The Post-Communist Far Right and Its Transnational Linkages

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Abstract

In this special issue, our contributors move the academic conversation beyond methodological nationalism and approaches that analyze far-right movements only within their respective state contexts by interrogating the circulation of ideologies, funds, and people across sociopolitical boundaries. Our goal is to scrutinize the far right in post-communist Eastern Europe by examining the multitudinous and multidirectional ties that exist between groups at the local, regional, national, and transnational levels. Attention, moreover, is paid not just to those factors that facilitate such linkages, but also to the obstacles that hamper these flows via various detours, omissions, and other forms of resistance. In this introduction, we offer a theoretical overview and discussion of contributors' findings to argue that conduits for the dissemination of far-right discursive frames are hardly unidirectional in nature. As a result, the transitological narratives of progress and regress typically invoked to explain the emergence of the far right offer only a partial understanding of how it mobilizes, builds alliances, and circulates ideas. We unpack the conceptual pitfalls and fallacies of transitological narratives and instead foreground the concept of multidirectionality, which opens up new avenues through which to understand how far-right groups mobilize and disseminate their narratives.

Introduction

This special issue focuses on the rise of far-right groups across post-communist Europe and the transnational ties that they have cultivated.[1] In the late 1980s and early 1990s, states moving away from communism attempted to simultaneously liberalize their political, societal, and economic arrangements. Lacking coherent proposals for a "third way," most decisionmakers came to believe that the adoption of free markets and liberal democratic forms of governance was inevitable, the expectation being that these states would eventually integrate with the prevailing institutional structures of the West and adopt their attendant norms and mores. For a time, the plan seemed to work; in the 1990s and early 2000s, even the Russian Federation sought to Europeanize, with Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin proposing that Moscow join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and cooperate closely with the European Union (EU).

By the mid-2000s, however, this homogenizing paradigm was sorely tested. Whereas in the 1990s the radical right in Eastern Europe was weak in comparison to the radical right in Western Europe, the EU's enlargement in 2004 and then again in 2007 bolstered nativist appeals throughout the region. In part, this stemmed from the impression that economic unification and the introduction of a single currency had "amputated the economic arms of national governments"

(Polyakova 2015, 17), leading to what many in the post-communist region viewed as a profound loss of self-determination and status (Vieten and Poynting 2016). However, the economic problems experienced during the transition from state socialism were of secondary significance in facilitating the rise of the far right when compared to the burgeoning political rhetoric concerned with cultural, ethnic, and civilizational threats (Lucassen and Lubbers 2012, 551).

Discourses that foreground these ideational factors and relate them to the ontological or existential security of the nation have become more prominent and persistent in recent years; this is true not just across the post-communist space but throughout Europe as a whole (e.g., Mälksoo 2015; Morieson 2023). One proximate trigger was the 2015 migrant crisis, which saw a massive influx of refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) challenge ideas of spatial belonging and European-ness (Polyakova and Shekhovtsov 2016). But while the migrants, the overwhelming majority of whom were non-white and Muslim, served as a glaring reminder of divides in public opinion over the limits of national inclusion (Mikenberg 2021), their presence was not what brought about the political reification of these tensions. Meta-cleavages in Europe's identity discourse date back much further, rooted as they are in the profound sociocultural dislocations that have taken place across the continent since World War II.

Among other manifestations of this trend, rising levels of secularization have challenged traditional conceptions of gender roles and sexual propriety, creating rifts between those who champion LGBTQ+ causes and those who rue what they perceive to be threats to religious liberties and the nuclear family. Concomitantly, a growing juridical and supranational emphasis on the universality of human rights, grounded in the de-territorialized experiences of individuals and minorities rather than a collective, has also butted up against the mythopoeic recall that undergirds ethno-nationalism as a political project. Cosmopolitan memory, which stresses the suffering of a state's victims – as opposed to national memory, which typically glorifies the polity and its suitably vetted heroes while eliding nuanced consideration of difficult historical episodes and moral culpability for past crimes – has been waxing across the western half of the continent since at least the 1980s, when the *Historikerstreit* in West Germany caused a public and painful reckoning with the Nazi past (Levy and Sznaider 2002).

That this manner of remembering gained traction in a milieu where European integration efforts promoted post-nationalism and growing societal shame over wartime and colonial pasts made appeals to triumphalist historical accounts appear unseemly is not surprising. Nonetheless, this phenomenon brought with it a backlash among those who refused to view their nations' histories through a critical lens. The reaction was especially potent in the post-communist region, where sovereign nation-states had only existed for a short period, if at all, prior to the imposition of Soviet suzerainty and nationalist appeals played a seminal role in catalyzing the transition away from Marxist-Leninist precepts beginning in the mid-1980s, leading nationalism to be regarded by many regional actors as a force for liberation rather than oppression (Darden and Grzymala-Busse 2006; Beissinger 2009).

As a result, electorates and political elites increasingly soured on the promises and demands of liberalism, perceiving it not as a means of ensuring equal protections for all but rather as a threat to national identities, historic myths, and traditional values (Krawatzek and Soroka 2022; Soroka and Krawatzek 2019). In some cases, former dissidents and anti-communist activists became the leaders of reactionary and xenophobic political projects, while in others nationalist figures who had been long marginalized found a new lease on life.

Not all of those disgruntled with progressive politics in Europe embraced far-right, as opposed to simply socioculturally conservative, positions; indeed, those in the former camp were and remain in the minority. At the same time, there is little doubt that extreme right-wing groups and the figures that represent them have been politically ascendant for some time now. However, while numerous researchers have examined their rise, most have done so in a domestic setting. What remains understudied about the growth of the far right in Europe, and among the post-communist states in particular, are the extensive transnational allies and networks of supporters these entities have

managed to cultivate, both among like-minded representatives of an illiberal "civil society" and state actors such as Russia. As a result, how transnational ties serve to bolster the visibility and success of the far right in post-communist Europe is the central theme of this special issue.

