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# **Ideologies of Autocratization**

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NEO-AUTHORITARIANISMS IN EUROPE  
AND THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC RESPONSE

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# Ideologies of Autocratization

Zsolt Enyedi

## Abstract

This paper discusses the ideological modules of the recent wave of autocratization. It detects the emergence of still fragmented but increasingly robust illiberal alternatives. The illiberal discourse is anti-universalist but typically not openly anti-democratic. It gains much of its traction from a backlash against progressive victories in the culture wars. Appropriating anti-colonial arguments, it advocates the coexistence of different political regimes while it venerates homogeneity and the centralization of power within national borders. While shifts towards autocratic structures can be non-ideological, the ideological modules of *paternalist populism*, *illiberal conservatism* and, in certain parts of the world, *civilizationist ethnocentrism* constitute ideational layers that help the cause of autocratizers.

## About the author

Zsolt Enyedi studied comparative social sciences, history, sociology and political science in Budapest and Amsterdam. The focus of his research interests is on party politics, comparative government, church and state relations, and political psychology (especially authoritarianism, prejudices, and political tolerance). His articles have appeared in journals such as *Political Psychology*, *European Journal of Political Research*, *Political Studies*, *West European Politics*, *Party Politics*, *Political Studies*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Problems of Post-Communism*, *Journal of Ideologies*, and *European Review*. Zsolt Enyedi was the 2003 recipient of the Rudolf Wildenmann Prize and the 2004 winner of the Bibó Award. He was a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center (Washington DC), Kellogg Institute (Notre Dame University), the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Studies (Wassenaar), the European University Institute (Florence), the Center for Transatlantic Relations, Johns Hopkins University, Department of Politics and International Relations and Pembroke College, University of Oxford. His most recent book, *Party System Closure*, co-authored with Fernando Casal Bertoa, was published by Oxford University Press in 2021.

## Introduction

Ideological discourse is often used to hide materialistic motives. When Hitler attacked the Soviet Union he used the language of anti-Bolshevism. In response, Stalin mobilized his people against the possible return of landlords, capitalists and the tsar. The historical record shows that at the moment of the German invasion these politicians were mainly concerned about the control of the oilfields and granaries in Ukraine, southern Russia and the Caucasus and, indirectly, about their own grip on power.

Mindful of the potential gap between words and true motives, contemporary observers are often sceptical about the utility of ideas for making sense of political processes. This perspective is problematic as there is no such thing as politics without ideological elements. Neither there is, of course, politics driven exclusively by ideological considerations. The task of the analysts is to identify the specific ideological templates used by political actors and to assess their significance.

As far as the recent wave of autocratization is concerned, the aversion to ideology-focused analyses is particularly conspicuous. The emphasis of the scholarship tends to be on the logic of power-grabbing and on kleptocratic rule (Lewis 2022). Ideological aspects are neglected for three major reasons. First, thanks to media penetration, we know more than in the past about the facts behind the façades of political propaganda, such as the work of spin doctors, the details of the wealth-accumulation by leaders or the behind-the-scenes collaboration of business and political elites. Second, the currently autocratizing countries are led by political actors with diverse ideological affiliations. Third, no elaborate and explicit anti-democratic ideology has emerged (yet) in the current wave of autocratization. While the third wave of democratization produced convergence on the model of liberal democracy, and the post-1989 transitions were particularly dominated by the glorification of human rights and the market economy, the current autocratic challenges to liberal democracy come from various ideological corners.

Ideology had an asymmetric role already during the Cold War. While half of the planet identified as communist or socialist, the other half had no similar unifying frame. Anti-communism was often a central tenet for these regimes, but this was true for both democracies and autocracies. The right-wing and authoritarian regimes were diverse in their ideological appeals: some emphasised nationalism while others legitimized themselves with religious fundamentalism or hierarchical law-and-order policies, and many were structured around the defence of inherited post-feudal structures or the operating principle of military rule.

The disparate conglomerate of right-wing regimes started losing its members after the democratic transition in Portugal, while the communist alternative collapsed in one go. But at the end of the 2000s the transitory expansion of liberal democratic norms reversed. Today checks and balances, pluralism and individual rights are under threat in the majority of the countries of the world (Boese et al. 2022; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). The policies and ideas used to undermine these institutions and norms can be analysed under the umbrella term 'illiberalism' (Laruelle 2022; Sajó et al. 2021).

