the region.

Nothing further from the truth. Smer and Fidesz, Fico and Orbán, proved to be the strongest allies. This alliance rested on deeper foundations than the mutual sympathy between two regional strongmen. Leading nationalist ideologues of Fidesz declared the Slovak-Hungarian conflicts passé, even though none of the major demands of Fidesz (territorial autonomy for Hungarians, double citizenship, etc.) were met. The historical skirmishes have been replaced by the civilizational conflict that is about the survival of Christian culture, nations, nation-states and traditional families. The fight against the threats of an imminent cultural catastrophe, and against foreign interference, require a common front.

A nice illustration of how this new brotherhood developed, and how the elite-level changes precede the mass level dynamics, was provided by a football game between Slovakia and Hungary organized in Budapest on 9 September 2019, where the Hungarian fans chanted insulting slogans. Three days later the Slovak ministry of foreign affairs called in the Hungarian ambassador to complain. So far, the story must sound familiar, the naïve observer may think that not much has changed in Central European politics. But the game was, in fact, watched in the VIP section by the Hungarian prime minister and by the leader of the Slovak National Party, a party that has been defined for most of its existence by its sharp anti-Hungarianness. After the game the party leader thanked Orbán publicly “for the wonderful atmosphere”.

The official Serbian-Hungarian relations are equally ideal. And even if the Romanian-Hungarian nexus continues to be strained, Orbán praised Romania’s leaders for being

reliable allies in the fight against pro-migrant Western liberals. Looking from a historical distance, this is indeed remarkable. The wolf dwells with the lamb, and the leopard lies down with the young goat. Eastern nationalism transformed. The fear of the neighboring nation was replaced by concerns about multiculturalism, political correctness, and the lobby power of the LGBT community. Spectacularly, Israel, the traditional international bogeyman of the Eastern European radical right, became suddenly a role model. Likud has no stronger allies in Europe than among the nationalist leaders of Eastern Central Europe. While it is true that both nationalism and populism have, by definition, an exclusionary dimension, the first in horizontal, the latter in vertical terms (Jenne 2018, 547), their combination is not necessarily narrow-based. The more active the cosmopolitan international elite is perceived to be, the more there is a need for a rebel alliance.

The new peace among the neighboring nations has much to do with the fact that Eastern European politics became defined by a handful of strongmen, primarily Kaczyński, Orbán, Vučić, Fico, Đukanović, Dodik, Babiš, Zeman, Plahotniuc, Dragnea, Janša and Grueski (and more to the East: Putin). These otherwise domineering personalities have cooperated smoothly across the 2010s. They belong to different party families: Babiš is liberal, Fico is socialist, Vučić is affiliated with the EPP, etc. But a few common opinions, like opposition to the culture of political correctness, to horizontal accountability, or to the generous refugee policies of Berlin, provided a rudimentary common platform for them. Orbán was instrumental in connecting the actors from the Balkans with those of Central and Eastern Europe.

Most of the listed leaders have been focused on their own country, and had little interest in European politics. But because Orbán did, he was able to make the Eastern bloc, and especially the Visegrad alliance, to appear as ideologically more cohesive than it was in reality. When Slovak policemen joined the defense of the Hungarian borders in 2017 (a shocking symbolic move on its own), they were given at the border new *Visegrad 4* uniform.<sup>4</sup> Even more symbolically, Orbán's oligarchs and advisors established a new international, London-based, news agency that supplies Russian-style propaganda about the decline of the West. According to the self-definition of the agency called V4 "We give a balanced view of what is happening in the world around us and how our life is affected. We give a conservative, right wing perspective of the key political, economical, cultural and other news critical to the EU and the world."<sup>5</sup> What is remarkable about this self-definition is that it assumes that the Visegrad countries are all comfortable with these labels, and with the supplied right-wing authoritarian content. This is obviously not so, but the inward-looking orientation of the Polish, Czech and Slovak leaders allowed Orbán to turn the V4 brand into a vessel of his own ideas.

