DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

THE RADICAL RIGHT IN EUROPE

Transnational networks

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December 2024

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Cross-border networking is an integral part of the strategies of the radical right. They have come to recognise that the hegemony of the »global liberal elites«, which they reject, has to be countered globally.

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In the hyperemotional struggle against these elites and the minorities they allegedly favour, cross-border dissemination and networking processes lead to a »hyperpolitical« radicalisation spiral.

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The global movement of the radical right is much more dynamic than others. It benefits from a sizeable motivation gap between »reactionary revolutionaries« and the defenders of liberal democracy.

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The radical right focuses primarily on the national level, but cross-border networking or cross-linking has become an integral part of its strategies because it has recognised that the hegemony of the »global liberal elites« which it opposes must be combatted globally. Cross-border dissemination, learning and networking processes lead to the harmonisation of the frames that form their identity. With the concept of »illiberal democracy« Viktor Orbán in particular is actively promoting the spread of a hyper-majoritarian, anti-pluralist form of government without checks and balances. This poses a fundamental challenge to liberal democracies and pluralist societies.

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The »imagined community« (Benedict Anderson 1983) of the European radical right is putting itself forward as the true »defender of Europe« and of its »true values« against its »enemies« both external and internal: against the global liberal elites and the minorities they are supposed to favour. This personalisation of the common struggle against »globalism« and »wokeism« is in line with the radical right's emotionalisation of political communication. Dissemination and networking processes lead to a transnational »hyper-political« radicalisation spiral. Because politics based on »affective polarisation« is more successful than a solution-oriented approach the relevant communication strategies are spreading across borders.

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Even though hitherto the radical right has not been able to bring a proto-fascist style mass movement into being, whether nationally or globally, and there is no reason to expect the emergence of a common leadership spanning different countries, nevertheless the global movement of the radical right is much more dynamic than others. When compared to the »pro-European« forces, the radical right have an organisational advantage, at least in relative terms: »reactionary revolutionaries« are much easier to mobilise in the context of advancing »hyper-politicisation« than the defenders of liberal democracy.

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Content

1 INTRODUCTION: A GLOBAL RADICAL RIGHT?

Parties of the radical right are on the rise in many democracies. But does that mean that it constitutes a global movement? It's become a cliché that nationalism – »our country first!« – both unites the radical right and divides it. Nevertheless, international conferences and other get-togethers are constantly – and ever more frequently – being organised, at which representatives of the radical right from all over the world are celebrated as stars in the common struggle against the »global liberal elites«.

A movement is not the same thing as a »uniform actor«, but rather comprises networking and cross-linking processes – cross-border in the case of a global movement – involving a variety of actors who step by step cease to be completely isolated from one another. Are resources mobilised for these processes? Are we talking about mere alliances of convenience or do these networks operate strategically? Are the central frames – the identity forming ideological frameworks, messages, demands and methods – the same?

This analysis is concerned with the European movement of the radical right. A subsequent paper will focus on the transatlantic networks linking Europe and North America. This distinction is to some extent artificial because many conferences and other networking events touch on both (and other) axes. Given the major importance of the European Union (EU) and in particular the European Parliament, however, it is justified.

Furthermore, the focus of this analysis is the physical networking of parliamentary parties and their peripheral organisations (NGOs, foundations, think tanks) rather than the cross-border activities of violent actors and the networking of the radical right on the internet, including the disinformation campaigns conducted and/or funded, for example, out of Russia. Both phenomena are undoubtedly key to the diffusion of ideas and mutual inspiration. But my assumption is that the physical networking of traditional political actors is more important for the emergence of a social movement and reinforces the efficacy of other activities.

CENTRAL THESES

The reasons for the success of the radical right are presumably first and foremost nationally specific. But there are common driving forces, such as economic globalisation, cultural modernisation and diffuse crisis- and democracy-fatigue.

The political work of actors on the radical right focuses primarily on the national level. But cross-border networking is an integral part of their strategies. Experiences with Brexit have made it clear to the radical right that any »exit« from the »global liberal order« and its economic interdependence is beset by limitations. Since the late 1960s, the New Right has focused strongly on attaining »cultural hegemony«. This strategy has since been, so to speak, transnationalised. This is because the radical right have come to recognise that the

hegemony of the global liberal elites, which they reject, has to be combatted globally.

Europe is a key venue of this counter-hegemonic assault on the liberal order. In the European Parliament and beyond, the radical right is trying to transfigure an increasing hostility (»scepticism«) towards democracy into a fundamental distrust of the institutions of liberal democracy and thereby conjure a revolutionary spirit. In this they are able to take advantage of every aspect of the polycrisis and the perceived representational shortcomings of politics.

Cross-border processes of dissemination, learning and networking lead to a convergence of the frames of the radical right. The »imagined community« (Benedict Anderson 1983) of the European radical right has set itself up as the true »defender of Europe« and of its »true values«, not to mention against its »enemies«, both external and internal: the global liberal elites and the minorities they supposedly prefer.

Beyond a turn towards so-called sovereign nations and an international rather than supranational »Europe of nations«, however, there is no agreement on a coherent alternative to the liberal order or to »the Establishment«. But there's no need for that for the purpose of effective cross-border cooperation, especially when it comes to political obstructionism.

The sovereignty-oriented programme of the radical right fits right in with the aims of the global rivals of the democratic West, above all Russia and China, who are striving for multipolarity and regional spheres of influence and reject liberal democracy. The radical right serves as both a de facto and even an openly funded ally in this undertaking. For example, Orbán's Hungary is actively promoting the diffusion of hyper-majoritarian, anti-pluralist government without checks and balances, which poses a fundamental challenge to liberal democracies and pluralist societies.

The personalisation of the common struggle of the radical right against »globalism« and so-called »wokeism« is in keeping with the emotionalisation of their political communications. The upshot of the various diffusion and networking processes is a transnational »hyper-political« radicalisation spiral. Because the politics of »affective polarisation« pays off better than efforts to find real solutions, the corresponding communication strategies are spreading across borders.

Even though hitherto the radical right has not been able to give birth to a protofascist mass movement and there is little likelihood that a transnational joint leadership will emerge, the global movement of the radical right is nevertheless much more dynamic than others. After the European Parliament elections the familiar picture of a dysfunctional fragmentation of the European radical right no longer applies. »Organic intellectuals« and political leaders are driving the organisational networking of the radical right in the European Parliament and beyond. In fact, it's the so-called – in simple terms – »pro-European« forces that are permanently split. Having said that, the radical right's organisational

advantages are relative: they benefit both nationally and cross-nationally form a considerable motivation gap. In the context of the ongoing »hyper-politicisation«, the »revolutionaries« are much easier to mobilise than the defenders of liberal democracy.

STRUCTURE OF THE ANALYSIS

In Section 2, I discuss key concepts and approaches to the analysis of the cross-border networking of the radical right. The focus of Section 3 is the common driving forces behind the political success of the radical right in almost all democracies. The networking of the radical right in the European Parliament is the subject of Section 4, while Section 5 discusses its European networking beyond the Parliament, especially at international conferences. In Section 6 I look at the role of Hungary and Viktor Orbán in the networking of the radical right in Europe (and worldwide), in particular in relation to dissemination of the notion of »illiberal democracy«. In the concluding Section 7, a number of practical recommendations are discussed.