Illiberalism is typically conceptualized as a mixture of practices and ideological elements (Kauth and King 2020). In this paper the emphasis will be on the latter; that is, on ideas that question the equality of citizens, freedom of expression, state neutrality, the rule of law, checks and balances, media pluralism and non-discrimination based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender or race. Ideology is understood here as a recurring and interrelated pattern of ideas on which public policy proposals can be based (Freeden 2003). It is outside of the scope of this paper to investigate how long-standing and stable the respective ideas and their linkages are (Freeden 1996, 2017). None of the discussed ideological modules amounts to a full-fledged, monolithic and fully integrated template akin to Marxist socialism, Thomist Christian integralism or Rawlsian liberalism, but they all have an intellectual and normative core that has the potential to structure political actions beyond materialistic cost-benefit calculations. The paper is aimed at identifying such core ideas.

To the extent one finds common ideas across various illiberal initiatives, they may follow both from these initiatives' joint opposition to liberal democracy and from learning from each other. 'Authoritarian learning' does not require purposefully designed institutions and arenas, but it can be facilitated by various structures of education and international cooperation. Organizations such as the World Congress of Families (WCF) or Marion Maréchal Le Pen's Institute of Social, Economic and Political Sciences (ISSEP) offer a radical conservative critique of liberal democracy, while institutions like the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) provide venues for politicians to exchange ideas and to forge ties of solidarity. As the list above indicates, these organizations cater for different actors: the illiberal front is fragmented. But they sometimes converge on common enemy figures, such as the millionaire philanthropist businessman George Soros, and borrow specific arguments and solutions from each other.

## 1. Left or right

As it follows from the previous section, it is not possible to arrive to a blanket assertion on the left-right profile of the current autocratic wave. But it is possible to point to the prevalence of right-wing cultural and left-wing economic values in the rhetoric of many of the political actors concerned and to argue for the primacy of the former. Autocratic projects tend to justify themselves by criticizing the inability of liberal democracies to achieve social and cultural integration, but the concerns about social cohesion rarely lead to the implementation of traditional left-wing economic policies.

In fact, the most clearly right-wing examples of illiberal projects, such as Alberto Fujimori's in Perú or Jair Bolsonaro's in Brazil, can be even said to have defended in an illiberal way some elements of the liberal order, primarily its economic aspects. Accordingly, these leaders were backed by educated and well-to-do social segments of the society (Mafei et al. 2021). In a similar vein, in the Philippines the left-wing populism of President Joseph Estrada was countered by President Rodrigo Duterte's more unequivocally illiberal right-wing populism. Duterte's anti-elitist rhetoric (directed especially against journalists, human rights lawyers and international actors) was popular exactly because the educated middle classes feared the corruption and chaos associated with left-wing populism (Garrido 2022; Rüland 2022).

Right-wing illiberals typically use some modernized version of the old anti-communist rhetoric. This discourse is most pronounced where the radical left is a serious alternative, like parts of Latin America, but it is also present in post-communist countries where it primarily expresses a rivalry with forces that can be described as successors of the defunct communist establishment.

On the opposite side of the political spectrum, Latin America's populist politicians like Evo Morales, Hugo Chavez, Nicolás Maduro or Rafael Correa justified their authoritarian measures, such as the extension of their own term limits, with the fight against the economic oligarchy. Even more importantly, their rhetoric focused on the emancipation of marginalized social groups, in sharp contrast to the right-wing versions of illiberalism. The lowest common denominator for left-wing autocratizers is provided by the language of egalitarianism combined with anti-Americanism (Alarcón et al. 2016; Chaguaceda 2021; Corrales 2020; de la Torre 2010; Garcia-Holgado and Perez-Linan 2021; Landau 2021; Moffitt 2016).

The complexity of the relationship between the left-right spectrum and illiberalism is exacerbated by two factors: the blurred profile of some of the illiberal parties and the illiberalism of some of the centrist political forces. India, one of the most significant examples among recent autocratizers, is a good example of the first factor. The traditionally ruling Congress party that represented social elites and marginalised social groups (similarly to the

Democrats in the United States) was successfully challenged by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Narendra Modi. The BJP gave voice to the anxieties surrounding the positive discrimination in favour of the Hindu lowest castes under Congress's rule. These policies were seen as dysfunctional and unfair even by many citizens who lived in modest circumstances. The rolling back of the system under Modi has been accompanied by a combination of neoliberal economic policies and of the distribution of tangible goods to the poor, creating a broad cross-class support for the BJP (Ganguly 2020; Jaffrelot 2022; Maerz et al. 2020; Varshney 2019). But while on economic issues the BJP's ideology is a complex one, culturally it is unequivocally right-wing, embracing extreme versions of Hindu nationalism and inviting citizens to think of themselves not in economic but in ethno-religious terms.

