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The Many Faces of the Far Right in the Post-Communist Space

A Comparative Study of Far-Right Movements and Identity in the Region

Essay

Far Right's Engagement with National Identity Issues in Online Spaces

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This essay investigates the far right's engagement with national identity issues in online spaces in Baltic and East European countries. Focusing on recent years, it offers an interpretation of how far-right entities (groups, parties, movements, but also individuals) leave traces on online space. It proposes that national identity issues constitute a prominent feature of their politics as evidenced by these traces.

Far-right entities may look very different from each other because of their organizational complexity and ideological heterogeneity[1] and because they remain so blurred with regards to several well-established political issues.[2]

As Nigel Copsey claims, for strategic reasons, the far right keeps an open mind towards norms of multi-ethnic and liberal-democratic societies, but it maintains its ideological core. This core, according to Roger Griffin, consists of an ultra-nationalist political alternative that aims at a palingenetic national rebirth to be achieved through a revolution.[3] In the post-war era, the far right developed a strategy of de-territorializing its message, making it meta-political and therefore adaptable across changing societies and cultures, and by investing heavily in historical revisionism.[4] Since the Cold War decades up to the present day, instances of the far right proliferated exponentially in myriads of groupuscules, parties, and movements, diversifying their offer from backward-looking and extremist philosophies to more reassuring pleas for democracy, security and individual freedom.[5]

This heterogeneity shows that the far right can implement constant permutations of its political and cultural offer in very short times. Consequently, identifying it resembles shooting at a moving target with clouded vision, as posited by Michael Minkenberg with reference to the radical right in Central and Eastern Europe.[6] Nevertheless, far-right entities of the region continue to share characteristics: they are similarly anti-democratic, anti-liberal, racist and revisionist.[7] The permutations of the far right should not surprise anyone. The actions of far-right entities are purposeful, rational, and organized. Their public discourses and worldviews are a matter of political opportunities: at the right time, these entities exploit certain specific material or symbolic resources to gain tactical advantages. They mainly play on identity

frames and oppositional frames (the opposition between "us" and "them"), which then leads to create polarization among groups with such different values.[8]

Ultimately, the various issues that the far right touch upon in their public outreach are attempts to reconnect exclusionary values with mainstream discourses, in order to attract new supporters. Proper programs and clear-cut ideological pinpoints may not be constantly spelled out in each speech or action; but new discursive opportunities are constantly exploited to present the same core values to a broader audience, in a much more sophisticated, nuanced, and acceptable fashion.[9]

The Internet transforms the nature of the far right under various aspects.[10] It gives it the opportunity to be more incisive in the radicalization of individuals,[11] while extending and establishing their networks into online social movements, reaching a broader and more differentiated audience, also across borders,[12] and to censorship.[13] In relation to identity issues, the Internet makes the play with identity and oppositional frames easier – and much more evident. Mainly, the Internet has simplified, consolidated, and empowered offline established strategies of playing with identity and oppositional frames. As recently noted by Andreas Önnerfors, the Internet simplifies the far-right's work of creating a dualistic political cosmology between Apocalypse and Redemption, which consists in separating "the people" ("us"), presented as good, from an evil "them".[14] For example, the Internet has offered a powerful loudspeaker to the French identiarian movement. Generation Identity (GI) succeeded in mobilizing also in the Baltic and East European countries, where GI chapters have been established. Its rhetoric plays both on identity frames and oppositional ones: it explicitly opposes globalization, immigration, Islamism, the European Union, the Euro, and the political and cultural left, which are accused of destroying national tradition, culture, and identity. These identity frames are only vaguely defined, and only in relation to oppositional frames. This vagueness is an important element, since it permits to adapt these frames in other national contexts.[15] This is why online plays with national identities are a serious matter at a European and at a global level.

The next sections are aimed at illustrating how the Internet helps various far-right actors, at different stages of mobilization and radicalization, and with materials of the past and of the present, to play with identity and oppositional frames related to national identity.

"Far-right group Generation Identity have been banned from Facebook across Europe", news publishing on June 21, 2018 by *Inews*.