Orbán's rhetorical innovations allow him to build a regionalist narrative while maintaining a traditionalist nationalist orientation. Consider his speech commemorating the post-World War I treaties that turned Hungary into a major loser, and the neighboring states into major winners. No other historical event causes as much discord among the nations of the region then this one. But Orbán, after repeating many of the standard nationalist tropes in his speech, suddenly applies a different frame: "The West raped the thousand-year-old borders and history of Central Europe. They forced us to live between indefensible borders, deprived us of our natural treasures, separated us from our resources, and made a death row out of our country. Central Europe was redrawn without moral concerns, just as the borders of Africa and the Middle East were redrawn. We will never

forget that they did this.” (Orbán 2020) The “we” in these sentences clearly refers to Hungarians, but the role of enemy is no longer played by neighboring nations. In fact, these nations now appear as part of a region that was brutalized by the West. The winners and losers are all losers.

### The anti-immigrant platform

The refugee crisis has clearly exacerbated the East–West differences (Kazharski 2018). The gap in the degree of xenophobia has always been there, as attested by a multitude of surveys, but without the dramatic events of 2015 – and without the ideological entrepreneurship of the authoritarian elite – this gap could have remained inconsequential. The changes in the prevailing discourse unfolded within a very short period of time. In a book published in 2017 one of the foremost experts on right wing movements in Eastern Europe, Michael Minkenberg, wrote that “issues driving the West European radical right, that is immigration and insecurity, do not correspond to the agenda in the East which is much more centered on historical grievances or narratives, the role of national minorities (in the face of very low levels of immigration), and border questions” (Minkenberg 2017, 6). This may have been very well true when the manuscript was written, but by the time the book was published it was no longer valid. The Western agenda was borrowed and amplified by the Eastern nationalists.

The idea of admitting immigrants became explosive in many societies of the region not only because of the cultural stereotypes, but also because many ordinary citizens felt that it was their turn of getting state support. The potential immigrants were feared of jumping ahead in the line, similarly to how African-Americans are perceived in the United States. Eastern Europe’s own “blacks”, the Roma, have already been widely considered to be a large enough burden on the white citizens, any further addition was seen as outrageous.

Although the Czech discourse is more pragmatic than the Polish or the Hungarian one, after 2015 the originally non-ideological, and nominally liberal Czech leader, Andrei Babiš, showed himself to be as worried about the fate of European civilization as Orbán or Kaczyński. His position converged with the one of the social-democratic Miloš Zeman or the Thatcherite Václav Klaus, as they all protested against the attempts of EU and Germany at imposing a more welcoming refugee policy on the Eastern member states.

The anti-immigration argument became integrated into the decline-of-the-West argument. As the Slovak leader, Robert Fico, said, “The idea of multicultural Europe failed and the natural integration of people who have another way of life, way of thinking, cultural background and most of all religion, is not possible” (Kazharski 2018). In this view, avoiding multiculturalism at all costs, is simply common sense, and the Eastern European countries should not be compelled to repeat the mistakes of the West.

### State and society

Yet another innovation was the re-evaluation of the role of state and civil society, more particularly the condemnation of the latter. While earlier representatives of both left and right paid at least lip service to the importance of media- and civil control over the executive power, in the second part of the 2010s NGOs, together with critical media, became regarded, especially by politicians in power, as part of the problem, not the



solution. Examples such as Andrei Babiš' labeling of Transparency International a corrupt organization became commonplace.

In the new approach one needs to be elected in order to become a legitimate speaker in national debates. Once elected, on the other hand, one can legitimately venture beyond the conventional confines of governments. Public media and the civil service can be used for partisan goals because the governing majority represents the people, and the people rule in a democracy. In this view, not the tyrannical rule of the elected but the excessive influence of NGOs poses the real threat to democracy.