2 ANALYSING THE RADICAL RIGHT

We shall use the collective term »radical right« to identify and analyse the actors examined within the framework of this study. This is primarily a pragmatic choice. None of the possible competing terms – above all national conservative, authoritarian right, right-wing populists, right-wing radicals or right-wing extremists – capture the full spectrum of the actors we are looking at here. They range from those parties of the conservative mainstream which have already shifted to the right, i.e. the so-called »radicalised conservatives« (Strobl 2021) such as the US Republican Party (Greven 2023) and a growing portion of the British Tories (Bale 2023; see also Biebricher 2023), as well as those conservative parties in the EU who are increasingly willing »to align with the populist radical right, either directly or indirectly, to gain power« (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2024), thereby normalising their positions, to such right-wing extremist actors who do not rely (exclusively) on political violence and subversion, but compete primarily within the political system.

The radical right span a very wide range of ideological and political positions. What they have in common is that, although they generally accept democratic ways of doing things, they not only want to win elections but also intend to wrench established liberal democracies fundamentally in an illiberal, anti-pluralist and authoritarian direction. They reject the separation of powers and protection of minorities under the rule of law.

The competing terms for »radical right« we have already mentioned are often used interchangeably in political debate and media discourse. In Germany, for example, the term »right-wing populist« is in common use, mainly to designate the spectrum between conservatives and right-wing extrem-

ists. It thus has the effect of downplaying, even trivialising the phenomenon. Although populism as a »thin-centred ideology« (Cas Mudde: »us vs. them«) has affinities with right-wing programmes, the term is more suitable to describe a type of political strategy. Even the collective term chosen here, »radical right«, cannot always be applied in a clear-cut way. This is because the actors under examination change dynamically, both ideologically and in terms of their political strategies. This applies both over the course of time and for regional or organisational subunits. Political parties are not monolithic. Changes can run in different directions, towards more moderation or towards more extremism.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CROSS-BORDER NETWORKING OF THE RADICAL RIGHT

Little or no organisational coordination is needed for the transnational diffusion of ideas, concepts, strategies and tactics (see Abrahamsen et al. 2024). Publications are enough, especially on the internet, where translation tools are easily available. In order to find out exactly how to block democratic processes or exploit or undermine elements of the rule of law in a specific national context, language skills are needed – but obtaining fundamental inspiration from blocking strategies in other countries is possible without such skills. For example, Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS), which was voted out of office in 2023, retains blocking options not only through the veto power of Polish president Andrzej Duda, but also through the partisan judges it appointed within the framework of judicial reform. In future, presumably, Germany's *Länder* parliaments will become the focus of attention, especially the Thuringian *Landtag* in which the AfD has a blocking minority vote.

Communicative exchanges can also take place virtually, with the necessary language skills. However, it makes sense that physical network meetings provide for more diffusion and organisational coordination. These are to be the focus here.

Analysis of the extent and significance of the radical right's cross-border networking faces particular challenges. There are considerable access problems. Statements made by political actors can always be suspected of being directed by self-interest or propaganda. If international gatherings do not produce declarations, manifestos or public agreements, we can usually only speculate on the significance of meetings of actors on the radical right and on what their concrete consequences may be.

Notwithstanding all these difficulties and limitations, the following sections show that many valuable insights are now available on the cross-border networks of the radical right. These are discussed and evaluated here, supplemented by my own research, in summary form. The focus is on the networks of the radical right in Europe since the Brexit referendum of June 2016.

The point of departure for the present investigation of the transnational networks of the radical right is the analytical approach of Clifford Bob's comprehensive 2012 study (Bob 2012). He utilised the transnational advocacy networks (TAN) approach, which originates from NGO research, for his research on the »global right wing«. The underlying question is: under what conditions do political actors deploy scarce resources across borders in order to influence supranational institutions such as the EU and to effect change in other countries, as well as in their own country? Analogous to research on social movements, the focus is on political opportunity structures (POS), in other words, the existing conditions for action in a particular context. Actors on the radical right usually need to attack their opponents head-on, especially in election campaigns. But a »paradise abroad« (Heilbrunn 2024) can be created in third countries through cross-border cooperation with other actors of the radical right, and that can mobilise a national movement even when political opportunity structures are blocked for it. Bob (2012) was also able to show that cross-border activities also take place when political opportunity structures are relatively open in all contexts. Political actors always react to one another and in light of the global interconnectedness – economic, cultural and political – they also do so across borders.

This transnationally active radical right can be regarded as a global social movement, in other words as a constellation somewhere between an entirely unified actor and entirely dispersed actors. That is because national actors of the radical right mobilise resources for the formation of cross-border networks and use the same or similar frames in their arguments, mobilisation and communications, as we shall show. They produce a common identity-establishing ideological framework for their own »in group« and for the »out group« that is the object of their ire (see Nissen 2022). The frames that shape the discourse of the global radical right can be formulated both negatively – anti-globalism, anti-immigration, anti-Islam, anti-wokeism (anti-LGBTQ and anti-gender identity), anti-liberalism, anti-establishment, sometimes also antisemitism – and affirmatively (nation, sovereignty, people, tradition, family, sometimes also white supremacy). The use of these frames is subject to constant transformation, depending on the available »political space« (ibid.).

THE RADICAL RIGHT'S TRANSNATIONAL »GRAMSCIAN TURN«

Successful transnational activities on the part of this global movement of the radical right strengthen their national successes and almost everywhere contribute substantially to the threat facing liberal democracy. Having said that, the so-called TAN (traditionalist/authoritarian/nationalist) approach falls short of explaining the overall political ambitions of this global movement. Because the radical right itself makes reference to it, it makes sense to employ Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony to capture the macro-political significance of their transnational activities.

Political rule, according to Gramsci, remains incomplete and weak without cultural hegemony, even if it's achieved at the ballot box or by revolution. A consensus has to be established in society. Like part of the left, the authors of the Nouvelle Droite or New Right have invoked, among other things, Gramsci's insights on the necessity of »cultural hegemony« in order to underline that, besides electoral success, hearts and minds also need to be won over in a so-called »war of position« – in Gramsci's formulation their »common sense« – in order to achieve sustainable political dominance.

The empirical question in this context of this investigation is whether the »metapolitical« and »counter-hegemonic« project of the radical right outlined above is also being pursued across borders. Abrahamsen et al. (2024) write about this second, transnational Gramscian turn:

> Nationalist and populist in character, this strategy is also international because its populism seeks to unify socially and geographically disparate groups through specific understandings of their marginalisation by liberalism and globalisation. (Abrahamsen et al. 2024: 3)

But who is organising the transnational networking of the opposition to »globalism« and »wokeism«? Gramsci puts forward the notion of the »organic intellectual«, political activists who assume a key role in the acquisition of political power, the struggle for hegemony and the economic basis of the movement. They are tasked with building the discursive and organisational structures of an »internationalist nationalism« (ibid.: 63) so that a global movement may emerge even without a central leadership: »The unity of the global Right emerges instead from diverse demands articulated in ways that allow its participants to see and feel themselves as engaged in analogically similar struggles against a common enemy« (ibid.: 20). Before looking at the networking activities in Europe, Section 3 focuses first on the cross-border commonalities of the rise of the radical right.

3 COMMON DRIVING FORCES UNDERLYING THE RISE OF THE GLOBAL RADICAL RIGHT

How can the rightward shift observed in almost all democracies in recent years be explained? We can assume that nationally specific reasons for the rise of the radical right are dominant. That applies to both the »demand side« – in other words people's specific issues or grievances – and the »supply side«. Indeed, the institutional and discursive conditions (POS and DOS, see above) differ from country to country, in some cases significantly. Thus, the parties of the radical right pursue different strategies. However, if there are commonalities across countries in the area of »grievances«, it is plausible, if not probable, that political strategies will also converge. In what follows I argue that there are three sets of cross-national causes that can be identified as common denominators of the shift to the right: economic globalisation, cultural modernisation and a widespread crisis and

democracy fatigue. These causal complexes then also appear transnationally as central narratives of the increasingly trans-nationally active radical right.