Digital Memory Wars in East European Online Spaces

Due to the historical proximity to violence and the rapid, radical social and political changes in Eastern and Central European societies,[16] the far right has an easy game in shaping nationalist versions of the various national identities, since the identity turmoil generated by the demise of communism. A great deal of this game is played on materials of the past in terms of memory work. By presenting the nation as a martyr of "Judeo-Bolshevik" violence in the interwar era and of communism after the Second World War, the far right proposes to whitewash national responsibilities for the atrocities committed by fascist movements and Nazi-allied regimes.[17] This "double-genocide theory" directly touches upon matters of national identity by the way of memory work and it offers the possibility to establish country-specific revisionisms and negationisms.[18] The use of digital memory[19] in the memory wars of the East European far right is still largely unexplored, in reference to the double-genocide theory. Yet the social networks had a tremendous impact on

memory work. Online spaces present a hybrid between public and private that conforms well with the notion of memory. Being non-confrontational spaces, they permit the mediation and immediate mediatization of fragmented and discontinuous interpretations of history.[20] These characteristics contribute to shaping memory as fluid, de-territorialized, diffused, immediate but at the same time highly revocable.[21] For these properties, online spaces can generate hostility and conflicts between individuals over various competing memories, in web wars which are fought by presenting black-and-white versions of national history in a mix of verbal aggressions and scattered information.[22] Consequently, the online spaces become battlefields of digital conflicts. For example, the Russian and Ukrainian Wikipedia pages of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, the Holodomor, the Russian Liberation Army, and the October Revolution have been the theatre of several edit wars between supporters of the opposing nationalisms.[23]

Victimizing the own nation and presenting its enemies as responsible is also a consolidated technique. In the former Yugoslav area, each far right entity depicts its own national group as "new Jews" and the former enemies of the 1990s war as "fascists" and "Nazis".[24] Ad hoc Facebook pages serve the purpose of exacerbating national resentment and ethnic hatred – in former Yugoslavia, pages in Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian showcase, with images and texts, the sufferings of each national community as victims of the coexisting ethnicities.[25]

The far right's instrumental use of history, combined with the mediatic power of the Internet, simplify the demonization of national minorities: in Bulgaria, the far-right party Ataka has filled its websites with historical documents portraying a nationalist version of an idealized past in which the Turks were the enemies and, therefore, there were no Bulgarian Turks. That past is contraposed to present-day Europe, which is presented as an Islamized continent, and to present-day Bulgaria, which is presented as subjugated by the Bulgarian Turks.[26] Neighboring countries are of course the perfect target for fueling ethnic hatred online. For example, far-right actors like the Polish Konfederacja use the social networks to fuel ethnic hatred against Ukraine over the Volhynia massacre during WWII.[27]

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At a regional level, the identity of the post-communist East European states is often strongly opposed to Russia, as instanced also in the reference to memory and history.[28] However, in the 2010s, several West and East European far-right parties and movements expressed admiration for Vladimir Putin's autocratic regime, which in many cases established a strong relationship with them.[29] For example, in the information war set up since the occupation of Ukraine in 2014, Russia entitled Konfederacja with wide media visibility.[30] From Russia's perspective, the European far-right actors are but one of the many assets of the resentment politics inaugurated by Vladimir Putin, who has capitalized consensus from the identity crisis of post-Soviet times through a unique blend of domestic repression of individual freedom and international hybrid war and information warfare. For Putin's "project Mayhem,"[31] the Internet is pivotal for shaping identities in the right direction, also using materials of the past; and, therefore, the regime's crackdown on the Internet is specular to that on Russian civil society.[32]

In the digital media ecology, the resources of memory-making are fluid, accessible and diffused.[33] At the same time, they are also very quickly revocable, since memory circulates in a state of continuous present.[34] In this peculiar ecology, far-right actors have easy game in mainstreaming historical narratives which create an endangered "us" and an evil "them": Russia has accused Ukraine of genocide; Ukraine has responded by presenting the Holodomor as the Ukrainian Holocaust.[35] Image substitute and visual fake history on the social networks weaponize misinformation and disinformation, as seen by the hashtag #holodomor, which reconnected anti-Jewish and anti-Russian meanings to the narratives on the 1932–33 famine.[36] In the conflict between Russian and Ukrainian nationalists, the identity of Crimea as either "Russian" or "Ukrainian" was constructed with the use of digital maps, which reinforced each narrative, and demotivational images aimed at discrediting the other's narrative.[37]