In the Hungarian context even the NGO-issue acquired international dimensions when the government attacked EU's financial support to civil society organizations. At a forum about immigration, Orbán, speaking after Nicolas Sarkozy, contrasted Western and Central Europe in terms of the leverage of leftist NGOs. He claimed that the "soft power, that consists of think tanks, NGOs, universities, the media and the public intellectuals, is 85% in the hands of the left-liberals in the West. In Central Europe, on the other hand, the ratio is 50–50%." The better conditions prevailing in the region allow him to speak his mind, while the Western politicians can no longer risk honesty (Orbán 2019a).

Incumbency is not a prerequisite for a negative attitude towards civic organizations. In Slovakia, for example, the Marian Kotleba and his party campaigns against foreign funded NGOs from opposition. The NGOs are accused by Kotleba to prepare unrest, and even coups d'état on behalf of George Soros and the U.S. authorities, and should be, therefore, obliged to use the "Warning! Foreign agent" disclaimer (Kazharski 2019, 8). The anti-Soros narrative used by Kotleba became, in fact, a lingua franca of the Eastern European authoritarians (though it received considerable support in the U.S. and in some Western European countries, too), further helping their supranational communication.

The flip side of the attacks on civil society is the veneration of a strong state. Again, there is a variation in the degree of state centrism among the authoritarian-minded politicians of the region, and also in what exactly is expected from the state. But most of them embrace a collectivist-paternalist ideology according to which the government needs to structure the life of the citizens. This statism is also intimately interwoven with traditionalism. As Ash (2019) put it, "disaffected voters are invited to escape the atomization of a superficial, Western-style consumer society, back into the bosom of the most traditional sources of community and identity: the family, the church, and the nation."

These traditional units of the society are not expected to act on their own, but through a state that is active in all spheres of life. As Orbán phrased it, the nation is an "organized community, whose members need to be protected and need to be prepared for a joint endeavor in the world. In fact, this is what binds them together into a society, into a community." (Orbán 2019b). Without organization from the top, there is no society.

The role of the military has not changed, but the governments became more active in providing military education for the youth and sponsoring paramilitary-organizations (Grzebalska 2017). School curricula were changed in order to provide for more patriotic content.<sup>6</sup> The only segment of the state that is treated with suspicion is the judiciary. According to Legutko, for example, "the courts have become more and more powerful institutions, and they derive their power from the irreconcilability of growing claims, entitlements, and privileges. An entire industry has been built that distributes favors to some and denies them to others." (Lusch 2017). Judges are attacked both as members of the elite, as representatives of a deep state, and as leftist activists. The out-of-touch principles

of defense lawyers and judges are seen as falling short of the standards of the popular sense of justice. According to Janez Janša, Slovenian Prime Minister, “key functions are in the hands of those who protect the élite, deep state, economic crime and tycoon networks, these are real octopuses of clientelism with tentacles reaching out to the highest peaks of the judiciary”.<sup>7</sup> Democracy and transparency requires the direct governmental intervention in the affairs of the judiciary.

### Incorporation of the discourse of radical right

Many elements of the current mainstream authoritarian ideology are borrowed, although with some modifications, from the extreme right. In this sense they are not real innovations. But the borrowing itself is an innovation, gradually transforming the mainstream actors. The most visible new element is the focus on conspiracies. Immigrants are considered to pose a threat not simply as foreign citizens on the move, but as stooges of an international elite. The real enemies are “the political, economic and intellectual leaders who are trying to reshape Europe against the will of the people of Europe”. Furthermore, “The planned transport to Europe of many millions of migrants is promoted by the coalition of the people smugglers, the human rights activists and Europe’s top leaders” (Orbán 2016)

The goal of this exposed unholy alliance is the elimination of national differences. “People, ethnic groups and cultures are stamped out to size like hamburgers, so that they can be turned into merchandise. Countries are transformed into railway stations, with everyone being able to move in and out freely” by the “globalists and liberals, the power brokers sitting in their palaces with ivory towers”, by “the swarm of media locusts”, and, of course, “by the transnational empire of George Soros” (Orbán 2017). The concept of “population replacement” became part of the mainstream discourse in the region.