ECONOMIC GLOBALISATION

Perhaps the »leanest« explanation for the political development towards the right is a focus on »globalization losers« or »transformation losers,« which some economists propose. But the simplistic deprivation thesis, namely that the social segments under particular economic pressure are particularly likely to vote for parties of the radical right, has been empirically refuted time and time again. What really matters is, on one hand, a loss of status or fears of sliding down the social scale as a consequence of an intensification of global competition, and, on the other hand, specific regional structural features that have resulted in or give reasons to expect negative economic developments.

After the failure to rein in economic globalisation, which had accelerated rapidly in the wake of the hegemony of neoliberal economic policy in the 1990s, with effective regulation (case in point, the supply chain law), a political backlash from those who were negatively affected by this transformation was possible if not likely. The benefits of free trade, free movement of capital and labour migration are always distributed unequally and thus there is always opposition, from the left and the right. Today, however, in many places social democratic and also leftwing parties are perceived as cheerleaders for economic liberalisation and globalisation. Furthermore, their proposals for regulation are a form of globalisation (»global governance«) and are also rejected by advocates of greater national sovereignty. The backlash is thus now coming largely from the right.

The radical right in other words has ushered in a personalised, joint war against a » global liberal elite« made up of experts, bureaucrats and an »economic aristocracy … detached and unmoored from their respective national identities and cultures« (Abrahamsen/Williams 2023: 29). Thus, despite protectionist inclinations among sections of the radical right, it is not world trade per se that is rejected, but rather the rules and institutions created by international agreements and memberships, administered and implemented by bureaucrats. This joint struggle against a definable and globally active »enemy« explains the increasingly transnational networking and is making the radical right more and more into a global movement. Moreover, its alleged stance on behalf of a »forgotten working class« has been turning it into a sort of »reactionary International«.

Trade competition in Europe does not shape the political debate to the same extent as in the United States, but opening up the financial markets for foreign investment and investment capital has fuelled the discussion on the disadvantages of economic location competition here too. Above all, however, the financial crisis of 2008–2009 highlighted that neoliberal policies had privatised profits, while, in the face of systemic risks, states – and thus taxpayers – had been landed with the losses. Considerable political opposition began to accumulate against the bailouts of the big banks and financial institutions, but this was scarcely represented in the established party system. The result of the Brexit referendum in June 2016, which led to the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union in January 2020, was also due partly to the debate on the financial crisis.

Migration played an even bigger role in the growing isolationism and »*souverainism*« in the United Kingdom, as it was soon to do also in the United States and many continental European countries, especially in the wake of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. A representation deficit can also be discerned in migration policy, whether it be about regular labour market migration, refugees or asylum seekers. The people who are not on board with migration policy, whether as a whole or to a considerable extent, find that their views are represented almost exclusively by the parties of the right.

CULTURAL MODERNISATION

Economically determined approaches are not the whole story, however. Alternative explanations attribute the causes of increasing radical right-wing attitudes and radical right-wing voting to people's reactions to various cultural changes in the direction of more diversity. These include the considerable shocks inflicted on male dominated societies by women's efforts towards emancipation and equality; the trend towards secularisation, which has affected almost all nominally Christian countries for decades now and has loosened the binding force of religion when it comes to traditional roles and the balance of power in families and partnerships; and changing morality in the area of sexuality, especially the rising acceptance of homosexuality and, more recently, of an ever more visible transsexuality.

These cultural changes have mobilised people whose moral outlook is largely based on religion to become more politically active and to advocate for the conservation of »traditional values«. They have contributed a great deal to the success of the Christian and radical right. But which issue is mobilised and at what time has to be explained in nationally specific terms. In some countries, such as in Scandinavian countries, certain societal and cultural changes are now so widely accepted that political mobilisation against them seems pointless. Some radical right parties are adapting accordingly and focusing on »European values«, including even the defence of LGBTQ rights against Muslim immigrants.

The phenomenon of labour and refugee migration shows that the discussion of cultural change as a driver of the rise of the radical right is not entirely independent of the problems of globalisation. In the eyes of some (and that includes earlier migrants and their offspring), migrants embody both economic competition and processes of cultural change. They make the challenges of diversity more concrete and thus can be identified as (allegedly) responsible for societal problems such as unemployment, lack of housing and crime, despite the fact those problems would also exist without them.

Accordingly, the radical right almost everywhere are igniting heated debates about integration, assimilation, »normality« and »dominant cultures«, as well as about deportation (»remigration«) and segregation, especially with regard to migrants who differ from the majority society in terms of skin colour and/or religion.

For the radical right it's easier and more politically rewarding to launch culture wars in defence of identities whose foundations have been shaken than to debate the pros and cons of economic globalisation. They are relatively inexpensive. You can get a lot of political bang for your buck with little effort, partly because cultural conflicts are less amenable to compromise than economic conflicts. This leads to an emotionalised race to the bottom and the radical right simply find it easier than any other political actors to harness populist incitement of outrage, »affective polarisation«, fear and anger to achieve political success. The radical right can depend for help on conservative, radical and commercial media, which have cottoned on that the populist »hyperpolitics« (Jäger 2023) of anxiety and anger is a very profitable business model. Changes to the media landscape have been a boon to the radical right, including commercialisation, the weakening of the editorial gatekeeper function, the personalisation of »politainment«, the ease and anonymity of disseminating disinformation on social media and the innovations of so-called »artificial intelligence« (»deep fakes«).

WIDESPREAD CRISIS AND DEMOCRACY FATIGUE

A third cross-country approach to explaining the rise of the radical right in almost all democracies is a widespread sense of overload and a general fatigue with politics and democratic processes. This sense of crisis enables demagogues, populists and wannabe autocrats to mobilise effectively, based on the abovementioned deficit of economic and cultural representation. In doing so they open up social divisions, so that conflicts can no longer be resolved within the framework of the established party system. This triggers a vicious circle.

In the current »polycrisis« crises constantly overlap. States and citizens are permanently overloaded. Crises include global refugee movements, climate crisis, systemic competition, above all with China, military conflicts, and the threat of the next pandemic. And solutions are nowhere to be seen. The consequence is that some people take seriously alternatives to the established pluralist party democracy, such as Viktor Orbán's »illiberal democracy« (see Section 6).

Daron Acemoglu (2024) writes on this topic »the simple explanation for the crisis of democracy in the whole industrialised world is that the system has not kept its promises«. And the forces of the radical right are virtually the sole beneficiaries of the disenchantment with democracy and political parties, the undemocratic juridification and bureaucratisation (Manow 2024), and the loss of trust in the state. They have been able to »unite the fundamental ›no‹ to politics« (Nils Kumkar, interview, SZ, 17.1.204).

It is easy for some to tumble down the rabbit hole of conspiracy theories, such as the so-called »great replacement«, the alleged plan of global elites to replace the white population with non-white migrants. For some, it suffices if there is a semi-plausible narrative with an identifiable scapegoat.

INTERIM CONCLUSION: COMMON DRIVERS

There are therefore common factors in the rise of the radical right: globalisation, cultural change, and widespread democracy fatigue. But does this yield a greater cross-border unity of the radical right?