Goal and Method

Transnationalism has been under serious scholarly scrutiny since at least the 1990s. However, as Sedef Arat-Koç observes, the concept has been operationalized in differing ways, including in relational terms – as proposed by the feminist scholar Ella Shohat – wherein concurrent feedback loops operate on multiple levels and to polysemous effect. Under this rubric, "to meaningfully see/establish connections between and beyond the nation-state level, a transnational framework would need to involve a good understanding of issues at the local and national level" (2007, 36). Katherine Verdery similarly reminds us that transnationalism and nationalism are intertwined via synchronous "globalizing and localizing processes" that are "mutually constitutive; i.e., they shape one another both simultaneously and sequentially" (1998, 292). Heeding these admonitions, in this special issue our contributors move the academic conversation beyond methodological nationalism and approaches that analyze far-right movements only within their respective state contexts by interrogating the circulation of ideologies, funds, and people across sociopolitical boundaries. Attention, moreover, is paid not just to those factors that facilitate such interchanges, but also the obstacles that hamper these flows via various detours, omissions, and other forms of resistance.

This exploration highlights four key dimensions in the transnational trajectories of the far right:

1) *geographical*, meaning the transnational connections that far-right groups have established between Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and the geopolitical West;
2) *chronological*, referring to the longitudinal development of the post-communist far right from the World War II era through the Cold War to the present day;
3) *structural*, examining the post-communist radical right from the standpoint of its organizational types and their antecedents, such as previous civic movements or political parties;
4) *institutional*, encompassing the formal as well as informal mechanisms ("rules of the game") through which far-right actors engage with one another and their supporters across political and sociocultural boundaries.

In doing so, we balance against the prominent scholarly attention paid to domestic-level factors and processes as the sole drivers of the far right's upsurge. Specifically, extant scholarship tends to focus on three main conceptual categories, all of which are interrelated but operate at different analytical levels (e.g., state versus individual) and within shifting explanatory frameworks (i.e., functioning as either independent or dependent variables), when describing the successes of the far right.

First, there is an emphasis on interstitial *transitionary processes*, including

a. autocratization – the erosion or "decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1096);
b. backsliding – "destabilization or even a reversal in the direction of democratic development" (Greskovits 2015, 28);
c. hollowing out – "a notion of democracy that is being steadily stripped of its popular component – democracy without a demos" (Mair 2006, 25).

Second, another stream of thought centers on the *reactive nature* of the extreme right, seeing its rise as constitutive of a backlash against progressive cultural and political phenomena. Prominent among these are the increasing attention accorded to minority rights (especially those of the LGBTQ+ community), pro-refugee policies (as these relate to migrants deemed to be racially or

religiously "other"), and the demands of EU integration (frequently seen as attenuating national distinctiveness).

Finally, there is a strand of research that points to *autochthonous factors* when assessing the emergence of the far right. In this line of thinking, illiberal elements have always been present in polities. Inherent herein is the notion of a parallel society, suggesting that potential challenges to the liberal democratic order are never far from the surface. This understanding may even extend to the establishment of what Grzebalska and Pető term a "polypore state," or an illiberal set of political arrangements under which the state, captured by far-right elements, "feeds" fungi-like on the existing institutions of democracy (2018).

Below we briefly describe these schemata and assess their common denominator, namely the normative assumption of linearity embedded in sociopolitical change of the sort experienced by European states extricating themselves from Marxist-Leninist regimes, the study of which has come to be referred to as "transitology."[2] In doing so, we discuss why we believe this represents an unjustifiably reductionist approach that hampers efforts to understand the circulation of far-right ideologies in the post-communist region.

Transitionary Processes

Autocratization

Autocratization may be understood as a "substantial de-facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1096). This definition is relatively straightforward, but the analytical challenge lies in identifying the inception and progression of what is often "a gradual transition into electoral authoritarianism" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1098). However, despite the difficulties in ascertaining when exactly a polity slips into the process of autocratization, it is undeniable that democratic regimes are facing challenges throughout the world. As the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project points out, "the level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2020 is down to the levels around 1990" (Hellmeier et al. 2021, 1053).

Reversals in democratic performance have been especially prominent in the post-communist region, with Poland ranking number one among the autocratizing countries assessed by V-Dem, featuring a dramatic Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) decline of 34 percent between 2010 and 2020. Indeed, among the top ten autocratizing states surveyed during this period, two others were also from this region: Hungary, which ranked second with a LDI decline of 32 percent and Serbia, which ranked fifth with a LDI decline of 27 percent (V-Dem 2021, 19). As researchers note:

> The playbook of "wannabe" dictators seems to have been shared widely among leaders in (former) democracies. First, seek to restrict and control the media while curbing academia and civil society. Then couple these with disrespect for political opponents to feed polarization while using the machinery of the government to spread disinformation. Only when you have come far enough on these fronts is it time for an attack on democracy's core: elections and other formal institutions. (V-Dem 2021, 22)[3]

Backsliding

In contrast to the more overtly agent-centric approach scholars of autocratization embrace, the notion of backsliding preferentially focuses its analytic lens on institutional-level factors that function to undermine the quality of democratic regimes, including corruption, the weakening of checks-and-balances on political bodies, and governmental encroachment on the work of non-profit organizations, media outlets, and academia.[4] This represents what Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley (2018) term a "paradigm" of backsliding, exemplified by the playing out of processes that cause a "destabilization or even a reversal in the direction of democratic development" (Greskovits 2015, 28).

Democratic backsliding has been at the heart of contemporary debates on post-communist affairs. Although scholarly scrutiny initially focused heavily on Hungary and Poland, backsliding has been studied across the region, including among former Soviet states and in the Western Balkans (Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018), Czechia (Hanley and Vachudova 2018), and Serbia and Bulgaria (Dawson 2016). We have likewise witnessed comparative efforts to evaluate the trajectories of backsliding between states, as with Hungary and Latvia (Greskovits 2015).