The second factor is represented by shifts towards autocratic structures under nominally centrist leaderships. In Bulgaria under Boyko Borisov a centre-right liberal office-holder relied on authoritarian measures, while in Serbia and Slovakia nominally leftist governing parties did the same. Notably, neither of these actors developed a comprehensive critique of liberal democracy (Cianetti et al. 2018; Dawson and Hanley 2016). Indonesia is another case of 'silent autocratization': under the pragmatic and initially liberal Joko Widodo (Jokowi) civil liberties were gradually restricted without much fanfare.

## **2. Attacks on universalism and globalism, lip service to democracy**

The search for commonalities behind this bewildering variation must start with the acknowledgment that, historically speaking, the current wave of autocratizers is distinguished by their formal acceptance of democratic rules and principles. Executive aggrandizement, the unwillingness to guarantee a level playing field in the political arena, and the frequent and often arbitrary disrespect of the constitutional limits on governments and of citizens' rights question the genuineness of their democratic orientation, but the difference compared to the interwar anti-democratic template is undeniable. The emphatically elitist worldviews have not been reinvigorated in the current democratic regress, even if, as discussed below, bottom-up legitimization is often tempered by various top-down concerns.

The proliferation of labels such as electoral autocracy, defective democracy, hybrid regime, competitive authoritarianism and illiberal democracy shows the lack of clear dividing lines between dictatorship and democracy in contemporary politics. In this context the acceptance of democratic rule can mean two things: maintenance of formally democratic

procedures and/or appeal to the will of the people. While the first is often a practical necessity, the second can be considered to be a properly ideological element.

The evocation of bottom-up legitimacy is often linked to freedom-of-speech arguments against imposed political correctness. Today's illiberals devote considerable energy to identifying instances of violation of freedoms by liberal democratic regimes and of biases and censorship within the (international) media. They embrace the values of pluralism and tolerance in a very specific and narrow sense of these words: by objecting to the progressive regulations of private and public affairs and by advocating for a multipolar world in which different regimes coexist.

This partial (and often superficial) borrowing from liberal discourse is combined with a profoundly anti-universalistic orientation. Universalism is one of the most visible and provocative hallmarks of the liberal democratic order. It is a provocative ideological orientation because it sits uneasily with national sovereignty, localism and religion-based political identities. It also has, historically speaking, a Western flavour, a fact exploited by autocratizers in non-Western regions.

A prominent authoritarian alternative constructed along these lines is the one framed in terms of 'Asian values'. According to this template human rights are products of historical developments and are contingent on local conditions (Chang 2021; Davis 1998). 'Asian values' imply a prioritization of society and family above the individual, consensus and social harmony over contention, and collective safety over individual freedom. They also entail the veneration of a paternalistic, economically active and, in terms of values, non-neutral state (Bourchier 2019; Ghai 2000; Ginsburg 2021; Jones et al. 1995; Mahbubhani 1992). To justify restrictions on criticism of authorities, the surveillance of the citizens and the hierarchically organized, collectivistic vision of the state-society nexus, the autocratizers tend to refer to a combination of cultural legacies and technocratic efficiency.

While the Asian specificities are often interpreted in civilizational terms by analysts and actors alike, it is obvious that the scepticism about the constraints on state power travels well across Confucian, Muslim or Catholic boundaries, as reflected by the dominance of the *raison d'état* over individual freedoms in constitutions from China to Indonesia (Bourchier 2015; Mudhoffir and Hadiz 2021).

The countries where this ideological discourse is most elaborate, such as Malaysia or Singapore, are in the forefront of demonstrating that modernization is possible in a non-Western way. But these countries are not among the most autocratic ones in the region. In fact, rulers proclaiming 'Asian values' often face radical challenges from fundamentalist ideologies that reject the supremacy of social harmony and call for less tolerance and more bottom-up legislation. Ironically, these approaches, while being more hostile towards the

West, overlap with the American and European radical right in their readiness to polarize public debates and in adopting an agonistic vision of society in general.