Looking at the dynamics of cross-border cooperation among the radical right in Europe over a longer period it turns out that ideological cohesion and organisational cooperation have increased. Above all the radical right is now formulating a counter-hegemonic claim in relation to the EU: it doesn't want to leave, but to »conquer Brussels ». Key to this aim are no longer only the activities of parties and factions in the European Parliament (see Section 4), but also a growing number of international conferences and other forums, organised by the EU parties of the radical right, foundations and think tanks (see Section 5). For a long time Matteo Salvini (Lega, Italy) and Marine Le Pen (Rassemblement National, France) were the driving forces of cross-border networking among the radical right; today Viktor Orbán (Fidesz, Hungary) is also a key actor. Hungary's »illiberal democracy« not only serves as an inspiration and model for the radical right in Europe, but Hungary is also actively exporting this concept (see Section 6).

4 THE RADICAL RIGHT IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

The EU and in particular the European Parliament offer incentives for cross-border networking between parties. Formation of a parliamentary group (of which there are currently seven), which must comprise at least 23 MEPs from at least a quarter of EU Member States, benefits from, among other things, funding for employees, enhanced speaking rights in plenary, advantages with regard to committee appointments, committee chairs and vice presidents, as well as entitlement to grants for political foundations. Because at first glance close international cooperation between deeply nationalist parties is counterintuitive many observers take the view that the European Parliament's incentives have themselves fostered the opportunistic foundation of radical right parliamentary groups. Shared ideology and similar positions on issues such as labour and above all refugee migration, LGBTQ rights, climate change measures and national sovereignty would not have been enough on their own, precisely because insistence on the latter – in other words, the primacy of national interests and national POS (especially electoral opportuni-

ties) – not to mention personal animosities between rival political leaders set limits on the cohesion of the radical right (cf. Startin 2010).

ATTEMPTS TO REACH AGREEMENT BEFORE AND AFTER THE 2024 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

Has the »pro-European« European Parliament itself created the problem of a fundamental challenge posed by a nationalist radical right with its specific POS? Empirical findings on the lack of voting discipline appear to confirm this view (Dressler 2024), along with the erratic and often short-lived histories of the various factions of the radical right. Only the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group can look back on a longer history, albeit with name changes and a constantly varying composition (Rivera 2024).

No radical right »super faction« was formed after the European Parliament elections in 2024. This was never in the cards because of the major differences between the Russia-friendly Identity and Democracy Group (ID) and the pro-NATO ECR. Two new political groups were formed after the election: Patriots for Europe (PfE) and Europe of Sovereign Nations (ENS). The latter in particular probably does fit the bill as an »opportunistic parliamentary group«. It was obviously cobbled together with great difficulty by a radicalised AfD from various extremist minor parties, while even excluding former lead candidate Maximilian Krah, who was held responsible for the previous exclusion from the ID group.

The ID parliamentary group has in turn been absorbed into the new PfE group. And its strategic foundation, orchestrated by Viktor Orbán, Herbert Kickl (Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ) and Andrej Babiš (ANO, Czech Republic), is a weighty argument against the notion that ideological and political considerations do not play a major role in the cross-border cooperation of the radical right in the European Parliament. The organisers, after all, used their own resources to promote cross-border cooperation in the sense of a transnational advocacy network.

Various tentative approaches had been made before the election in June 2024 as the ECR and ID groups were growing ever closer ideologically. Despite disagreements on policy towards Russia, Marine Le Pen (RN, France; ID) made clear overtures to Giorgia Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI; ECR) until shortly before the elections. Meloni was also courted from among the ranks of the Christian Democratic EPP in order to secure a majority for Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (CDU, Germany). Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party, which left the EPP in 2021 – presumably in order to pre-empt being kicked out, as its membership had already been suspended – had repeatedly hinted at seeking membership of the ECR group, dominated by Meloni's FdI and the Polish PiS.

Although the rapprochement between the ID and ECR groups had been made easier by the exclusion of the AfD from the former, in the end no agreement was reached despite talks between Le Pen and Meloni. Instead, Viktor Orbán pulled off a coup and thus established himself as the real driving force of transnational radical right networking in the European Parliament and beyond (see Section 6). The PfE absorbed the parties of the ID group, such as Matteo Salvini's Italian Lega and became the biggest radical right faction in one fell swoop.

»MAKE EUROPE GREAT AGAIN«: THE COUNTER-HEGEMONIC STRATEGY OF THE RADICAL RIGHT

The various approaches made before the 2024 European Parliament elections were by no means the first active efforts to improve cross-border networking. The endeavours of the radical right in the European Parliament and beyond to form sustainable alliances, including the use of their own resources, have been stepped up in recent years. In their study of three factions of the radical right during the 2014 to 2019 legislature, McDonnell and Werner (2020: 116) found that: »[t]hese parties have entered a new international and transnational phase.«

Even though it is unlikely that there will ever be a superfaction, common leadership and joint election campaign (which the European Parliamentary groups could not lead in any case, only European parties, see Section 5), the tendency is nevertheless not only in the direction of greater strength, but also in the direction of more cohesion. For example, the issues pushed by the radical right in their separate European Parliament election campaigns are much more similar across borders than in the case of the so called »pro-European« parties, which conducted 27 separate national election campaigns as well.

On one hand, the parliamentary groups of the radical right are converging as regards their political demands, with the exception of policy on Russia. The PfE's »A Patriotic Manifesto for a European Future« calls for a »Europe of nations« that would protect its peoples against »threats emanating from the political, economic, religious and cultural spheres«. The motto »Make Europe great again« is emblazoned on the PfE home page. The ECR has become radicalised, in particular with the affirmation of the »illiberal democracy« project by Italy's FdI and Poland's PiS. These are now the stock positions of the radical right: for more national sovereignty vis-a-vis the EU, against »illegal« migration and the climate policy measures of the Green Deal, and more fundamentally: for the defence of Europe's and the West's »cultural identity« (for more detail see Section 6).

On the other hand, the leading parties in the PfE group are moving closer to the ECR's objectives as regards the future of their countries in the EU. »[T]he ECR does not intend to dissolve but rather to take over the European Union« (Rivera 2024: 2). After the largely negative fallout from Brexit most parties on the radical right have changed their position and no longer proselytise for leaving the EU. Viktor Orbán rather pugnaciously formulated it as follows: »Our plan is not to

leave the EU. Our plan is to conquer it« (after Balfour/Lehne 2024: 3). This may well be primarily a tactical stance, but it can be linked to numerous statements about an intergovernmental and non-federally organised EU, a »European alliance of nations« (Marine Le Pen).

Although it cannot be proved empirically that the radical right's enhanced topical cohesion is owing to their organisational coordination, it is at least plausible that they are influencing one another (and dissemination and cross-border learning can take place whether the respective »sender« intended it or not). Last but not least, the convergence of policy content and aims is evident in the alignment of the frames used to identify the movement in political communications and to define political opponents or »the enemy«: roughly speaking, the true people made up of patriots against the »globalism« and »wokeism« of the liberal elites and their preferred minorities. The success of different national election campaigns using similar topics and methods points to an intentional cross-border diffusion, in particular as the frequency of conferences and other network meetings has increased, as has the presence of international participants (see Section 5).

The result is a cross-border »hyperpolitical« escalation spiral because the success of the deliberate emotionalisation of political debates encourages »organic intellectuals« of the radical right in all countries to go all out for »affective polarisation«. A politics of fear and anger turns the political opponent into a detested enemy who has to be resisted to prevent an apocalyptic future. Across countries it is clear that young people in particular can be reached by the hyper-political presence of the radical right on social media. Similar messages are hitting home almost everywhere and the fundamentally nationalistic orientation of the respective parties is clearly no obstacle.