Complementing these cross-sectional studies, other researchers have focused on longitudinal comparisons, tracing the historical scope and scale of backsliding. In the post-communist space, these inquiries usually begin with reconsidering the regime transition that took place in Poland in 1989 and the demonstration effects it engendered among neighboring states. Given that Poland and its erstwhile Warsaw Pact neighbors were long held up as democratic success stories, the appearance of a "reverse wave" of democratization (Huntington 1991) in the region prompted considerable consternation among liberally inclined policymakers, bringing with it supranational sanctions against states seen as transgressing democratic principles and leading to questions over the EU's inability to prevent the deterioration of democracy among its member states. However, despite the hyper-attention accorded to the institutional ramifications of contemporary backsliding, the origins of this phenomenon and its relevance for advancing our understanding of the far right remain understudied.

Scholars oftentimes discuss backsliding in relation to the emergence of "illiberalism," a term used to describe democracies that have adopted majoritarian patterns of behavior wherein individual and minority-group rights are not fully protected. The teleological implications of this perceived halt or reversal in a democracy's evolution are embedded in the terms employed to categorize it, which possess a decidedly linear valence: "democratic regression" (Diamond 2021); "democratic rollback" (Diamond 2008); "de-democratization" (Bogaards 2018); "democratic recession,"(Lührmann and Lindberg 2019); and "democratic deconsolidation" (Mounk and Foa 2016). Such framing is generally accompanied by efforts to uncover the mechanisms of democracy's "decay" or "erosion" (Gerschewski 2021).[5] As a result, researchers place regime variants that fail to align with notions of progress embedded in Western culture in a political grey zone, qualifying the noun "democracy" with such adjectives as "defective," "façade," "pseudo," or "partial."[6]

Backsliding has frequently been situated in relation to identity politics and ethnic nationalism, associating the roots of the phenomenon with a slippage from pluralism to monism (Bill and Stanley 2020). In terms of proffered causal mechanisms, it has been seen as a response to socio-economic challenges such as the Great Recession of the late 2000s (Bernhard 2021), the 2016 European financial crisis (Drozdiak 2017), and, more broadly, rising economic disparities across the developed world (Piketty 2014). With respect to the latter, it is worth noting that post-communist societies' shift from "substantial equality towards to one of high inequality" in the decade after 1990 saw an *average* increase of 45 percent in income inequality (Karakoc 2013, 197).

Additionally, backsliding has also been seen as an outcome of "'tectonic' shifts in civil society," when, as was the case in Hungary, "the national question, Christianity, and anti-Communism merged with anti-liberalism" (Greskovits 2017, 6). Indeed, civil society the world over increasingly appears to be reflecting manifestations of "bonding" (i.e., intragroup) rather than "bridging" (i.e., intergroup) social capita (read: trust), reinforcing divisions between groups rather than raising the overall level of trust across the entirety of society (Putnam 2000). In the post-communist context, the former comports to what has been described as "pillarized" civil society, the existence of which makes politics an increasingly zero-sum game (Ekiert 2020).

More specifically, Euroscepticism and sociopolitical pushback against Western notions of progressive policies seen as threatening to the dominant ethnonym have culminated in the emergence of an "uncivil" civil society that is exclusionary along a number of dimensions, including territorially, biologically, and mnemonically (Bolzendahl and Gracheva 2018; Guerra 2017). The latter of these is particularly interesting given the contentious "memory wars" that have arisen throughout post-communist Europe in the last two-plus decades, rendering how the past is recalled a politically salient variable in inter-group relations within and between states.[7]

Last but not least, like with scholarship focused on autocratization, the democratic backsliding literature often links the erosion of liberal democracy to the rise of ethno-populism. Implemented both as a strategy for gaining electoral success and a useful tool through which to concentrate personal power, politicians adopt ethno-populist appeals to legitimate their illiberal and authoritarian designs by claiming that these reflect the "will of the people."[8]

Hollowing Out

If autocratization and backsliding refer to processes that play out at the analytical level of the state and that are typically facilitated by elite actors or involve institutions, studies focusing on the "hollowing out" of democracy are apt to stress mechanisms operative at the grass-roots level, with the key variables of interest being the factors that cause individuals to become less civically engaged over time. Given this, in the present context "hollowing out" represents the "general European problem of declining popular involvement in politics" (Greskovits 2015, 28).

The technocrat-heavy EU has long been criticized for exhibiting a "democratic deficit" in terms of how it creates regulations and administers policies (Kratochvil and Sychra 2019). This, coupled with competing visions of what the Union should be and the perception that Brussels is too removed from the everyday affairs of ordinary Europeans to be meaningful to them, has significantly impinged on its legitimacy and relevance. Among other indicators, voter turnout rates for European Parliament elections are consistently low throughout the EU member states; moreover, they have been trending steadily downward since the first elections were held in 1979 in what then still the European Community (Remer-Bollow, Bernhagen, and Rose 2019).

Juxtaposed atop this reality have been concomitant reports of dropping levels of party affiliation across the developed world, including in Europe (van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012), and the escalation of extreme political instability (Smolka 2021). Declining rates of group membership and interpersonal engagement, along with what many perceive to be burgeoning incivility, are not just restricted to the political sphere. While much of the research has thus far proven inconclusive, manifold factors have been proposed to account for the proliferation of these phenomena. Among those that have been implicated in the falloff of civic engagement are television watching (Putnam 2000), individuals' geographic mobility and attendant lack of spatial rootedness (Magre, Vallbé, and Tomas 2016), growing economic inequality (Levin-Waldman 2013; Lim and Sander 2013; Schröder, Melchior, and Neumayr, 2023), demographic heterogeneity (Costa and Kahn 2003), generational change (Sloam 2014), and the "filter bubble"/ "echo chamber" effects of self-sorting into homogenous communities (Ilardi 2021). Meanwhile, it has been widely argued that the proliferation of disinformation/propaganda/ "fake news" on social media platforms, along with informational websites of dubious veracity more generally, has had a chilling effect on public engagement across ideological lines and the overall quality of democratic discourse (Frischlich et al. 2021; Olaniran 2020).