The illiberal stance against universalism also shapes attitudes towards globalization. While some of the countries undergoing autocratization benefit economically from globalization, most of their leaders rally against globalism and globalization-induced multiculturalism (Ganga 2021). In case of states that benefit most from international trade, such as China, this involvement limits the officials' willingness to offer an expansive counter-vision to liberal democracy (Ikenberry 2014). In contrast, in the case of Russia the more marginal economic position, together with the legacy of messianic role-perception, helped the development of a more explicit challenge to liberal democracies (Lewis 2020). One of the central concepts of the Putinist discourse, the 'Russian world' (Ruskij mir), provides civilizational boundaries to the regime's scope of demands, but because it encompasses all Russian speakers it also legitimizes interference well beyond the country's borders and thereby it exacerbates the rhetoric's expansionist potential (Yatsyk and Makarychev 2022). In this ideological framework, however, the will of the people is not the most central factor; sovereignty belongs more to the state than to the people (Laruelle 2022).

In the regions of advanced capitalism anti-globalization sentiments play a different role within the neo-authoritarian discourses. In the wealthiest and most developed Western democracies the connection between the substantive rise of inequality and globalization led to populist, protectionist, nationalist and isolationist movements, supported particularly by social groups that bore the costs of globalization. During the 2010s Donald Trump became the main representative of such demands, explicitly contrasting the narrow material interests of the United States with the existing regime of international trade and military agreements.

While American illiberal initiatives campaign for pulling up the country's drawbridges in general, in most other regions autocratizers advocate turning away from particular geopolitical poles. The most spectacular such U-turn happened in case of Turkey. The Justice and Development Party led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was originally in favour of European integration. But during the 2010s confrontation with the European Union became part of the core identity of the Erdoğan regime. As in many similar instances, this was partly a reaction to EU's insistence on issues such as press freedom and the independence of the judiciary (Taspinar 2014). The same applies to Hungary, a country that developed an equally hostile rhetoric to 'Brussels', even though it remained part of the EU. In general, the Eurosceptic authoritarian forces within the EU tend not to campaign for an exit but try to slow down the speed of integration, with the ultimate goal of transforming the EU into a pragmatic economic intergovernmental enterprise.

While Eurosceptic sentiments became increasingly a staple of illiberal ambitions, anti-Israel propaganda largely faded away from the agenda of autocratization. This happened in

parallel to the transformation of Israel in an autocratic direction. In Israel the decades-long presence of anti-minority policies and the ascendance of religious fundamentalist and/or radical nationalist forces to power received a new impetus from the success of Trumpism. Inter-community tensions spilled over into issues relevant for political pluralism and civil rights, leading to attacks against academic freedom, the politicization of judiciary and the increased governmental control over media, but largely without the adoption of a self-conscious anti-liberal democracy discourse (Shany and Kremnitzer 2022).

The governments led by Benjamin Netanyahu are paradigmatic examples for the recent wave of autocratization because they exhibit most clearly the prevailing 'first things first' rhetoric. This 'realist' discourse conceptualizes political leaders as responsible for their own population, and within that for the majority. The job of elected leaders is to assure economic survival, law and order, demographic sustainability and, in many instances, the preservation of the cultural legacies that guarantee internal cohesion. Abstract notions, like freedom of movement or human rights have only marginal place in this role perception. The realist perspective criticizes liberal legalism for separating law from politics and from everyday morality and for advancing a dangerous utopianism in the form of universalism (Blokker 2021). While such ideas have always been convenient for autocrats, the failure of democracy promotion in various corners of the world, from Afghanistan to Iraq, Libya, or Venezuela, provided credence to this more 'pragmatic' approach to international affairs.

### **3. Culture wars**

The cultural agenda of the 21st century autocratizers is anchored in the success of progressive policies across the world, but particularly in advanced capitalist countries, representing a correction of and a backlash against the robust victories of liberal values. These victories, beginning in the 1960s but continuing unabated through the turn of the millennium, led to the growing acceptance of cultural diversity. As the New Left increasingly focused on identity issues, the authoritarian right also structured its rhetoric around cultural identities, championing majority identities (Fukuyama 2019). Since the progressive reforms were driven by educated, socially and physically mobile elites, the resistance adopted a populist format.