All in all, it turns out that the supposed fragmentation of the radical right in Europe, and especially in the European Parliament, is largely wishful thinking. The narrative of a joint political project, a counter-hegemonic global or at least European movement, as propagated by Viktor Orbán and others, has been strengthened. In fact, the often rather simplistically termed »pro-European« factions in the European Parliament often appear even more split than the radical right, for example, when it comes to appointments to key posts or because their informal coalition has to be constantly recalibrated with compromises when it comes to political decision-making in the European Parliament and in the Council of Ministers. Ironically, it was precisely the shift to the right almost everywhere in Europe that rather »Europeanised« the 2024 European Parliament elections (Skrzypek 2024). This may be something of a paradox, but given the radical right's expressed intention not to leave the EU but to »take it over« the very label »pro-European« may have to be rethought in the not-too-distant future because who knows what kind of Europe we'll be dealing with.

In the short term, the political actors of the radical right will certainly come together in the European Parliament when

they find that they can block or achieve something that way. Despite their fragmentation the radical right are »bound to play a disruptive role in the decision-making processes« (ibid.). Even if they can only agree to reject certain policy measures this can lead to blockades if other allies can be found. In the current legislature, for example, the EPP and radical right-wing groups are likely to jointly work to prevent further climate policy measures. The radical right appears confident of victory in particular in its strategy of turning the EU into a »defence union« against (especially Muslim) immigration. Furthermore, the willingness to sanction national governments for violating minority rights or breaches of the rule of law is also likely to decrease.

In the long term the EU's post-national peace project is at risk of foundering. The reversion to a »Europe of (competing) nations« will also in all likelihood bring with it a resumption of nationalistic thinking in terms of friends and enemies, and not only in relation to economic competition.

5 TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKING OF THE RADICAL RIGHT IN EUROPE

Leading figures of the radical right have long held informal meetings. Nationalist stances have never really prevented rapprochements and cross-border dissemination and learning processes from taking place. Often such relationships have been based on individual relations between politicians, intellectuals and activists of other countries. What has been lacking hitherto has been systematic attempts, such as to overcome language barriers and other obstacles to political cooperation. The EU provides the best institutional conditions for cross-border networking for the radical right in Europe, also beyond the groups in the European parliament.

EURO PARTIES AND FOUNDATIONS: ECR AND NEW DIRECTION

The EU promotes not only transnational parliamentary groups, but also transnational associations of parties. Euro parties such as the ID Party and the ECR Party are also allowed to accept member parties that are not represented in the European Parliament, and they maintain relations with non-European parties. The ECR Party, led by Georgia Meloni, for example, cultivates relations with the US Republicans and Israel's Likud. In contrast to European Parliamentary groups Euro parties can fund and conduct election campaigns, and also establish foundations, which are also funded. Membership of a Euro party is fundamentally independent of membership of a parliamentary group. For example, although the Spanish Vox party switched to the PfE group after the European elections in 2024, it is still a member of the ECR Party and provides one of its vice presidents. This is a clear sign that the parties and groups have converged in terms of issues.

Figure 1.
Distribution of seats in the European Parliament 2024–2029
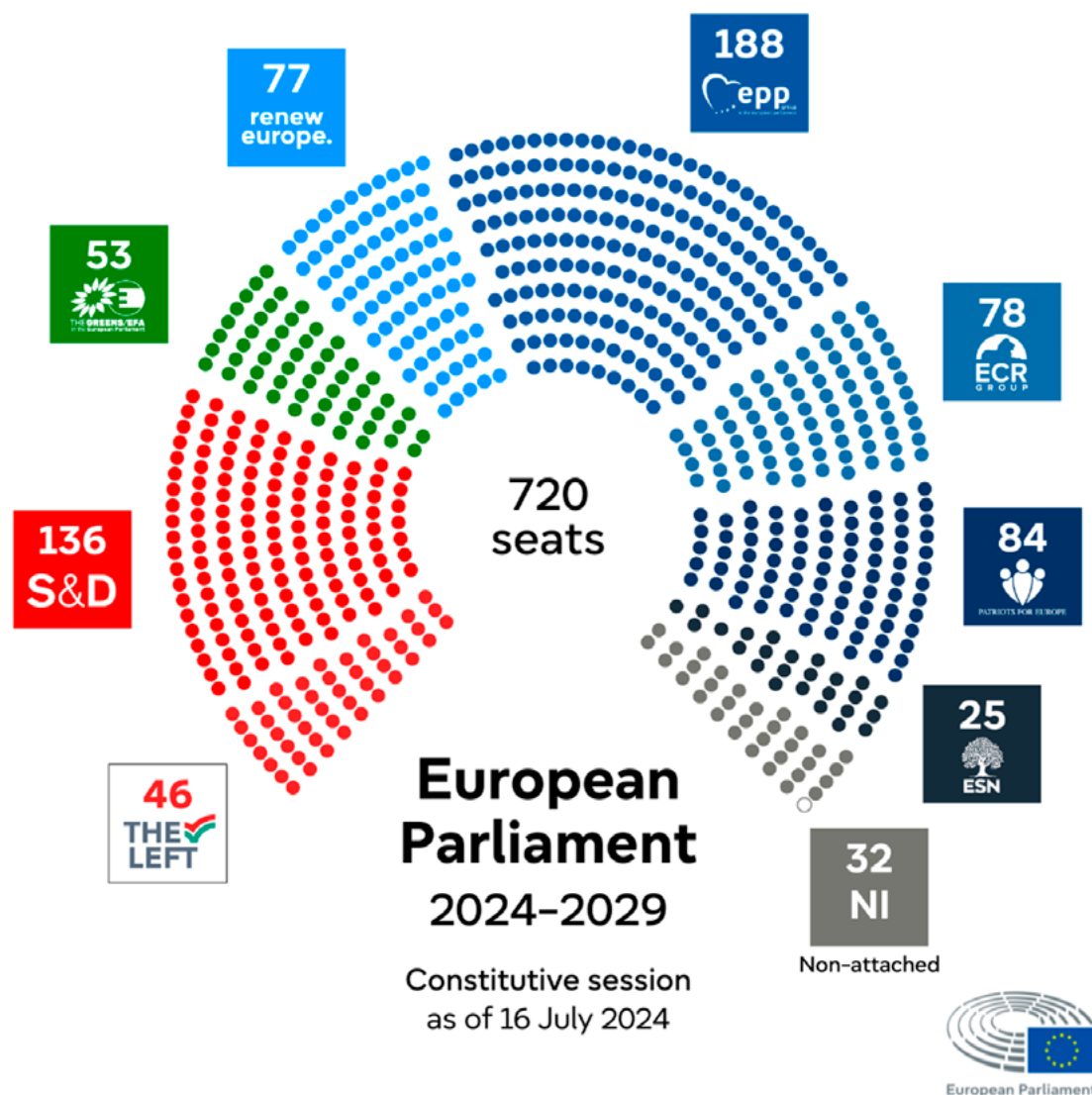
Source: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/images/20240726PHT23416/20240726PHT23416_original.png)

New Direction (ND), the ECR foundation set up by Margaret Thatcher in 2010, organises courses for »future leaders«, as well as strategy meetings throughout Europe (Forti 2024; Rivera 2024). Via the ND the British Conservatives continue to exert a certain influence in the ECR Party. Among other publications, the ND publishes the main organ of the ECR Party, *The European Journal*, in which, for example, arguments for a »fortress Europe« are discussed.

ND functions as a think tank and has links with many other think tanks and different organisations. On its own account this network is constantly expanding. ND is not transparent, however, when it comes to its existing contacts. Up until 2014, the Think Tank Network Initiative attempted to ascertain ND's confirmed contacts, and also which organisations claim to have relationships with it (it is not improbable that many organisations claim such contacts mainly to inflate their own importance). ND focuses on joint public events and publications.