Even in Slovakia, a country where progressive forces achieved major successes at the end of the decade, the discursive field was re-shaped by the co-optation of culturalist-conservative anti-migration rhetoric (Kazharski 2018, 2019). Politicians, like the leader of SME Rodina party, campaigned with the idea that Europe is exposed to a “controlled invasion” (Walter 2019).

Next to conspiracy theories, the other major borrowed product from the extreme right is the appearance of biological metaphors in political discourse. Kaczyński portrayed the arrival of refugees as a public health problem, and the promoters of gender theory a “threat to Polish identity, to our nation, to its existence and thus to the Polish state.”<sup>8</sup> In general, across the region, the defense of biological sex against “gender” became the rallying cry of the anti-Western forces, leading in many cases to the rejection of any international document that contained a reference to gender, including the Istanbul convention (Grzebalska and Pető 2017).

### The political resurrection of Christianity

In many, though not all, Eastern European countries, the shift towards authoritarianism has been coupled by an intensive identification with Christianity. The once anti-clerical Orbán

(2019b) called the 2010 victory of his party a “Christian regime-change”, a new break that complemented and overwrote the liberal regime transition of 1990.

Christianity is most often invoked in the context of abortion, gay rights, multiculturalism, immigration and gender-relations. As far as the latter is concerned, the enacted policies and the expressed ideals encourage a division of labor in which the maintenance of the family and of the household is the job of women. Moreover, the family as such is elevated to the status of a political unit, replacing the individual. Following up on this principle, Fidesz promoted the idea of giving parents more votes, and although this proposal was withdrawn, the mechanisms of state redistribution were redesigned in a way that made Hungary one of the most generous pro-family states in the world. Poland quickly followed suit. In 1989, in terms of gender relations in the labor market, Eastern European societies were more modern than the Western European ones. Today they are increasingly less so.

The supposedly universalistic Catholic Church has also undergone a transition. A minority of the clergy reacted to the refugee crisis by re-emphasizing the universalist message of the Church, taking moral support from the new leadership in the Vatican. But the majority faction became more active on the culture-war front, promoting a culturalist and “Europeanist” approach, thereby also distancing itself from the Latin American pope. The Polish Bishops’ Conference called, for example, non-heterosexual partnerships not simply wrong but “completely alien to European civilization.” (Ash 2019).

The diverging interpretation of Christian heritage and Christian democracy led to major debates within the right-wing party family. In a “memorandum” addressed to the European People’s Party in 2020 Viktor Orbán accused EPP of failing to represent Christianity, falling into the arms of gender ideology, becoming a centrist party alliance, and “sliding from the Christian right-wing towards the left”. Vytautas Landbergis, Lithuania’s first president, was writing already in 2008 about the demise of Western civilization, signaled by the omission of Christianity from the founding documents of the EU (Trencsényi 2018, 320). Ryszard Legutko also asserted that conservative and Christian-democratic parties in the West have capitulated to the leftist agenda. Even the British Conservative party “surrendered to the leftist bulldozer that has been devastating the Western world at least since 1968”<sup>9</sup>

Legutko’s 2016 book entitled “The demon in democracy: totalitarian temptations in free societies.” provided perhaps the most coherent ideological frame for the cultural counter-revolution. The fundamental argument of the book is that liberal democracy and communism are essentially the same, the liberals, with the help of the European Union, are colonizing more and more areas of human life, and although “Christianity is the last great force that offers a viable alternative to the tediousness of liberal-democratic anthropology”, no social rule having its roots in Christianity can withstand the onslaught of liberal democracy. The European Union and the European governments are paralyzed by their “Christophobia”.