The above-noted factors are all present, and in some cases amplified, in the post-communist space, as demonstrated by the relationship between economic inequality and low levels of civic engagement (Karakoc 2013). Likewise, some researchers have argued that the "trust deficit" displayed by post-communist publics is an artefact of communism (Pop-Eleches 2007);[9] among its other effects, lack of trust between individuals is commonly assumed to be the reason for the anemic levels of volunteerism encountered in the region. Such legacy effects are similarly said to encroach on levels of societal support for democracy and free markets (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017).

Reactionary Nature

The previous discussion focused on the factors and phenomena that are thought to bring about the emergence of the far right and facilitate its sociopolitical advancement; in contrast, the strand of literature that analyzes its reactive nature is more interested in how the groups that make up this

antipode of the political spectrum respond to various stimuli and, in turn, the ways in which this affects their organizational ability (and electability). In effect, while the independent variables considered (e.g., advancement of LGBTQ+ rights, migration, dissatisfaction with the EU) remain the same, the outcome of interest changes, the narrative shifting from assessing how the radical right comes about to assessing how radical right attitudes are activated and mobilized.

Characteristically, far-right groups distrust the EU, though they share this in common with more moderate conservatives across the post-communist region. Environmental issues and COVID-19 policies have more recently emerged as loci of political contestation in far-right circles. Other issues of significance to far-right actors are more localized, including discourses over women's access to abortion in Poland, which enacted a near-total ban on the procedure in 2021 (Kulczycki 2023), the promulgation of antisemitic tropes as a means of criticizing George Soros' funding of pro-democracy NGOs in Hungary (Kalmar 2020), and the contestation of the post-1989 narrative of German reunification by the *Alternative für Deutschland* to "reshape the country's memory culture to celebrate national greatness rather than focus on atoning for past misdeeds" (Richardson-Little, Merrill, and Arlaud 2022, 1360). Clearly, the demands that give expression to far-right positions are manifold and cannot be distilled, in the aggregate, to any singular touchstone, though xenophobia, racism, Islamophobia, antisemitism, and homophobia often figure prominently.

However, a paradigmatic theme of the European far right is that of opposition to immigration by people of non-European/non-Christian backgrounds. Throughout the continent, concerns over migration and related integration initiatives are at the forefront of the movement's agenda. Therefore, while it is "inappropriate to reduce the radical Right to its position on immigration," the topic nevertheless represents the "main theme where they claim 'issue ownership'" (Minkenberg 2021, 417).

Immigration is also a major focal point for the far right in the post-communist space (despite most external migrants preferring to settle in wealthier European states like Sweden or Germany), but here we must also add resistance to the promulgation of LGBTQ+ rights as a defining feature of the regional movement. This represents an ideological demarcation that effectively bifurcates the continent (Magni and Reynolds 2023). In western Europe, a great many – though certainly not all – far-right groups have come to accept homosexuality, and today even argue against taking in Muslim migrants from the MENA region on the basis of their alleged intolerance concerning sexual minorities. In contrast, within the post-communist states the far right remains much more homophobic (Cornejo-Valle and Ramme 2021; Sweigart 2022; Żuk and Żuk 2020).[10]

Consequently, migration and LGBTQ+ rights are the two dimensions along which we may most clearly discern the reactive nature of the far right in this part of the world. These themes are prominent in radical discourses because they serve as a sort of "short-hand" for broader complexes of sociopolitical grievance, standing in for and encoding more inchoate and less readily reifiable concerns, including advancing secularization, perceived civilizational threat, and feared loss of national autonomy. Additionally, they may serve a preference falsification function, allowing, for example, public-facing far-right figures to couch Islamophobia or racism in the somewhat more respectable guise of arguing that migrants from different parts of the world should not be admitted to their country because such individuals would have difficulty with assimilating to the dominant culture.

If we examine anti-migrant appeals in relation to the reactionary stances espoused among far-right groups, we see that the politics of grievance is front-and-center in these narratives. "Radical right parties," as Lenka Bustikova explains, "arise as a backlash against concessions extracted by politically organized ethnic and social minorities" (2014, 1740). There exists an implicit linkage to majoritarianism/populism in this relationship, in that when minorities are politically successful, the far right appears to gain strength; conversely, when minority demands are not accommodated, it loses influence (Bustikova 2014). The dynamism implicit herein also encompasses reactionary politics over longer timeframes: "In the post-war era, the political fortunes of the radical Right,

along with concomitant scholarship, underwent a significant shift when transnational migration grew. The radical Right's focus on the 'politics of the past' reoriented towards anti-immigrant politics" (Minkenberg 2021, 416–417).

Autochthonous Factors

Closely related to considerations of the reactionary nature of the far right, which do not delve so much into how it *comes about* but rather how it *functions*, is the notion of the far right as reflective of preexisting societal realities and biases. Instead of focusing on how the far right is incubated by, or responds to, external stimuli, here analysis shifts from examining *ex-post* outcomes to *ex-ante* antecedents and their processual development, focusing on how sentiments that are presumed to organically exist within society are politically activated. Borrowing from the study of nationalism, if the former approaches may be regarded as being more malleable and responsive – and thus more "constructivist" and "supply-side" oriented – then autochthonous factors could be seen as stemming from the embrace of a more "primordial" worldview and as being driven by "demand-side" expectations.

From this perspective, one of the most influential strands of regional literature is that concerned with post-communist states' incomplete shift toward liberalism and democracy. Scholars in this vein point out that while many of these states eventually fulfilled the rote expectations of "democratic consolidation" by formally meeting EU accession criteria, full democratization was never achieved. Shortcomings in this respect were even more glaring among polities that were not provided with a roadmap to EU membership, such as the post-Soviet states (with the exception of the Baltics) or most of the former Yugoslavia (Greskovits 2015).