Many parties on the European radical right cultivate relations with other countries, beyond cooperation in the European Parliament and the Euro parties. A large-scale quantitative study on the status of cross-border contacts between individuals and institutions of the radical right (3,000 speakers from 1,800 different organisations at 302 conferences and other events in 35 countries between 2000 and 2024) sees the actors involved in the organisation of two major conference series as central nodes of a »truly transnational movement« (GPAHE 2024): the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) and the National Conservatism Conference (NatCon).

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE SERIES: CPAC AND NATCON

CPAC, which was originally purely American, and NatCon show that the intensity of the radical right's cross-border networking has been stepped up sharply in recent years. Meetings have become more and more frequent and more

and more countries are represented. These conferences are also receiving a lot more media attention, not least because prominent politicians of the global right – such as current prime ministers Viktor Orbán and Georgia Meloni, and current presidents such as Javier Milei – show up there. But above all these conference series, which are better funded than others, provide representatives of the full spectrum of the radical right with an opportunity to exchange views on issues, strategies, and tactics. Politicians from traditional conservative parties are represented alongside activists from the extreme right (GPAHE 2024).

Because the Euro parties and European Parliamentary groups provide an institutional vehicle for the Europe-wide networking of the radical right, the CPAC and NatCon conferences presumably play a bigger role in transatlantic networking. But these conferences are not unimportant for European networking, too, not least because Europe is a favoured meeting place for the radical right, even though Americans top the list of speakers (ibid.). Although formal agreements between radical right parties and organisations are rare, the conferences play host to cross-border networking and dissemination processes. They are »contact zones« between the national and international levels (see Abrahamsen et al. 2024) and enable the political leaders and »organic intellectuals« of national parties and organisations to formulate and test out common narratives and messages, be celebrated for election victories and successful actions, and in general to give the impression of being a cohesive movement that is on the up. Images emerge from these gatherings that symbolise unity and are much more media-potent than joint declarations on policy demands and strategies, which hitherto have had little binding effect. Through the use of similar frames, the narrative of political success, underpinned by the presence of prominent election winners and hopefuls, is supplemented by the narrative of a common struggle. Time and again they inveigh against »globalism« (global liberal elites and migrants) and »wokeism« (against gender issues and LGBTQ, especially trans rights). CPAC Washington in February 2024 – attended by among others Nigel Farage (Reform UK) and Santiago Abascal (Vox, Spain) – took place under the banner »Where globalism goes to die«.

Despite the primacy of national considerations – above all perceived political opportunity structures, especially in the run up to elections – these joint appearances and declarations of the radical right are a performative part of a counter-hegemonic strategy of an increasingly global movement.

> The highly mediatised spectacles of CPAC, NatCon, and other right-wing meetings serve not only to generate connections but also to perform unity and thus solidify the image of the radical Right as a movement with power, purpose, and momentum – a performative politics that can itself be symbolically powerful. They constitute a crucial aspect of what we call the radical Right's counter-hegemonic strategy, a performative politics of global radical Right networks. (Abrahamsen et al. 2024: 10)

CPAC is the more senior of the two conference series. Organised by the American Conservative Union, it was held for the first time in 1974 as a forum for the conservative Reaganite faction of the Republican Party. With the ongoing »Trumpification« of the Republicans, however, CPAC has become little more than a »festival of [Trump] ass kissers« (Greven 2024), although it also provides a showcase for more radical voices within the party. Steve Bannon, one of Trump's long-time advisers, plays a key role in CPAC USA, although he has been less successful in his attempts to promote transatlantic networking of the radical right. In the meantime, several international offshoots of CPAC have emerged (Brazil, Mexico, Australia, Japan, South Korea), among which CPAC Hungary is the most active. In April 2024, already the third conference took place in Budapest, organised by the Fidesz-government-affiliated Center for Fundamental Rights (see Section 6).

NatCon is a project run by the Edmund Burke Foundation, also US based. The Foundation was set up in January 2019 with the mission of strengthening »national conservatism« in Western and other democracies. The think tank is headed by Yoram Hazony, author of the book *The Virtue of Nationalism*. Most NatCon conferences have been held in Europe – Rome, twice in London and twice in Brussels, most recently in April 2024, when the police interrupted proceedings, which enabled the radical right to pose as defenders of freedom of opinion.

NatCon conferences first and foremost promote transatlantic networking, especially between the United States and the United Kingdom. At the NatCon held in London in May 2023 the speeches showed how far to the right the participating parties and politicians had now moved. Conspiracy narratives and apocalyptic disaster scenarios were the order of the day, including »transgenderism, … wokeism, … cancel culture, … neo-marxism, … globalists … and the end of our way of life« (Lowles/Mulhall 2023: 17), which are familiar themes of right-wing extremist gatherings (but meanwhile also of CPAC conferences). In 2020, British Tory politicians were still reprimanded for their participation in NatCon, but when former Home Secretary Suella Braverman showed up, she was not in 2023.

Conservative actors cozying up to right-wing extremists is becoming less and less scandalous in Western democracies. This shows that the conferences and the parties that support them were themselves initially the target of a successful counter-hegemonic strategy, among other things from the Identitarian Movement, which also operates internationally.

Their manifesto, which draws on familiar tropes from the »*Nouvelle Droite*«, has been translated into many languages and serves as the basis for the »community of struggle« and its partly pop-cultural methods of brand-conscious, aestheticised political marketing. The actual level of cross-border cooperation is unclear, at least beyond online communications, but the Identitarians have been able to move the window of discourse by mainstreaming ethno-pluralist ideas and in particular the dissemination of conspiracy narratives such as

the »great replacement« in conventional conservative circles. The ethnic »ethnopluralism« of white people (occasionally of white Christians) has not yet completely eclipsed traditional nationalism, but this is the declared aim of identitarians such as Martin Sellner, who is pushing for an ethnically homogeneous society with his programme of »remigration«.

Cross-border networking through conferences also takes place beyond CPAC and NatCon and is not confined to Europe. The Spanish Fundación Disenso, which is close to Vox, is active in the international networking of the European radical right under the guiding principle of the »Iberosphere.« Up until the invasion of Ukraine the Russian Orthodox Church and members of the Russian radical right were active in the World Congress of Families, where they worked together with evangelicals and other Christian conservatives, especially in the struggle against LGBTQ rights.

6 THE »DEFENDERS OF EUROPE« AND THE EXPORT OF »ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY«

Domestically Viktor Orbán is facing the first pushback he has encountered for a long time. Former Fidesz politician Péter Magyar managed some notable successes at the municipal elections and in the European Parliament elections. Orbán's European ambitions remain unabated, however. He no longer wants to leave Europe but to »occupy Brussels« and over the long term build a grand coalition for his sovereignist agenda to the right of Social Democrats, Greens and (economic) liberals. Although the formation of such a »Eurosceptic International« and the desired »Europe of Nations« would seem to be a long way off, because, beyond a few individual policy measures, the EPP will not accept it, Orbán is determined to seize the leadership of this process for himself. His strategy has two main aspects: on one hand he claims that the radical right are the »true defenders of Europe« or the »defenders of the true Europe«, while on the other hand, he has created an infrastructure in Hungary that makes it possible to disseminate the model of »illiberal democracy« throughout the world.

DEFENDING EUROPE

The radical right have concerned themselves with »European values« before. There were already links between processes of Europeanisation and the transnational activities of the radical right between the two world wars. After the disillusionment of Britain's experiences in the wake of Brexit, however, and the turn of most parties on the European radical right towards the project of »conquering Brussels«, long advocated by Georgia Meloni and the ECR parliamentary group, it may soon cease to make sense simply to dismiss them as Europhobic.