But the emphasis on the political significance of Christian identity is not an exclusively right-wing attribute in the region. In 2015 the left-wing Slovak government, for example, declared that it will only accept Christian refugees, though later it adjusted its policies to EU’s requirements. In Romania, both the Social-Democrats and the Liberals supported the constitutional ban on same-sex marriage. While some of the new authoritarian leaders are religious, Christianity typically appears in the political discourse divorced from actual beliefs or religious practice, and in need of protection as part of the national and European way of life.

## Populist establishment

During the last decade one crucial innovation of the Polish and Hungarian political elites (and to a lesser extent, of the Slovak, Czech, Bulgarian and Romanian officials) was the consolidation and professionalization of populist rule and discourse. Populism is typically understood as a negative, transitory, disruptive and insurgent phenomenon. But many of these features may prove to be, in a larger context, not its inherent characteristics, but rather products of historical happenstance. After the Second World War populists faced a largely content and deferential electorate in much of the developed world. The talent of their leaders, their organizational capacity, or their internal discipline fell short of the challenges they needed to meet to become dominant players. They could not reach much further than to temporarily disrupt the well-oiled machinery of welfare states and liberal democracies.

But once the populist enterprises appear as compatible with the prevailing international order, they can start attracting actors who otherwise keep distance from such movements: donors, campaign managers, lawyers, and in general government insiders. These technocrats of populism often see more clearly than the media that the liberal world order is fragile, often relying on an informal and shallow elite consensus and not on robust commitments and resources.

Indeed, the 2010s revealed that the guardians of the liberal order, such as the U.S., the E.U., the mainstream media or the judiciary, have in fact rather limited scope to discipline the rebels. PiS and Fidesz, because they started out as moderate parties, were particularly successful in mobilizing experts who were knowledgeable about the decision-making mechanisms in Europe and could exploit the weaknesses of the system.

The stabilization of populist rule needs ideological creativity. Under populist governments the idea of a people-oppressing elite is retained but it is re-conceptualized in a way that the executive and the parliamentary majority are excluded from the definition. The populist discontent is channeled towards minorities and social-intellectual elites, both portrayed as puppets of foreign actors.<sup>10</sup> While exercising power, the rulers must remain the spokespersons of “the half of society that feels itself left behind, one way or another, by the churning of globalization, Europeanization, liberalization, and digitalization.” (Ash 2019). In this discourse Brussels signifies the bureaucratic elite that lost all touch with reality, and yet tries to impose its ideas on once sovereign nations.

Just like in classical populism, under populist establishment popular justice is considered to be of higher value than written law or the decisions of the courts. But, as opposed to classical populism, lawyers are put into the driving seat. Their job is to make sure that the rules and the administrative processes of the state are in line with the popular sense of fairness, as interpreted by the elected leaders.

In the framework of populist establishment the “will of the people” appears in various ways. Some channels are the traditional ones, primarily elections, occasionally referendums. Others are simulations, like Orbán’s “national consultations” in which citizens can choose between extreme left-libertarian and often non-sensical and widely popular, but authoritarian-leaning, alternatives. The “consultations” are preceded by lavishly financed mobilizing campaigns run by the entire state apparatus and much of the mass media (Batory and Svensson 2019).

In spite of the asymmetric and often disingenuous communication between state and society, some sort of representation does materialize in these systems. Public policies are

often adjusted to public preferences, and citizens are constantly reassured that their concerns are shared by the leaders. (Enyedi and Whitefield 2020). State benefits are distributed in the framework of political campaigns. The emphasis tends to be not on the development of the infrastructure but on the handing out of cash.

The discussed factors are manifestations of a relatively coherent ideology and political strategy, that I call paternalist populism (Enyedi 2016; Enyedi and Mölder 2018). Paternalist populism uses the anti-elitist and Manichean tropes of populism, but it is also anti-individualist and traditionalist, offering protection to the people against terrorism, poverty, multiculturalism and international competition. As opposed to some other versions of populism, direct democratic elements play a marginal role in paternalist populism, and NGOs and others instruments that could contribute to the scrutiny of the elites are treated with suspicion. The state has the moral obligation to guard, incentivize and educate the citizens, particularly the future generations, and to contribute to the development of a home-grown business elite.