For this reason, certain scholars are cautious about discussing democratic reversals in the post-communist region; after all, if liberal democracy broadly writ was never really present, what is there to reverse? Erika Harris (2019), for instance, observes that in Slovakia illiberalism marked most of post-1989 era and emerged well prior the establishment of far-right LSNS (2019). From this perspective, the vestiges of Slovakia's former regime did not abruptly disappear after 1989, but spilled haphazardly into what followed, ensuring that it would be characterized by an amalgam of communism and capitalism, as outwardly reflected in the continued salience of traditionalism, strong family ties, and statism/political collectivism (Marušiak 2020, 110).

This "incomplete transition" phenomenon has also been observed among other post-communist polities such as Bulgaria and Romania (two late EU joiners), as well as among the post-Soviet "never EU" states such as Armenia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. However, even within Hungary and Poland, once thought to be unabashed success stories when it came to democratization, autochthonous factors have led to less-than-optimal outcomes. As Seán Hanley reminds us, "traditions of cultural conservatism and economic illiberalism" did not disappear post-1989 and their continued presence was not sufficiently taken into account when evaluating faltering democratic and liberal commitments in Poland (Hanley 2021). Attesting to this are the grueling and prolonged debates the country has engaged in regarding transitional justice (Nalepa 2022).

Within many post-communist states, societal divides and what scholars describe as pathologies reveal themselves most profoundly in the economic realm, the region being one where inchoate political transitions have frequently resulted in stilted markets, as reflected in such concepts as "state capture" (Hellman, Jones, and Kaufmann 2003), "partial reform" equilibria (Hellman 1998), and the "mid-transition trap" (Vujačić and Petrović-Vujačić 2020). Nevertheless, even though broad themes and commonalities may be discerned, much of what gives rise to and motivates the post-communist far right is situationally dependent, demanding we recognize localized complexities and feedback loops that operate on multiple levels, including the transnational. This should discourage us from theorizing sweeping, unidimensional "explanations" for what has occurred in this region since communism collapsed.

Narratives of Progress vs. Regress

It is not surprising that EU integration efforts and post-communist democratic transitions have been one-sidedly promoted as linear, teleological processes, leaving out the possibility of their regression or multidirectional development.[11] It could hardly be otherwise when debates between Europhiles and Eurosceptics ossify around the notion of progress and continuity, at the core of which is a tension that emerges from oftentimes competing (and perhaps irreconcilable) local, regional, and transnational identities. (Substantially the same point could be made about promoters of liberal democratic values and their majoritarian interlocutors.) The potential enmity that exists between these levels of sociopolitical meaning creation constitutes a key obstacle for the formulation of a unified and uncontroversial European identity (Patel 2020).

This fixation on the inexorable nature of *progress* as it applies to supranational entities such as the EU or the post-communist democratizers is discernible across much of the literature, presumably influenced more by academics' aspirational commitments than their empirical observations. Its effect is to introduce an analytical myopia that runs the risk of turning what should properly be the study of processes into the assessment of binary and value-laden outcomes. We see this tendency in much of the institutionalist literature concerned with democratization, wherein institutions are interpreted as the creators and guardians of a liberal democratic order, while illiberal cultural currents endeavor to subvert them. Such narratives introduce an overly simplistic and didactic typology of what is "good" and what is "not good." Moreover, the attendant obsession with linearity, with outcomes oriented along a spatial-temporal continuum that ranges between communism and liberal democracy, obliterates the possibility that a *multidirectional* symbiosis (Rothberg 2009) of continuities and discontinuities – resulting in multiple and overlapping trajectories – define transitions in East-Central Europe from pre-1989 to post-1989, all of these functioning within a historical system characterized by the uneven distribution of capital, resources, and power.

A preoccupation with unidirectional historical development has been at the core of the so-called "transitology" literature, which enjoyed its heyday in the 1990s. Heavily influenced by Western thinking on sociopolitical progress and its teleological underpinnings, this institutionalist body of work tended toward universalizing policy prescriptions, which is not surprising given that it drew significant inspiration from prior regime transitions in Latin America. However, as Thomas Carothers already observed more than two decades ago, the idea that "any country moving away from dictatorship was in transition to democracy has often been inaccurate and misleading" (2002, 14).[12] This admonition regarding assumptions of linearity has repeatedly proven pertinent in the post-communist world; nevertheless, more than a few pundits still express something bordering on bewilderment when considering the situation in contemporary Hungary and Poland, which today exist in a political grey zone characterized by illiberalism, populism, and rampant xenophobia. That the present reality was unforeseen by so many otherwise knowledgeable observers stands as a testament to the enduring potency of such misguided theoretical formulations.

Linearity (and Its Antecedents)

The propensity to demarcate slippage from "good" to "bad" when considering sociopolitical outcomes along the metrics of liberalism and democracy did not emerge in a vacuum, but rather picks up on strands of Western triumphalism in the wake of the Cold War's end (e.g., Fukuyama 1992). Moreover, unidirectional understandings of history are also rooted in what Balibar and Wallerstein term "the nationalist myth of linear destiny," which appropriates the pre-history of nations for its ideological purposes (1991, 92). Elaborating on this, they argue that this pre-history is decidedly non-linear in form:

> First, it consists of a multiplicity of qualitatively distinct events spread out over time, none of which implies any subsequent event. Second, these events do not of their nature belong to the history of *one* determinate nation. They have occurred within the framework of political units

other than those which seem to us today endowed with an original ethical personality (this, just as in the twentieth century the state apparatuses of the 'young nations' were prefigured in the apparatuses of the colonial period, so the European Middle Ages saw the outlines of the modern state emerge within the framework of "Sicily", "Cataloniapound"; or "Burgundy"). And they do not even belong by nature to the history of the *nation*-state, but to other rival forms (for example, the 'imperial' form). It is not a line of necessary evolution but a series of conjunctural relations which has inscribed them after the event into the pre-history of the nation form. It is the characteristic feature of states of all types to represent the order they institute as eternal, though practice shows that more or less the opposite is the case. (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991, 92)

Critically approaching and challenging the notion of linearity inculcated into our worldview by nation-states' historiographic traditions allows us to hypothesize that the presence of far-right movements among post-communist polities is not the inevitable result of their "regress." At the same time, we must evaluate the possibility that these movements did not emerge and come to prominence independently of one another, but rather that they are intertwined and linked by dint of global processes, while synchronously expressing specificities acquired in the sociopolitical, cultural, economic, and mnemonic environments of their respective local/regional/national contexts.