Undeniably, online spaces offer opportunities to hijack inter-ethnic conflicts not only to organized entities, but also to individuals, as exemplified by George Simion, who back in 2019 streamed live on Facebook from the Romanian-Hungarian WWI military cemetery

The Romanian far-right politician George Simion. He streamed live on Facebook from the Romanian-Hungarian WWI military cemetery of Valea Uzului in Transylvania, 2019.
PHOTO: WIKIWAND

of Valea Uzului in Transylvania. Romanian far-right parties, groups, and religious extremists engaged in a physical altercation with the Hungarians present at the cemetery.[38] Simion's skills in staging national victimhood online shows that the Internet is a powerful resource for far-right actors in search of legitimation.

Online Radicalization

The atomized nature of the far-right in a myriad of groupuscules makes their discourses less guided by determined movements' leaders and more by content which is already present in the public digital space. As Joe Mulhall puts it, the social networks and peer-to-peer technologies offer new opportunities to far-right activists. From behind pc-keyboards, anonymous individuals emanate content referable to a plurality of actors and ideologies.[39] In the Baltic and East European area, two recent cases of online extremism have shown that even young users may generate offline far-right terrorism: the cases of Feuerkrieg Division, whose leader was a 13 year-old Estonian, and of Moonkrieg Division, run by a 16 year-old Swede. Via Telegram channels, both terrorist organizations succeeded in recruiting members from Croatia, Lithuania, and other East European countries.[40] According to Pam Nilan, digital media favor the gamification of hate, providing teenagers with a sense of belonging and agency.[41] Even though those lone wolves may not necessarily collaborate directly with bigger groups and organizations, they still contribute to carrying extremist messages further in a less formalized, postorganizational fashion. The Internet settings favor the transnationalization of issues such as anti-immigrant stances and nativist

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interpretations of the economy,[42] which are still identity and oppositional frames.

Thanks to the self-organized nature of digital online content,[43] different websites favor gradual levels of radicalization in the users.[44] For example, the YouTube software, by suggesting similar channels to the ones followed by the users, involuntarily creates a "radicalization pipeline", moving users towards more extreme content, video after video.[45] That content and the comments added by the users add constructively to discourses which are later accommodated into the oppositional frames of other online actors, as seen with the massive online anti-immigration mobilization during the refugee crisis of 2015, once Generation Identity launched the hashtag #defendeurope, which turned viral across the major social networks.[46]

The East European far-right groups' online presence, especially on social networks, surpasses that of the Western groups in intensity, especially for recruitment and communication.[47] One of the consequences of this trend was the electoral success of Simion's Alliance for the Union of Romanians in December 2020. The success of AUR has shown the power of social networks of reconnecting a composite identity discourse together with violent oppositional frames, carried out by video-political performances streamed on Facebook and Telegram by the aforementioned Simion, in a one-man-show which started under different slogans and campaigns in 2018 and which profited by notable returns from diaspora voters.[48] Similar online one-man-shows are also common and successful in the Baltic space, as recently shown by Rasmus Paludan's party New Right (Denmark), which succeeded in passing the electoral threshold by streaming defamatory speeches and anti-Islamic performances.[49]

Mainstreaming the Far Right

According to Lenka Bustikova, one of the specificities of the East European space is the coexistence of the radical right beside radicalized mainstream parties.[50] Since the 2010s, the Internet has shown its potential for providing support to the mainstream parties' attempts to feed on the content of the far right. These mainstream actors deploy far-right content by the dynamic use of the Internet

Online communication had pivotal relevance in building the "Soros Plot", in which George Soros functions as the core of the oppositional frame. Here the web site of the Hungarian government.