In particular Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán explicitly wants to be seen as the defender of Europe and guardian of Western values. Hillebrand (2024) discusses the decisive features of this »true« Europe in detail. Europe is to be defended against its enemies on the basis of three pillars: first, the (ideally homogenous) nation; second, the (preferably traditional, necessarily heterosexual) family; and third, Christianity (understood by most radical right-wingers in cultural or civilisational terms). Externally the enemies are migrants and refugees (especially non-white and Muslim), while domestically the enemy is the liberal elite and the minorities they supposedly coddle, in particular, once again, migrants and the LGBTQ community. Budapest has become a »Mecca for right-wing extremists« (Forti 2024). Every two years, for example, there is a »Demographic Summit«, a rallying point for Christian and radical right-wing actors, at which supposedly »family-friendly« policy measures are discussed, sometimes under the guise of academic debate, although this scarcely conceals the anti-LGBTQ agenda. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni has been one of the keynote speakers.

In the struggle against »globalism« and »wokeism« a Europe of (sovereign) nations is supposed to operate, on one hand, as »Fortress Europe«, keeping out immigration, and on the other, to defend a self-constructed cultural-ideological European identity against cultural change.

It remains an open question how such an international rather than supranational entity would deal with economic matters. If, for example, the member states were to pursue independent foreign trade policies again, then conflicts on trade, location and subsidies are inevitable. And questions also arise within the EU: what would become of the European Economic Area, the free movement of labour and so on?

What is remarkable about the construction of an idealised Europe (and an idealised West) is the assertion that democracy is an achievement unique to Western civilisation, and closely linked to its Christian heritage (see Forti 2024; sometimes also: Judeo-Christian heritage). When Orbán and others declare themselves on these grounds to be the defenders of the »true Europe«, including democracy, they are echoing many national debates in which the radical right consistently claim that they are not enemies of democracy, but rather want to help to reassert it in the face of so-called »representation deficits« and state failure. In light of recent election results, such arguments cannot merely be dismissed on the basis that these parties are »undemocratic«.

If one enquires more closely, however, it rapidly becomes clear that a very particular definition of »democracy« is in play here, namely a hyper-majoritarian democracy with autocratic tendencies, a democracy that does not shackle the elected majority and its representatives, whether by means of the parliamentary rights of the opposition or the defence mechanisms of the rule of law; an independent judiciary (especially a constitutional court); international agreements; a non-partisan, professional state apparatus; free media or an active civil society – the checks and balances provided by liberal democratic constitutions and pluralistic societies are supposed to make way for a »tyranny of the majority«.

What is being defended is an »illiberal democracy«, while the foundations of liberal democracy are fiercely contested.

There can be no doubt that the institutional changes wrought by a radical right government damage democracy over the long term. That has become evident after the voting out of the PiS government in Poland. The question is, how far the power holders in an »illiberal democracy« are prepared to go, for example, with changes to election law. In the case of Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz government this includes exporting the Hungarian variety of »illiberal democracy« to other countries in order to ease the pressure on Hungary in the EU.

HUNGARY'S »ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY«: MODEL AND EXPORT PRODUCT

Viktor Orbán uses his appearances at international conferences of the radical right to showcase Hungary (and himself as its leading figure) as a model. It was on this basis that he presented his »recipe for success« at the first CPAC Hungary organised by the government-affiliated Center for Fundamental Rights (CFR) in 2022 and explicitly called for imitations: Hungary is »the laboratory where we managed to come up with the antidote for progressive dominance«. At CPAC Hungary in April 2024 he spoke, in view of the upcoming European Parliament and US presidential elections, of an »era of sovereignty« to be rung in on the model of Hungary, a »conservative island«.

Orbán has been able, through this and similar speeches – and through numerous publications and other measures by various organisations (see below) – to make Hungary's »illiberal democracy« into an inspiration to many radical right-wingers throughout the world, a »paradise abroad« (Heilbrunn 2024) from which people can and should learn. For example, »Project 2025«, a programme for government developed by the Heritage Foundation and others for Donald Trump's second term (although Trump distanced himself from it, scarcely credibly, out of expediency) can be seen as a kind of »Orbánisation« of America.

On top of that comes the deliberate construction of an organisational infrastructure in order to actively »export« the model of »illiberal democracy«. Key participants in this are, for example, Hungarian embassies, especially in central and eastern Europe and in the western Balkans. As he can no longer rely on Poland's veto in the EU Council of Ministers, Orbán is interested in the EU accession of Western Balkan states, especially Serbia, in contrast to most other parties on the radical right, which reject EU enlargement. In that way he could bring allies on board for his projects, such as Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić, and secure his power base against EU intervention to protect the rule of law. The Hungarian government and Fidesz thus provide cross-border assistance in election campaigns, especially with regard to communications and campaign strategy. One favoured mobilisation tactic is to hold referendums on culture wars issues alongside elections, something that they learned from the US Republican Party.

Nevertheless, attempts to transfer »hyperpolitical« communication strategies across borders, aimed at the emotionalisation of political debate, can run up against cultural and legal obstacles. In Poland, for example, they were ultimately unsuccessful. This did not improve relations between Fidesz and the PiS, which in any case were overcast by their different policies on Russia. Even so, Fidesz sets great store by maintaining contacts with sovereignist parties, such as FdI in Italy, PiS in Poland and Smer in Slovakia, and continues to cultivate them even after election defeats. Resources deployed transnationally are mobilised strategically and for the long haul.

The same applies to the organisations, foundations and think tanks, generously funded by the state, which are tasked with fashioning some sort of »intellectual« basis for the counter-hegemonic project of »illiberal democracy«, for example, by funding visiting fellowships for academics, mainly from the United States, but also by expanding what in any case is the astonishingly large international presence of Hungarian academics and activists – organic intellectuals of global networking.

The Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) is among the most important actors in the cultivation of relations with friendly parties, organisations and personalities of the radical right and in the dissemination of key ideological messages. The MCC is a private educational institution and talent incubator for the Fidesz party, which also functions as a think tank with government support. It is a host institution for fellows of the radical right from all over the world, in cooperation with the Ludovika University of Public Service and the Hungary Foundation. The annual MCC Feszt is an event with a very high networking rating (GPAHE 2024). MCC also has around 20 branches in different regions of Hungary, as well as in Romania and Slovakia, not to mention, since November 2022, in Brussels. The research director there is German political scientist Werner Patzelt, who became notorious because of his research on the Pegida movement. The Brussels office organises, among other things, events in line with the agenda of the Hungarian government. Other representative missions abroad are planned, for example, in London, where events have already been held, and Madrid. Since 2023 the MCC has been involved in the private Modul University in Vienna, and also in the European School of Management and Technology (ESMT) in Berlin, among other things with an endowment professorship (»MCC professor for strategy«). All these measures are aimed at enhancing the respectability of »illiberal democracy«.

Another important government-affiliated institution for the transnational networking of the radical right is the Danube Institute, founded in 2013 by the Batthyány Lajos Foundation (BLA), also close to the government. Besides its role in organising the NatCon conferences (together with the leading Edmund Burke Foundation, see Section 5) and other events, exchanges between academics, experts, leading politicians and also cultural players of the radical right are pre-eminent. All this, too, is aimed at creating an intellectual basis for the implementation of the Fidesz government's political priorities.

The MCC, the Danube Institute and various Fidesz affiliated media companies are attempting to influence European political discourse with an anti-migration and anti-LGBTQ slant, with publications such as the journal *European Conservative* and the V4 News Agency (V4NA) located in London, as well as websites such as ReMixNews.