Similarly, the idea of transitional linearity operating in tandem with Western concepts of sociopolitical progress results from a taxonomy of knowledge that effectively eliminates consideration of what happened after 1989 as a multidirectional process, one moreover that may be appreciated through a colonial lens. Notions of progress are ineluctably bound to the advent of linear time-keeping conventions; in turn, both concepts are part and parcel of a chrono-politics that "shows how the coloniality of knowledge and being is managed by the Euro-centered system of ideas built around the colonization of time" (Mignolo 2011, 178). Elaborating on this point, Walter Mignolo writes:

While bio-politics or necro-politics are politics of the state as it *regulates* the populations (be it within the imperial state or in the colonies), chrono-politics served (during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, to detach the Renaissance from its own tradition – the Middle Ages – and during the Enlightenment to detach European modernity from the "primitives") in the era of neoliberal globalization it has become one of the main weapons to *promote competition*, thereby encouraging fast speed and success, consuming the energy of millions of people who live their lives constantly thinking of going faster and getting ahead, to being a winner and to avoiding the shame of being a loser. (2011, 178)

Although the colonial mindset of chrono-politics translated into the EU, which was desirous of pushing forward European integration efforts, fast-tracking the accession bids of multiple post-communist states during the 1990s, the process was tackled mainly through the strictures of international relations, a field trapped in narratives of linear progress, notably its "continued commitments to state-centric and positivist approaches" (Georgis and Lugosi 2013, 2) And in case of American IR theorizing, as the work of Robert Vitalis (2015) and others demonstrates, these narratives appear "deeply steeped in racist thinking" (Rutland 2022, 636) due to their linkages to European civilizational projects.

In contrast to unidirectional transitology, which posits that implementing the "correct" liberal institutions will promote the democratic progress of a society while attacks by illiberal cultural elements will stunt or reverse this development, the idea of multidirectionality in transnational contexts allows for the generation of new insights into the circulation, dissemination, empowerment, and mobilization of far-right movements, allowing a deeper understanding of historical agency and the implications of its agents in a broader geo-temporal context, or what Immanuel
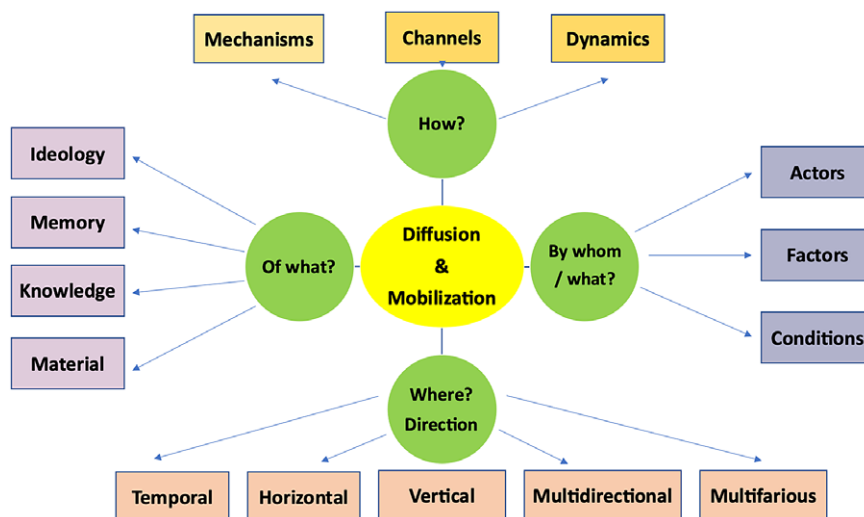
Figure 1. Transnational links. Source: Authors.

Wallerstein has described as a "historical system" correlated with the global capitalist economy wherein the "development of one region is linked to the underdevelopment of the other region" (Boatcă 2021). As proponents of Dependency Theory point out, such linkages form a mutually interdependent system of centers, semi-peripheries, and peripheries, with these components respectively displaying varying "degrees of 'coreness' and peripherality, related to local as well as global hierarchies of power and prestige" (Kalmar 2022, 13). In other words, we cannot predict that Bulgaria's future will resemble England's past in terms of meeting the West's liberal democratic standards, because utilizing the state as the unit of analysis – rather than considering transnational entanglements, where nation-states as well as other groupings that engage in cross-border interactions are mutually interdependent but decidedly not coequal – risks overlooking that post-communist polities do not function independently of one another or wider global realities.

As figure 1 indicates, there are multiple avenues to consider when reflecting on the diffusion and mobilization of the far right in the post-communist region. Inspired by Walter Mignolo's geopolitics of knowledge, this graph offers a visual tool for exploring and unpacking inter-related avenues of far-right knowledge production built on four core questions of the "fundamental decolonial perspective" (Mignolo 2011, 189):

1. Who is the knowing subject, and what is his/her [their] material apparatus of enunciation?
2. What kind of knowledge/understanding is he/she [they] engaged in generating, and why?
3. Who is benefiting or taking advantage of such-and-such knowledge or understanding?
4. What institutions (universities, media, foundations, corporations) are supporting and encouraging such-and-such knowledge and understanding?

These four queries inspired us to ask: Who or what mobilizes/diffuses far-right memories and ideology? What kind of content (i.e., knowledge production) is being disseminated and mobilized? How exactly is such knowledge and its recall being mobilized/diffused? And where, and along which conduits and vectors is far-right ideology disseminated and mobilized? In turn, these questions bring into the analytical frame multidirectional vectors of knowledge production and mobilization that facilitate myriad relationalities across multiple actors, spaces, temporalities, and structures.

What Are the Findings?