Within the rhetoric of cultural resistance, the fear of replacement by another racial or ethnic group (immigrants or minorities like the Roma in Eastern Europe or the Muslims in India) was fused with the fear of being eclipsed by liberated sexual minorities. The growing visibility of the latter groups does not only represent a challenge to traditional lifestyles and religious convictions; it also evokes the fear of demographic extinction through the 'culture

of death' (Mancini and Palazzo 2021). In this frame traditional personal and group identity are seen to be equally at danger, necessitating proactive measures such as limiting sex education in schools, banning abortion or constraining NGOs representing sexual minorities (Querioz et al. 2021).

Benefitting from the backlash against progressivism, autocratizers could effectively use the language of traditionalism. The type of conservatism they offer is an illiberal version of classical conservatism that sees contemporary democracy as overly influenced by liberal values such as internationalism, multiculturalism and human rights. Within the culture-war context tough-on-crime principles gain new meaning: they can be utilized to serve anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalism attitudes as foreigners violating domestic moral rules can be object to incarceration and deportation. In Europe illiberal conservatism is typically coupled with civilizationist ethnocentrism, an ideological construct within which agency is attributed to sovereign ethno-cultural units bound together by a civilizationist solidarity, meaning in the European context the defence of white Christian culture against both globalization and Islam (Enyedi 2023).

The culture-war logic structures the behaviour even of the ideologically less fundamentalist autocratizers, such as Donald Trump. His stance against immigration, abortion and science, or his association with white supremacists, reflected the concerns of conservative religious believers who felt threatened by progressive racial policies, LGBTQ+ rights and what they perceived as restrictions on religious freedom (Gray 2022; Jamin 2021).

In general, the culturalist rejections of liberal democracy often have religious roots and/or adopt a religious format, typically manifesting in an opposition to 'extreme secularism' of liberal democracy. Some forms of religious resistance target the spirit of individualism, others the separation of church and state. Virtually all of them criticize the moral relativism of modern democracies, while, paradoxically, mobilizing against the interference of secular democratic states into the autonomy of religious communities, an activity that points to the very opposite of moral relativism.

The trend towards global liberal cultural ascendancy provides a boost for the discourse of re-traditionalization even in regions where there were no local progressive victories. In Central Asia, for example, the departure from the relative moral conservatism of the Soviet regime helped both authoritarian rulers and jihadists to make their case. Soviet conservatism was alien to Islam, and it was even hostile to it, but it did not provoke moral attitudes in the same way as Western cultural products did, especially in conjunction with the political chaos, threat of violence, corruption, ethnic tensions, inequality, criminality and the opaque redistribution of resources that followed the arrival of capitalism (Tucker 2022).

The explicit alliance of illiberal forces and churches is sometimes prevented by the pro-democratic stance of the clergy. Some leaders, such as Jair Bolsonaro and Rodrigo

Duterte, were forced to publicly confront a pro-democracy Catholic Church. Pentacostal-charismatic evangelicalism, on the other hand, emerged as a major cultural resource of authoritarian politics in Africa (Uganda, Kenya, etc), Latin America (Brazil, Guatemala, etc) and in North America. This is not so because of specific theological, economic or democracy-related views held by the movement, but rather due to the involvement of these churches in the culture wars, placing the majority (though not all) of Evangelicals on the arch-conservative end of the spectrum, especially on sexual minority rights and abortion. The Orthodox Church, particularly the leadership of the Russian clergy, takes an essentially similar position, albeit in a top-down fashion, focusing on resistance against the poisonous impact of Western values (Frick 2021).

The clearest expression of neo-traditionalism is to be found in the 'anti-gender' discourse. This discourse was launched by the Vatican but it quickly spread across denominations in most regions. It builds on the tradition of anti-feminism while it occasionally receives the backing of large section of women. In Europe the animosity against sexual tolerance often goes together, somewhat paradoxically, with the fear of Muslim social views on gender equality (Dietze and Roth 2020; Pető 2021). The case of Poland is exemplary in this regard as religious (in this case Catholic) fundamentalism is combined with the fear of both Western and Islamic influence.