and of more traditional media, in well-designed strategies of political communication. In Hungary, Viktor Orban started to take over the national media in the mid-2010s. At the same time, the number of independent news websites diminished, and several new government-financed ones appeared.[51] Online communication had pivotal relevance in building the "Soros Plot", in which George Soros functions as the core of the oppositional frame. In 2017, Maria Schmidt, professor of history and director of the Budapest's House of Terror, wrote a long, ill-informed, and conspirationist post on the government-sponsored blog Látószög (Viewing Angle). The post accused George Soros of being the puppeteer of several world crises. Even before it was published, state television endorsed the views contained in the blog post.[52] In Hungary, the "Soros Plot" helped Fidesz to steal part of the electorate from the far-right party Jobbik, fueling antisemitism while claiming to oppose it.[53] This plot constructs Soros as a Jew. It associates the Jewish identity with power, wealth, and leftist and liberal ideas and policies. Being fundamentally antisemitic, it is an oppositional frame adaptable to any context at a global level. What originated as an infamous, minutely planned, *ad hominem* electoral campaign with antisemitic tones has become "a globalized, freely available, and adaptable open-source weapon" for right-wing entities.[54] Such conspiracy plots have helped the mainstream parties to cannibalize the far right, but they turned out to be less controllable than anticipated. For example, in Slovakia, Robert Fico took tough stances against immigration, but he succeeded only in normalizing the anti-NATO and anti-EU oppositional frames of the far-right People's Party-Our Slovakia.[55]

These attempts to steal consolidated far-right politics of hate and emotions have succeeded, in some cases, in radicalizing the mainstream parties, while in others they have instilled a sort of political correctness in the far-right parties and movements which aim to expand the range of their voters. For example, the People's Party-Our Slovakia has attempted to clean up its image from the openly fascist and antisemitic rhetoric of the previous decade. However, the Slovakian virtual communities to whom it belongs are part of a segmented galaxy of extreme right websites which support neo-fascism, neo-Nazism and anti-establishment, ethno-nationalist and anti-EU stances.[56] While presenting to the mainstream audience a socially acceptable political instance aimed at reconstructing the national identity in a nationalist narrative,[57] these groups show the unfiltered nature of the far right in the unregulated online environment. In those settings, networking and recruitment are more explicit in tone and ideological content,[58] as also made visible by the explicitly racist online frequentation of some members of the populist radical right parties Conservative People's Party of Estonia[59] and Sweden's Democrats.[60]

Social media have started to take action against these dangerous online presences by targeting the most extreme instances. In 2019, Facebook and Twitter banned the Azov regiment pages, which succeeded in recruiting online at a global level.[61] Despite moving to alternative social networks such as VK[62] and more recently Parler, which represents a safe haven for preserving the far right discourse, the far-right organized entities are conscious that these offer only minor chances of engendering mass mobilization, since they are not mainstream at a European level. For the far right, the importance of mainstream virtual spaces for doubling the discursive opportunities from political correctness to various degrees of extremism becomes evident when looking at the Czech far right's battle against the social networks firms' right to ban content from their platforms.[63]

Conspiracy Theories

While the past is a highly usable weapon in the East European spaces' (online and offline) political struggles, recent global issues are also relevant, and not exclusively for radicalizing mainstream parties. As Mark Fielitz and Holger Marcks state, far-right actors both disseminate fears and use elements of social networks that may catalyze those fears.[64] The far right, beside dividing the past into identity and oppositional frames, weaponiz-

es websites, blogs, social networks and peer-to-peer technologies for presenting mainstream issues through ideological lenses, between identity core values and rejected ones. In this strategy, conspiracy theories serve as oppositional frames. The conspiracy theories permeating the European space present the core of the national and religious identities of Europe and its countries as in danger.[65] Plots in which evil, secret, and unstoppable forces aim at destroying the nation and Christianity are narrative resources that the far right has used regularly throughout its history, as the interwar and wartime propaganda of the European fascist movements against the "Jewish-Bolshevik threat" testifies. As recently pointed out by Roger Griffin, the far right offers something to hate to "individuals experiencing an impoverished or disintegrating reality principle and real or imaginary existential threats".[66] By doing so, the far-right narratives provide them a sense of empowerment, agency, rebirth, and transcendence which favor the individuals' radicalization and mobilization. This is why the circulation of bizarre plots in the digital realm, where these circulate and reproduce easily and quickly, is so dangerous.