Contributors to this special issue observe that even though the far right is relatively small in the countries they examine, it gains in relevance when it merges with the conservative mainstream (Poszpieszna et al.; Rudling; Kasianov; Paulovicova, and Gyarfasova) and when it weaponizes history and memory for political gains (Rudling; Kasianov; Paulovicova and Gyarfasova). The latter point, about how the far right utilizes recall of the past to distinguish and situate itself socio-politically, is a major theme in this collection and the one on which we will focus our discussion below.

These articles demonstrate that a small and fractured far right may successfully gain traction by mobilizing mnemonic narratives that spill across national and transnational memory space as an indication of allyship on the geopolitical chessboard. Far right '"mnemonic warriors" weaponize mnemonic culture as a form of soft power to rewire cultural self-perception and societal recall both locally *and* transnationally.[13]

What is the function/purpose of fomenting a weaponized mnemonic culture?

1. It deepens the rift and racializes communities, i.e., designates groups into "socially constructed categories in opposition to the national norm" (Georgis and Lugosi 2014, 72). By doing so, weaponized memory aims to produce a stronger and more resilient nation and eliminate narratives perceived to undermine the strength of the nation from within (Auers; Paulovicova and Gyarfasova; Rudling; Kassianov). This means that some aspects of liberal democracy, such as acknowledging the rights of marginalized groups, accepting/assisting refugees, or admitting past crimes in an effort to come to terms with problematic pasts, are put on hold, as anything that might expose the vulnerability or weakness of a nation/state is placed under surveillance or suppressed.

2. It relies on a politics of emotions, wherein the public mood is steered toward feelings of pride, greatness, and strength as psychological unifiers emblematic of a strong and proud nation/state. History as depicted in school textbooks, museums, commemorative events and spaces/places, and public discourse is inevitably sanitized. As Kasianov demonstrates, this sanitization, heroization, and attendant mythologization of the past is reflected in the securitization of Ukraine's national narrative in response to an increasing Russian threat. He argues that this evolution of the mnemonic process was critical in mobilizing Ukrainians against Russia: "The expansion of the nationalist memory narrative from its home region to the rest of Ukraine occurred within the framework of intense decommunization of the symbolic space, thus creating favorable conditions for an anti-communist, anti-Soviet, and anti-Russian narrative, which were generic features of the nationalist version of the past."[14] In this manner, Kasianov avers, the nationalist version of the past moved toward the sociopolitical center, becoming incorporated into an official narrative that stressed the story of Ukrainian liberation and hid the xenophobic and exclusivist elements present in the original account.

3. It is utilized by the far right either as a tool against Russian aggression (Auers; Kasianov; Rudling), or, alternatively, as a means through which to bond and alliance-build with Russia (Paulovicova and Gyarfasova). For example, the firm anti-Russian stance of the Latvian National Alliance (NA) established a *cordon sanitaire* around far-right European parties with close links to Russia. NA's focus on an ethnonational agenda, especially in Russian-speaking enclaves, established Latvia's far right as a respectable player in state affairs. However, whereas the retelling of Latvian and Ukrainian historical experiences produced a firm anti-Russian stance, this was not the case with the Slovak far-right People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS), which has continually demonstrated pro-Russian leanings. Nina Paulovicova and Olga Gyarfasova untangle the LSNS's mnemonic appropriation of two events that are irreconcilable for LSNS – Russian relations: the Slovak National Uprising and the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops under the leadership of the Soviets. As

they demonstrate, the LSNS resorted to several mnemonic strategies to sanitize this past in order to establish friendly relations with Russia and "Slavic civilization."

The contributions offered in this special issue point to the critical importance of multidirectional vectors of memory that cannot be easily harnessed by the linear transitological narratives. For example, Paulovicova and Gyarfasova, in their exploration of the LSNS and its mnemonic alliances with Putin's Russia, identify the presence of diachronic, transnational, transgenerational, inter-imperial, and trans-ideological trajectories and conclude that the "LSNS's memory construction is multidirectional rather than competitive or discordant." Similarly, Per Anders Rudling traces diachronic and transgenerational memory linkages in the context of long-distance ultranational-ism, maintaining that the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) represents "a distinctly transnational phenomenon." Heavily invested in the culture wars, the Ukrainian far right in the diaspora had a great impact in shaping how Ukrainians remember their past despite being spatially removed and exerting a marginal electoral impact "back home." Far-right diaspora memory activists shaped "the infrastructure of memory production" to such an extent that their preferred narratives dominated Ukraine's politics even though the far right's representation in parliament was minuscule after 2014. Kasianov complements Rudling's piece, arguing that Ukrainian emigre nationalists exported narratives that found fertile ground in the 1990s among activists in Western Ukraine, where they acquired the form of a communicative memory (Assman 2008), challenging the official Soviet narrative that the OUN and its military arm, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), were fascists and Nazi collaborators. Indicative of this, the 1990s saw the recovery of numerous OUN- and UPA-centered *lieux de memoire* in Western Ukraine, which by the 2000s "became an integral part of the national heroic myth aimed at mobilizing against Russian aggression" and hence a "tool for top-down state politics imposed on society."

Exploring the understudied theme of the Latvian far right, especially the programmatic and international relations aspects of party Europeanization, Daunis Auers concludes that the far-right NA, a stable member of multi-party governmental coalitions for the past three decades due to its strong anti-Russian stance, displays minimal signs of Europeanization. Considering the "front stage" (i.e., official party program and website) and "backstage" communication of NA (i.e., social media like Twitter/X) and complementing qualitative analysis by quantitative data, Auers concludes that an older version of nativism bent on curbing Russia's presence in Latvia dominates both the NA's front and backstage communication with the public, while a newer nativism centered on the migration crisis and combatting alleged "cultural Marxism" did not gain traction due to the fact that Latvia, leaving aside its ethnic Russian community, is not home to visible minorities. As a result, Latvia's NA remains distinct from the Western European far right.

