

## Summary

# Right-Wing Radicalism: In Many Countries a Part of Mainstream Society

by **Tora Lane** and **Joakim Ekman**

**T**he aim of the *CBEES State of the Region Report 2021* is to map out the current rise of the far right in Central and Eastern Europe. Today the region is typically described in both scholarly research and news media as particularly marked by Euroscepticism, illiberalism and increasing tendencies towards authoritarianism. It hardly needs to be said that there are also several parallels to recent political developments in other EU member states, and in the world at large. It is telling that, in March 2021, the *Economist*<sup>1</sup> published a piece on revanchism and conspiracism in American politics, based on the Capitol riots, noting at the same time that far-right extremism has become a global threat. In early 2021, *Foreign Affairs*<sup>2</sup> published an article pointing to far-right extremism as a global threat to democracy. In December 2021, in an article in *The Nation*,<sup>3</sup> it was argued that the far right's opportunities for global expansion are presently particularly strong.

In this report we focus on issues of national identity in the far right in contemporary Eastern Europe. To this end, we invited authors to contribute with comments, analyses, and discussions of crucial features of far-right movements in separate countries and in the region at large. The report gathers in-depth analyses of this development in 13 countries. It draws out certain common themes, but also highlights the diversity of far-right politics in the region.

On a general level, the “far right situation” in Central and Eastern Europe appears similar to the situation in other regions of the world. We can recognize the ideological content, i.e. the four-fold combination of nationalism, xenophobia, law and order, and welfare (or

welfare chauvinism). At the same time, the far right seem to have become more acceptable in mainstream media in the post-communist region than elsewhere in Europe, as is evident in Michlich's contribution on the current situation in Poland. Also, in Central and Eastern Europe in particular, illiberal tendencies present comparatively more serious challenges to democracy and the rule of law, as for instance in Hungary, not to mention Russia and the former Soviet states.

The question that we wanted to address here, therefore, was the role and nature of politics surrounding national identity in the region. With the fall of Communism, the countries that had previously belonged to the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc embarked upon projects of national identity that went hand in hand with a process of finding their place in the European Union and other supranational organizations. How did the projects of developing national and regional identity after the fall of Communism pave the way for a spread of popular discontent with the so-called liberal elite of Brussels, a discontent that is kindled by populist politics that fairly often plays into the hand of nationalist xenophobic sentiments?

**A**s this report shows, far-right parties with a clear xenophobic message have entered parliament in a series of countries in the Eastern part of Europe, e.g. in Lithuania, the Czech Republic and Croatia. Although some seem to have seen the twilight of their popular support, having to leave parliament, they have retained an influence on the shaping of the political agenda and within the power elite, as is the case with the Polish far

right. It appears that this process of regaining or continuing the work with and formation of a national identity is not without ideology, or at least an ideological appendix. In many countries, and on the transnational level, there is a complex relation to the legacy of nationalist dissident movements, exile groups and organizations and the international opposition towards Communism, as we can see in particular in the contributions on national symbols and memory in Ukraine by Likhachev and Rudling, respectively, and in the contribution on Belarus by Kotljarchuk. This is not only a question for governments, but also for opposition movements today in their resistance towards Russian influence in the region.

With regard to the growth of the far right, many countries show strikingly similar tendencies although of course the political and cultural discourses differ. However, some countries stand out in this process as different from the others: Eastern Germany and Russia. Communist Eastern Germany was replaced with unified Germany, thus leaving a complex historical legacy of a country that no longer exists which fuels resentments in the eastern part of the country, as Weisskircher clarifies in his contribution. In Russia, in turn, the situation is different, as Shenfield highlights in his article, since the very national idea of Russia today is also imbued with the legacy of the imperial and Soviet past, and the idea of a multinational state thus coincides with the notion of Russian spheres of influence. The countries of Central Asia also differ in the way that nationalism has more or less become equal to authoritarianism, as Lemon and Antonov demonstrate with the case of Tajikistan.

**F**rom this report it becomes clear that it is important here to stress the supra-national dimension. In the European far right, nationalism has come to be combined with a particular brand of supra-nationalism, since we are dealing with a political landscape that consists of networks and webs of identities that go beyond the nation. As this report demonstrates, cultural distinctions are frequently made between empires, civilizations, spheres of identities, influences, powers, and oppositions such as east and west, and north and south; all play a role both in relation to the current political agenda and to the memory or narratives of the past. As Bassin shows in his essay, in many cases the identity of the nation is tied to that of

Europe, and there are significant transnational far-right networks. In many cases, what the far right opposes is not the European Union as such, but a certain liberal idea of Europe that is identified with the EU. There is growing discontent with ideas of tolerance, equality, and open-mindedness, in combination with protectionism for the sake of strengthening the nation within the EU. In this way, extreme right-wing actors in Eastern Europe can obviously find close allies in Western Europe.