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Like the "Soros Plot", which was crafted with Orban's Hungary as client but which was later weaponized by other far right actors globally, several other conspiracy theories are presently circulating in the online spaces, crafted locally and readapted on occasion by other actors. In 2019–2020, the conspiracy theory according to whom the 5G communication technology would be an instrument of the "Illuminati" for controlling mankind has been virally disseminated on a global scale and, in the East European region, it found activists who wrote numerous Facebook posts in Romanian, German, Polish, Czech, Serbian, Bosnian, Croatian, Slovenian or translated others published in English, Italian, Spanish, and French.[67] East European actors both drew and contributed to such global trends, by translating and reposting relevant content; for example the Moldovan Orthodox Church and the Romanian Academy fell for the 5G oppositional frame and supported the theory on their websites.[68] In Poland, from the web-pages of the anti-Ukrainian and antisemitic portal *Wprawo*, the former Catholic priest and far-right activist Jacek Międlar presented Covid-19 as part of a plan to depopulate the planet ideated by those who believe in "LGBT, cultural Marxism, [...] pop culture junk or trash from Hollywood".[69] In Slovenia, the far right has linked the 2020 lockdown against Covid-19 with the theory of the "great replacement", according to which NGOs and leftist parties would substitute white people with immigrants.[70] The Slovakian far-right has operated mainly via Facebook for advocating against the use of facemasks, attempting to capitalize on conspiracy theories at the expense of globally-accepted epidemiological best practices, with the result of causing the second Covid-19 wave in the country.[71]

The identity and oppositional frames sketched by these conspiracy theories are not necessarily accepted as a whole by the online audiences of far-right ideas. The audiences pick and choose from repertoires of nostalgic nationalism[72] or by constructing their identity in opposition to various "villains" identified by conspiracy theories which resemble the plot of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*[73] or which are specific to certain national contexts and historical moments.[74] These global conspiracy theories provide new trajectories of radicalization, which contribute to normalizing the oppositional frameworks promoted by the far right, making them more appetible for national audiences. For example, in Hungary, almost half of the population is convinced by the state media that the EU elites favor immigration in order to weaken Europe.[75] In Poland, where far-right groups have professionalized since the 2000s,[76] there is a widespread belief that the online-based conspiracy theories of QAnon, according to which the US, media, and Hollywood elites constitute a global network of pedophiles and Satanists, are true; Q-groups are present also in several European countries, with the risk of growth and radicalization.[77]

From "Gender Ideology" to the Defense of the "Traditional Family"

The previous sections have presented a series of processes by which the far right have attempted to mainstream identity and oppositional frames online, with examples taken from the Baltic and East European countries. Those processes aim at finding scapegoats against whom hate is directed, and at establishing the far right as savior of an imagined nation made of positive values.

In lieu of a conclusion, this section will show that the

far right's play with identity and the transnationalization of hate favored by the Internet have already caused visible offline consequences, namely the practice of exclusionary values against specific groups. To date, the far-right play with identities has succeeded, in the region under consideration, in establishing "LGBT-free zones" in several voivodeships and communes of Poland.

The process of stigmatization and exclusion of LGBT from the public space has a long history rooted in the global far-right attempts to establish a clean, public presentable identity frame and to de-humanize its adversaries in injurious and hateful oppositional frames. In the East European space, gender and sexuality are skillfully weaponized by nationalist politicians. In the region, the discourse has its origin in the clash between the openings of the post-communist times and the rise of an ethnic-nationalist conception of national identity, which favored stability, cohesion and familiar norms in order to maximize predictability in uncertain times.[78] The East European far right started to present LGBT as "the secret weapon of the West" for weakening national identity.[79]