Auers analysis of the far right in Latvia, like Kasianov's in Ukraine, underscores the role of the security threat posed by Russia in accelerating the circulation of ethnonational tropes. Conse-quently, we see that the mobilization of far-right groupuscules to form a unified political and social front is facilitated via an increased circulation of securitization discourses (Balzacq 2011; Stritzel 2014; Butler 2020; Gomes and Marques 2021) disseminated in response to claimed, perceived, or real threats. Securitization discourses weaponize memory; far from being epiphenomenal, the "memory wars" that they frequently bring about have led to kinetic conflicts, one example being Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, an event proceeded by Putin giving two televised addresses in which the airing of claimed historical grievances figured prominently (Krawatzek and Soroka 2022).

However, this special issue not only scrutinizes the multiple transnational conduits of right-wing mnemonic framing but also focuses attention on the structure of far-right organizations' linkages on the local, regional, and national levels as an important factor in the production and dissemi-nation of patriotic, conservative national discourse. Utilizing social network analysis and building on the concept of "pillarization," Pospieszna and colleagues address the horizontal and vertical connections displayed by conservative grassroots organizations to shed more light on the

relationship between localized groups and national-level bodies. Their careful study of these linkages allows us to better understand "why some of these organizations choose to take a more radical form and some remain to cultivate conservative values in a more moderate manner, being active only at a local level." Specifically, the authors argue that grassroots organizations form a critical nexus: "Because of their ability to cultivate and disseminate conservative norms and values they are important non-state actors mobilizing people and empowering right-wing organizations operating at the central level." As such, this study underscores the presence of horizontal linkages among grassroots organizations that differ from the pillarized linkages of national organizations and offer new opportunities for engaging in the politics of commemoration and memory.

Conclusion

The exploration of the far right's transnational circulation is critical to our understanding of the instrumentalization of soft power by political extremists, as it helps us to grasp why and how the far right, despite its "groupuscular" nature and relatively weak electoral record, has succeeded in having a major impact on shaping societal identities and encouraging culture wars, including over how the past is publicly depicted. As our theoretical overview and discussion of contributors' findings has demonstrated, the conduits for the dissemination of the far-rights' discursive frames are hardly unidirectional in nature. As a result, transitological narratives of progress and regress offer only a partial understanding of how it mobilizes, builds alliances, and circulates ideas, because the multidirectionality of these processes has been overlooked by scholars. This is unfortunate, because as the studies presented in this special issue demonstrate, the plural and non-linear mnemonic flows revealed by employing a transnational analytic lens permits us to observe a "productive not privative" process of "ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing and borrowing" (Rothberg 2009, 3) that opens new avenues through which to understand how far-right groups mobilize and disseminate their narratives.

Disclosure. None.

Notes

1 The term "far right" is a notoriously slippery and difficult-to-define concept. Exacerbating this confusion are the varying meanings accorded by scholars to its derivatives and subtypes, such as "radical right" or "extreme right" (we do not parse these terms herein, instead utilizing them inclusively). Moreover, it is often conflated with populism or nativism, but these are not quite the same categories (Mudde 2014). A similar observation applies to "fascist" (another famously indeterminate concept), which represents a designation that could be applied to many, though not all, far-right organizations. Additionally, when we discuss the "far right," we are not focusing solely on political parties but on a wider set of groups and movements. Therefore, for purposes of clarity and brevity, we choose to be lumpers rather than splitters and adopt a suitably generic working definition: "the far right includes all those ultranationalist collective actors sharing a common exclusionary and authoritarian worldview – predominantly determined on sociocultural criteria – yet varying allegiances to democracy" (Pirro 2023, 103).
2 The spatial and contextual generalizability of such transitionary processes has long been disputed (e.g., Bunce 1995; Schmitter and Karl 1994), but the essentially linear, and thus often implicitly teleological, nature of them – that of a movement away from one well-defined regime type toward another well-defined regime type – has largely gone uninterrogated by the scholarly community until recently.
3 Such assault on democracy need not, however, take surreptitious means; in many cases, "illiberal governments are using legalism to kill liberalism" (Pirro and Stanley 2022, 86).

4 This is not to deny the element of political agency and elite maneuvering, but rather to imply that institutional effects are hierarchically prioritized in analyses of democratic backsliding.

5 There is evidence to suggest far-right political parties may produce synergistic effects, with their presence shifting the platforms of mainstream competitors rightward (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020; Minkenberg, Florian, and Zobel 2021).

6 Still others look at the reverse of the metaphorical coin and term them "competitive authoritarian" regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010).

7 As is the case in cross-border relations between the dyads of Russia/Poland (Soroka 2022) and Russia/Ukraine (Krawatzek and Soroka 2022). We also see this play out domestically, as in the Polish case (Bucholc 2019).

8 Ethno-populism, given its more generic focus on the masses – as opposed to the highly exclusionary claims of ethno-nationalism – is an efficient tool of electoral mobilization (Vachudova 2020).

9 See Epperly (2019) for a contrary perspective.

10 This would seem, at least partially, to be tied to patterns of respect for religious authority and attendant variation in rates of secularization.

11 For an influential statement regarding this concept in the realm of mnemonic politics, see Rothberg (2009).

12 See also Levitsky and Way (2010), whose conceptualization of "competitive authoritarianism" rests on the premise that it need not be an intermediary (and thus temporary) regime type.

13 On the concept of "mnemonic warriors" and other mnemonic regimes, see Bernhard and Kubik (2014).

14 Decommunization, which Kasianov also describes as de-Russification and de-Sovietization (2023), is a major push against the Soviet mnemonic space and Russian present-day influence. It is not, however, an isolated or unidirectional process but rather a process that should be negotiated along with "repatriated nationalism" or "long-distance nationalism (see Per Anders' Rudling's contribution), and its impact on mnemonic space in Ukraine. Simply put, transnationalism played an important role in "building turf" and empowering resistance against Russia's increasingly aggressive moves, and decommunization was part and parcel of such resistance. As a result, decommunization should be also negotiated as an indelible part of Ukraine's securitization, of which the weaponization of memory is an indelible part.

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