Considering the need for a rebirth of the nation in a reconfiguration of Europe and the world, it is perhaps no wonder that issues of national and regional (Eastern European or European) community-building have been legion, and that they are interconnected, as shown in

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the contributions by Ulinskaitė and Garškaitė on Lithuania, Gherghina on Romania and Balogh on Hungary. Although many far-right leaning parties in the region have gained popular support through a typical (nationalistic) critique of high-brow white collar Brussels – for example in Croatia, Serbia and again, the Czech Republic – it also becomes apparent from articles in this report that many far-right parties actually

want to identify themselves as European (and/or as members of the European Union).

**I**n other words, Euroscepticism does not necessarily mean a push towards disintegration. Equally important for an understanding of the relation to Europe is the impact of identity politics in all respects. Thus, as exemplified by Paulovicova in her in-depth examination of the political agenda of the far right in Slovakia, one can identify the development of an ethno-populism framed by identity politics, which appeals to people who have a sense of being an under-represented or even repressed minority. And thus, as is apparent in Lithuania, Poland, and Hungary, the far right proposes an idea of Europe today that is not hegemonic in the political discourse of the European Union, but builds on traditional values such as family, Christianity, and the nation. Perhaps these are two sides of the same coin, since traditional values appeal in particular to people who have the sense that social welfare is encumbered by the European Union’s austerity measures.

In several post-Communist countries, far right movements seem to occupy a space that until recently was associated with the political left: in East Germany, as

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Weisskircher notes, the AfD wants to reenact the GDR (without Communism); in Poland, the PiS party advocates increased social welfare; and in Russia, Putin has gained popularity by raising pensions and salaries for state officials, while also restoring the memory of the Soviet past.

The transnational ties of the far right in the global world that we inhabit are also a consequence of the way that social media has changed the sphere where the dynamics of public opinion evolves.

Today, we can see how far right actors have adjusted their communicative strategies for the sake of expanding their influence in this semi-official public sphere. This is neatly illustrated in Zavatti's contribution on the far right's engagement with national identity issues in online spaces. Zavatti demonstrates that while the far right is highly engaged in exploring the opportunities offered by online social movements, the Internet also plays well into the hands of their appropriation of identity politics. Here, the far right can present themselves as victims of both Communist history and the liberal consensus of the contemporary political establishment. Thus, he shows how the online space offers a way of making political issues privatized and polarized, and historical facts politicized and contested.

**A**nother development that pertains to the region is related to the way that the far right has come to shape projects of national identity, in an essentially illiberal direction. In her discussion of the illiberal polypore state, Pető analyzes strategies for a re-ideologization of state institutions in the name of nationalism/the far right. Instead of – or in a new combination with – propaganda, the illiberal state can exert influence on universities and cultural institutions through the use of coercive soft power, i.e. by lobbying, dominance in executive boards, and through networks. Pető convincingly demonstrates that these developments are far from harmless. Not only independent media and investigating journalists are targeted by the right-wing forces, but also academia and individual researchers.

Finally, the politicization of the use of history is yet another common denominator of the far right in general, which has become particularly acute in Central and Eastern Europe. The instrumentalization of the past through memory agencies and the application of criminal law is

a phenomenon which has gained increased popularity across post-communist Europe in recent decades. This phenomenon is felt most strongly in the region's outright non-democracies, but also in EU member states with governments pursuing authoritarian policies. The political use of history, as a far-right practice, is related to the legacy of Communism and in particular to the fact of Central and Eastern Europe having been the “bloodlands” of Europe – the location of the fiercest battles between Communism and Nazism.

The desire to control the writing of history is of course not solely a phenomenon pertaining to Eastern Europe, and it shows alarming transnational features too. Scholars beyond these states, dealing with topics sensitive to or deeply unpopular with radical right-wing groups, have for a long time been forced to reckon with

pressure from various parties outside of academia. In this report, this is illustrated by Rudling's analysis of the far right as a transnational phenomenon, organized through emigre communities. Rudling's article describes attempts by Ukrainian radical nationalists in the diaspora to use political, economic, legal, and social pressure to restrict inquiry into certain topics, thereby policing and controlling historical and social culture. The far right's occupation with historical memory is no coincidence. Politics, as Andrew Breitbart stated, lies downstream from culture.

We aimed to contribute to the discussion and analysis of the nature and rise of the far right in Central and Eastern Europe with the multidisciplinary approach that is a feature of this report and the work of the *Centre for Baltic and East European Studies*. Currently, it seems that this phenomenon will only demand increasing attention. ●

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## References

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