#### **4. The people and the state**

Without any doubt, populism is an important layer of the autocratizing ideological discourse in many corners of the world. The anti-elite discourse has robust, long-lasting traditions in the United States, but in most other regions it is relatively new, at least as a major organizing force of political divides. The pernicious side-effects of neoliberal policies, especially the increase of inequalities, have fostered the plausibility of people-centric appeals of ambitious autocratic leaders and has helped the radical right to discover the native working class as a major constituency. In Europe populism capitalized on the cumulation of social challenges, from the 2008 financial crisis to the 2015 terrorist attacks in France and the refugee crisis of the same year. In the Western part of the continent the authoritarian breakthrough failed to materialize, but in Eastern Europe the various crises of legitimacy contributed to the advance of autocratization in countries such as Hungary and Poland.

But populism is not a central element of the discourse of most autocratic leaders of Africa, Asia or Russia. And populism is present in many countries only in its specific paternalist variety. Paternalist populism (Enyedi 2020), championed by leaders such as Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński, combines the superiority of the popular will with the

educational role of the state. While the ideal-typical populist rhetoric is vague on the definition of the 'people', paternalist populism champions governmental support for 'model citizens' (Querioz et al. 2021), a social group whose boundaries are determined in line with the values and interests of the ruling elite.

The exact balance between populism and paternalism can vary within a single country. In Italy, for example, the League represents more the populist side, while the Brothers of Italy, in line with its Fascist roots, the paternalist sensibilities (Albertazzi 2022). The 'winning formula' in most cases is the appeal to the homogeneously conceived people against the corrupt foreign or foreign-hearted elites, with the promise that the state sides with the virtuous citizens and takes a leadership role in the fight against foreign interest groups. The state is envisioned as a force capable of redressing the arbitrariness of the markets and of resisting the imperialistic intervention of great powers and of international financial institutions. The paternalist populist approach allows autocrats to channel the discontent of citizens against neoliberalism (Scheppelle 2019).

The ideological construct of paternalist populism overlaps with the 'Asian values' agenda in emphasising the community and the obligations to it over individual rights. The Hungarian ideologue, András Láncki, for example, praised Viktor Orbán for introducing the 'system of the meritorious moral relationships' (Láncki 2018), in which community assistance and individual rights are conditioned on fulfilling obligations. As in the 'Asian values' template, the community is supposed to be held together by ideological values while the leader is left relatively free of ideological constraints in order to stay victorious in the struggle for power (Láncki 2015; Scheppelle 2019). The narrowing of the channels of accountability is justified with a reference to the need for curbing the pernicious influence of privileged elites, for resisting external powers and, in general, for swift action.

The statist values that accompany paternalist populism require not only the enhanced capability of intervention but also an internal homogenization of the state, where education, health care, the judiciary, public information, sport and, often, religious affairs are coordinated and centralised. In line with the paternalistic elements, the interest of the governments, from Brazil to Poland, turned to history textbooks. Even in the United States, where the right traditionally championed school autonomy, efforts have been made by state governments to change curricula in a more conservative and nationalistic direction.

The growing relevance of culture wars in world politics further facilitated the international diffusion of paternalist aspects. In 2021 Viktor Orbán banned education on sexual minorities in schools. In 2022 Ron DeSantis, Governor of Florida, followed suit with the "Don't Say Gay" bill, and went even further with the "Stop WOKE" bill, forbidding the inclusion of various topics in school and university curricula. A couple of months later, in 2023, Vladimir Putin introduced a decree according to which the government's obligations

include the protection of traditional family values, especially concerning heterosexual marriage, and the enforcement of traditional Russian spirituality and morality in the education of children. Additionally, the state must protect the “historical truth” and defend the society against “external ideological and value expansion and destructive information and psychological impact” (Russia Posts English 2013).

The statist turn of the American right is significant because, until recently, individualism and pro-market orientation kept it ideologically isolated from illiberals elsewhere. Even Trump used little collectivistic or communitarian rhetoric. But some recent theoretical advances narrowed the gap between the United States and the rest of the world. Leading conservative academics such as Adrian Vermeule (2020), Patrick Deneen (2018), Rod Dreher (2021) and others developed a new, more communitarian and more explicitly illiberal approach. The message of these thinkers is that conservatives should no longer be afraid of using state power for implementing their principles (Halmai 2021; Garcia-Holgado and Perez-Linan 2021).

## Conclusions

Paraphrasing Tolstoy, one is tempted to say that all liberal democracies are alike, but every autocratic initiative is autocratic in its own way. This asymmetry comes from the fact that liberal democracy is a relatively recent, barely a century old, innovation in need of a generic legitimization. Individual autocracies, on the other hand, do not need to provide legitimacy for all other autocracies, they only need to legitimise their own rule. And specific justifications can rest on the references to the charisma of the leader or on the unique challenges faced by the country. In general, authoritarian practices can exist without an unequivocally authoritarian rhetoric.