The paternalist version of populism is special also in having a particularly long time-horizon: instead of focusing exclusively on contemporary dilemmas, it builds structures and enacts policies that are aimed at reproducing the status quo. The paternalist populists appreciate the achievements of the individuals, but consider the heterosexual, married families as the primary clients of the state. The rights and obligations of the citizens, and especially of the denizens, need to be aligned with the interest of the nation. Membership in the “people” category must be deserved: a life led in line with social norms is a precondition for having a say in the country’s public affairs. Elections formally allow the people to decide what is in the national interest, but substantially the national interest decides who the people are.

## Closing thoughts

Eastern Europeans managed to build relatively stable parties and governments, they marginalized the Communist elites and, with the exceptions of the Balkans, avoided irredentist wars. But they witnessed the rise of authoritarian forces, and in some instances, the stabilization of authoritarian practices. The disciplining power of the norms of liberal democracy appear today to be weaker than a decade earlier.

These developments were not simply products of the legacies of the past or the attitudes of the population. They required innovations from the authoritarian political forces.

This article focused on ideological frames, such as the cocktail of American style self-confidence and anti-Western resentment, the transformation of neighbor-hating nationalisms, the development of a civilizationist anti-immigrant platform, the delegitimization of civil society, the return to the belief in a strong state, the resurrection of the Christian political identity, and the transformation of populist discourse into a language that is compatible with governmental roles.

At the beginning of the paper I talked about a divide between East and West that is larger today than a decade ago. Of course, this divide can narrow in the coming years. The bad news is that this is likely to happen, at least in short run, more because of the Easternization of the West, than for the opposite reason. The growing focus on socio-cultural conflicts and identity-issues, the polarization between the cosmopolitan cities and the economically depressed and nationalist-traditionalist countryside, the ability of populist parties to stay in government, and the growing volatility of the electorates make the politics of Western countries increasingly familiar to the observers of East-European politics.

At the same time, the global evolutionary attitudinal changes towards more tolerance, less deferentialism, and more emancipatory values, affect both parts of the continent. The fear of these changes creates well organized authoritarian blocs, and the paper focused on the success of these blocs. But the appeal of authoritarianism is weaker among the younger cohorts, and the increasing prominence of the environmentalist agenda drives attention away from the issues of national homogeneity and sovereignty. Despite the success of some nationalist parties among the young, time is not on the side of the authoritarians. What they need to fear is not population replacement but generational replacement.

## Notes

1. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019/democracy-in-retreat>, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2019/01/08/the-retreat-of-global-democracy-stopped-in-2018>; <https://www.v-dem.net/en/>; <https://www.bti-project.org/en/home/>
2. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/01/08/how-people-around-the-world-see-the-u-s-and-donald-trump-in-10-charts/>
3. <http://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/former-leader-of-czech-republic-vaclav-klaus-western-hegemony-is-evidently-over/>
4. A year later Orbán tried to expand southward by offering troops to the Italians to protect the Mediterranean, and to return illegal immigrants.
5. <https://v4na.com/en/aboutus/>
6. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51612549>
7. <https://www.gov.si/en/news/2020-05-27-janez-jansa-on-radio-ognjisce-we-are-doing-everything-in-our-power-to-retain-the-potentials-of-slovenian-people-and-the-economy/>
8. <https://www.france24.com/en/20190425-kaczynski-calls-lgbt-rights-threat-poland>
9. Ryszard Legutko's remarks on July 15, 2019 during the "International Institutions vs. National Independence" panel at the 2019 National Conservatism Conference. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWuD3tSsbQI>
10. Hegedüs (2019) calls the latter the externalization of the enemy.

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## Notes on contributor

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