The oppositional frame against LGBT has evolved into a more encompassing discourse against what is called "gender ideology" and the establishing of an identity frame related to the "traditional family". This ideology is presented as a theory that goes against the understanding of sex as a biological category. Targeting the widespread anxieties about homosexuality and gender roles, this frame aims at attacking whoever struggles for gender equality, with politicians, feminist intellectuals, and LGBT activists as main targets. This discourse constitutes a unifying ground for religious, nationalist, and conservative actors, who use it as a shared framework.[80] These actors compare "gender ideology" to Nazism and communism. Basically, they pretend that progressive ideas are crafted by crazy humanists in service of obscure, malevolent elites. According to Ruth Wodak, the far right uses gender politics for advocating for a patriarchal social order under the leadership of white males. These latter are presented as losers of a globalized modernity which would have women and Muslim immigrants as winners.[81]

For the Baltic and East European far right, presenting the nation metaphorically as a family on the brink of disaster served traditionally in order to promote its leader as a savior, either in the shape of a strict father or of a youthful challenger.[82] The step from metaphor to promoted heteronormativity as politics was relatively short. The Internet has provided a megaphone to the far

right's homophobe oppositional frames for a long time. For example, in Ukraine, Svoboda and Right Sector have made wide use of the Internet to present "homosexuality and gender ideology" as a "pervert ideology" forcefully imposed by the European Union.[83] Such views are also shared by nationalists in Czechia, Hungary, Russia, and former Yugoslav-countries.[84] These oppositional frames target LGBT specifically but also include immigrants, Muslims, Jews, and leftist and feminist movements, parties, and intellectuals among the ranks of the "enemies".

The homophobe oppositional frame has favored the creation of a transnational coalition based on an identity frame, that of the "traditional family". Several right-wing parties and state rulers in the mid-2010s provided support to the World Congress of Families (WCF), a US-based organization aimed at fostering homophobia and transphobia under the guise of protecting the "traditional family". Thanks to its linkages to various churches (the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches of Russia and some of the East European countries' Orthodox churches), to semi-authoritarian regimes and illiberal democracies (Putin's Russia, but also the ruling Law and Order party in Poland and Fidesz in Hungary), and to several European right-wing politicians, the presence of WCF in the East European space has grown steadily in the last five years. The massive presence of several far-right actors in each national online space (linguistically speaking) has guaranteed the mainstreaming of homophobe intolerance. Beside the English-language *Citizens Go* petitions website, which is financed by Russian and European institutional and private actors, several right-wing-run "coalitions for the family" exist throughout Europe; they are, invariably, set up by far-right organizations.[85]

Although far-right attempts to forbid civil unions throughout the region have partially failed (like the referendum held in Romania in 2018), homophobia became normalized and very soon LGBT events started to be boycotted and banned locally.[86] In Russia, an "anti-gay propaganda" law exists since 2013; in Hungary, an anti-LGBT law was passed in 2021. Key instrument of the spreading of this oppositional frame was the Internet, which favored the mobilization of anonymous individuals in a counterculture made of, according to Agnieska Graaf, "sharing the same videos on social media, signing the same online petitions, and 'liking' coverage of similar protests in various countries: against gay marriage, against abortion rights, against 'gender ideology,' against 'political correctness'."[87]

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The most enduring offline consequences of these exclusionary and hateful identity politics are presently visible in Poland, with the near-total ban on abortion enforced since 2021 and the establishing of "LGBT-free zones". Particularly, in reference to the case of the "LGBT-free zones", the Internet shows its potential for local mobilization: the ultra-conservative Catholic organisation Ordo Iuris, that is the main promoter of "LGBT-free zones", has uploaded on its website a "Charter" with a declaration of principle ready to be subscribed by the Polish local and regional authorities who wished to "strengthen [...] the family as a basic social community, and [to] ensur[e] its protection against influences of the ideologies that undermine its autonomy and identity."[88] The ideological proclamation, provided with a fillable form, was available on the Internet. It required only few steps to pass from radicalization to mobilization. At present, about one third of Poland's municipalities and voivodships have endorsed the "Charter" and enforced "LGBT-free zones".[89] Beside the national abortion ban, these zones are the most visible sign so far of the success of far-right oppositional and identity frames in the Baltic and East European area, and the clearest explanation of where the national identities promoted by the far right wish to lead Europe. ●

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