But while the asymmetry exists, there are similarities in the ideological discourse of autocratic politicians across various regions of the world, as demonstrated above. Some part of the common platform is neatly summarized by David Lewis (2021, 19):

*“The most fundamental common theme is a rejection of the tenets of liberalism (defined in all sorts of different ways) and the assertion of national or civilizational spaces that deny the application of universal norms. So, in that sense, it is a spatial and anti-universalist movement, aimed at ‘de-spatialising’, normative institutions—the European Union, transnational civil society and so forth. A second common feature is the attempt to separate democracy from liberalism—we can call this illiberal democracy or*

*democratic authoritarianism, but in each case an illiberal political order denies the validity of political pluralism, but still claims a popular mandate from society.”*

Today’s autocratizers are majoritarian, they see the West in decline, and they consider political correctness and judicial activism as anti-democratic. Accordingly, their favourite enemies are human rights advocates, journalists, international finance, academic elites, judges, cosmopolitan citizens and, occasionally, great powers. Their rhetoric rarely explicitly denigrates freedom or elections, and it even alleges that the ambition is to reset the linkage between the demands of ‘real people’ and the government, a linkage broken by the radicalized liberal social elites. They are particularly in favour of restoring national sovereignty that was undermined by the liberal world order or by some specific great powers, and in this regard, they often employ anti-colonial discourse. The freedom-centred argument, however, is rarely followed up in the domestic arena where the same forces tend to restrict media freedom, regulate historical memory and enforce a specific cultural script.

Behind the universalism of the international elites autocratizers find utopianism, ‘oikophobia’ (Scruton 2006) or the dislike of one’s own culture and national community and a rejection of the natural (often God-given) order. The represented community is projected to be homogenous in essential political and cultural aspects. It is also claimed to be victimized by shadowy and typically foreign or foreign-hearted actors, leading to an imminent crisis that legitimizes harsh treatment of the nation’s enemies, whether they are physically located inside or outside the national community.

The various surveyed ideational modules do not glue together into a single authoritarian ideology. The ideological discourses of autocratizers converge, ironically, exactly in not explicitly endorsing authoritarian governance. They provide justification for measures that violate pluralism, limited government and the equality of citizens, and they mobilize supporters against dissenting groups and individuals, but they do not elevate an entire system of such measures above democracy. Most autocratizer politicians are not as forthright as Orbán and Putin who both argued that liberalism is obsolete and pernicious (Barber et al. 2019), and not even these two embrace a comprehensively authoritarian worldview.

Populist argumentation is definitely more common than during previous waves of autocratization, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient to justify the restrictions on civil liberties and fair competition. The equation of populism with illiberalism, autocratization and, especially, authoritarianism is definitely wrong. Furthermore, paternalist populism, the most relevant version of populism, differs from ideal-typical populism by redefining the popular will as one that is jointly determined by the people and the state, with the latter having a major role in guiding the former.

In an important recent piece, Marlene Laruelle (2022) pointed to right-wing conservative ideas that form the basis of illiberalism, albeit in an 'updated' and distorted form, and in combination with anti-minority and anti-institutionalist sentiments. Similarly, Ruzha Smilova (2021) defined 'democratic illiberalism' with the features of ethno-nationalist anti-individualism, anti-liberalism, anti-globalism, unrestrained popular sovereignty, and anti-pluralism. They both argued that this 'blueprint' is an increasingly successful rival to the liberal democratic model. Indeed, regimes characterized by the rule of strongmen, alignment with traditional moral values, enhanced homogeneity and national pride have more appeal than any time since the Second World War.

The discussion of various discursive strategies of autocratizers above revealed that the scope of right-wing illiberalism, described by Laruelle and Smilova, is wider than that of populism, but it is still not comprehensive. The task of further research is to provide us with a typology of various illiberal ideas and to study systematically their relationships to the ongoing de-democratization.

Without any doubt, the earlier dominance of the liberal democratic model was closely tied to its ability to deliver economic growth, social mobility and security. But restoring the competitiveness of liberal democracy requires both improved performance and ideological fine-tuning. The latter needs to reckon with the fact that in the world of ideas there exists a still fragmented but increasingly robust illiberal alternative.

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