Quantitative evaluations of the presence of representatives of these organisations (and also of the organisers of and participants in CPAC and NatCon events) show a high and rising degree of cross-linking. The top three of the most cross-linked or networked individuals (measured by their speeches at international conferences) are Danube Institute president John O'Sullivan, editor of the Orbán-friendly *European Conservative* journal, Josh Hammer and Orbán's political director Balázs Orbán (no relation), who is also chair of the MCC advisory board (GPAHE 2024). But that doesn't say much about the actual effectiveness of the cross-linking. The mere fact that people from different countries appear at the same conferences and events scarcely provides us with a clear view of what is really going on. The same applies to the question of how much influence the subsidised academic and journalistic work of international »fellows« have in their respective home countries. Talk is cheap.

The claims and the realities of the efforts of the various »organic intellectuals« concerning the development of a successful counter-hegemonic strategy based on the systemic alternative of »illiberal democracy« are probably far apart. Nevertheless, the dynamics and direction of the networking efforts of so many different actors point to the emergence of a global movement of the radical right, which not only enjoys the advantage of finding »hyper-politicisation« easier, but also has advantages in terms of organizing when compared to the defenders of liberal democracy. Although the movement's counter-hegemonic »revolutionary« impetus lacks a unified leadership and has not engendered a mass movement, it does have a considerable headstart when it comes to motivation and mobilisation.

7 CONCLUSIONS AND PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Transnational networking or crosslinking has become an integral part of the political strategy of the radical right. It is thus becoming a global movement, an »Illiberal International«. There is no consensus on all substantive issues, but there is consensus on the goal of changing the system. And »the radical Right does not require ideological unity or conformity to build transnational coalitions that have potentially profound national and international impacts« (Abrahamsen/Williams 2023: 31). The global radical right is pursuing a counter-hegemonic strategy with a view to toppling the rule-based liberal order (and its institutional embodiments, such as the EU) and replacing it with an order based on greater national sovereignty. Its aim in this is specifically to combat the »global liberal elite« and the minorities it is alleged to support, above all migrants and LGBTQ communities (see

Abrahamsen et al. 2024: 20, who talk of a »»New Class‹ … of global managerial elites«).

Transnational networking and cross-linking also contribute to the success of the European radical right. The cross-border dissemination – and also explicit learning – of strategies on the deliberate emotionalisation and personalisation of political debate has triggered a transnational »hyperpolitical« radicalisation spiral, also by means of disinformation campaigns and the spread of conspiracy narratives in social media (which we have not examined here).

In elections, the radical right benefit almost everywhere from the growing affective polarisation of populations, also because their »polarisation entrepreneurs« are able to capitalise in their hyperpolitical mobilisation on the representation deficits of liberal democracies. Although no »Right-wing International« has yet emerged, many parties of the radical right can claim the status of workers' parties regardless of whether workers actually benefit from their policies. Basically, they benefit over against the defenders of liberal democracy – who tend to be fragmented in pluralistic societies – from a considerable motivational advantage among their supporters, which can be attributed to the unity that is aggressively celebrated at international conferences and other networking events. This shows how effectively the increasingly shared frames are in terms of self-identification (»defenders of Europe«) and the identification of the enemy.

The counter-hegemonic project of a sovereignist alternative to the liberal order is also being promoted across borders. Hungary's »illiberal democracy« has become a globally recognised model and Hungary itself an active exporter. Ostensibly, the will of the majority is to be given greater weight and to that end protective mechanisms such as international agreements, judicial independence, a non-partisan, professional civil service, free media and an independent civil society would be largely sidelined. The long-term fear is that the democratic institutions will generally become a façade, hindering the democratic transfer of power or even blocking it altogether. It is precisely these autocratic undertones of the anti-pluralist programme that make it so attractive for radical actors all over the world.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS: MORE (GLOBAL) MOVEMENT

Key battles must continue to be fought at a national level, beyond the level of discourse – that is, beyond better communication and »anti-fascism« – with concrete solutions to the problems perceived by growing sections of the population as a lack of representation. Economic issues are at the forefront here. The simple fact is that if people feel economically secure, they are more open to compromise on difficult cultural questions. Above all, in such circumstances the positive, optimistic narrative of an open, modern (multi-ethnic, multireligious) society and a pluralistic, representative democracy becomes much more attractive. Then proposals

on how to overcome widespread democracy fatigue (»citizens' councils«) are likely to get more of a hearing.

Such a positive narrative – if it is to be feasible – necessarily points beyond the nation state (and also beyond Europe). In a liberal global economy, the creation of greater economic security requires supranational efforts to regulate global competition. Effective global governance will be needed to rein in economic power (including in the political realm) with a post-neoliberal globalisation policy. To this end, transnational networking must be pursued, not only among progressive forces, but among all defenders of liberal democracy and a pluralistic society.

This has proved difficult hitherto. The radical right is now a global movement, at least in relative terms: It is more of a social movement, nationally and transnationally, than its opponents can claim to be.

There are at least two ways of changing this, based on transnational initiatives. First, a republican alliance in defence of the democratic order and of an open world society and economy. Second, a progressive movement for a post-neoliberal politics that doesn't turn its nose up at economic populism (see Protzer/Summerville 2022).

Democratic rule is reinforced if either policy measures are vindicated by their results (»outcome«) or decision-making processes are regarded as legitimate (or both). Given that the defenders of liberal democracy are engaged in a pluralistic competition of ideas and can rarely agree on policy measures, the first issue is the formation of a transnational »republican« alliance. If a high level of substantive tolerance can be achieved, for example on the issues of migration and capitalism (but incorporating red lines with regard to the adoption of a radical »friend and foe rhetoric«), this alliance would uphold the defence of a democratic polity, institutions, processes and fundamental values.

In addition, such an alliance can highlight the danger of the return of aggressive international conflicts in the democratic world. The nationalism of the radical right would inevitably lead to a conflict-prone, competitive nationalism and thus endanger popular prosperity. Protectionism is already on the rise again, and national subsidies and competition policies are becoming more aggressive. Above all, however, transnational networks already link the radical right to authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China, which are interested in a »multipolar world order« and spheres of interest. This must be brought to light.

Of course, everyone across the democratic-pluralist spectrum will continue to promote their particular goals, not least because it is difficult to mobilise people with more abstract, systemic considerations, whether in defence of liberal democracy or the liberal world order. From a progressive perspective, the latter in particular is in urgent need of reform, not least because of glaring global social inequalities. For that reason, second, a transnational movement for a post-neoliberal politics is necessary to push for the effective socio-ecological regulation of cutthroat global competition, not least to avoid excessive competition to subsidise industrial policy in »national competition states«. It will meet with considerable resistance, especially from business. But this would make possible, on one hand, »economic populist« rhetoric to effectively mobilise people in support of socio-ecological regulation and cushion competition within the framework of globalisation. On the other hand, business representatives fear that the rise of the global radical right is jeopardising the liberal world economic order. Many are mobilising for liberal democracy and an open society. They can therefore also be allies and should be brought on board.

In principle, however, economic liberalism and political autocracy can live in harmony, as research on neoliberal networks and their links to authoritarian politicians and foundations shows. Furthermore, anarcho-capitalists such as Peter Thiel and Elon Musk are hoping for a kind of economic carte blanche (and lower taxes). But the radical right does not yet have an economic basis to support its counter-hegemonic strategy. A »historical bloc« along the lines envisaged by Gramsci has still not fully formed, also in part because the radical right lack coherence with regard to economic and social policy. This opportunity must not be missed.

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