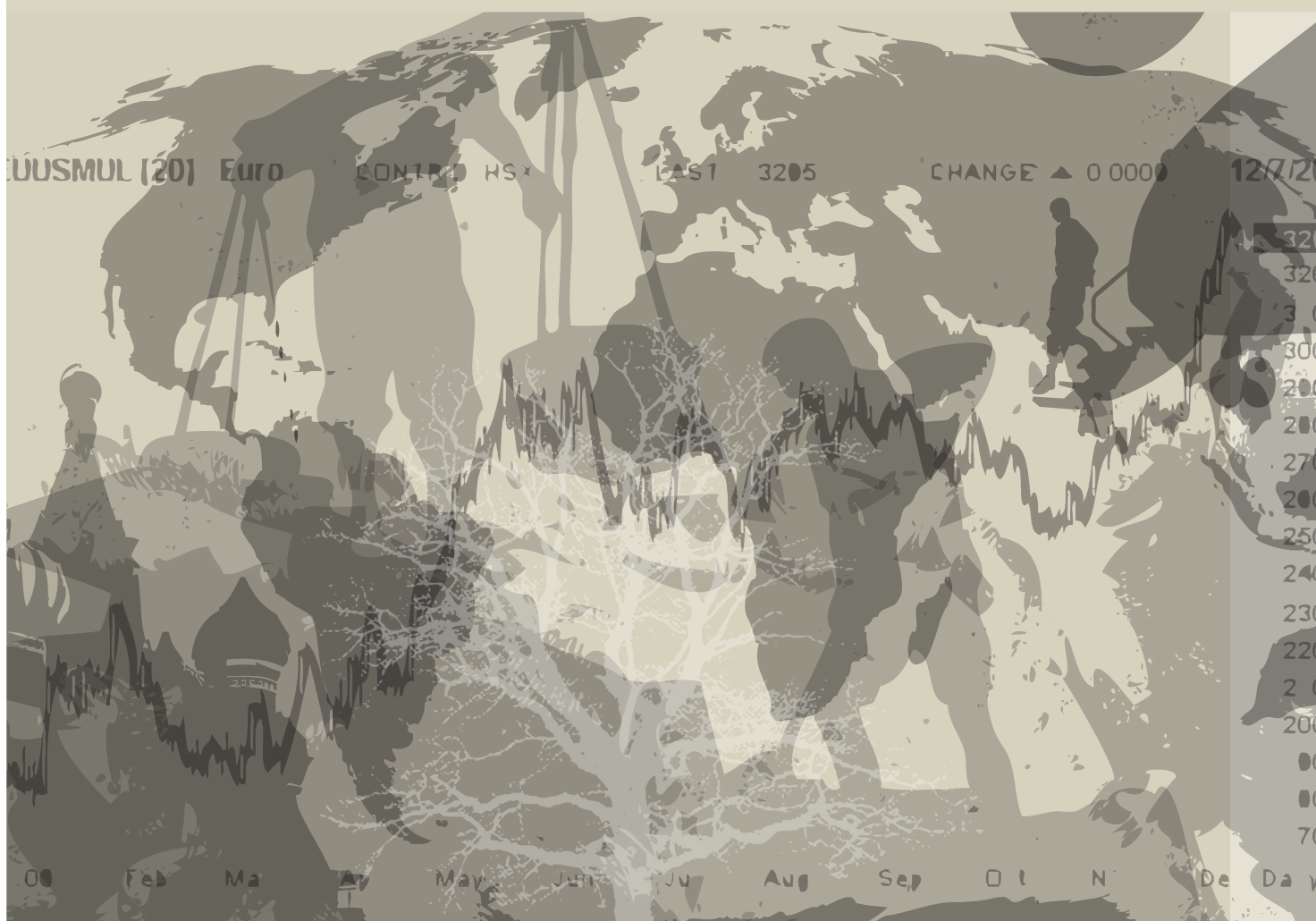


Visions of an Illiberal World Order?

The National Right in Europe,
Russia and the US

Minda Holm and Vibeke Schou Tjalve



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Summary

The rise of a national Right in both Europe and the US is disrupting the security agendas of Western foreign- and defense ministries. Long accustomed to directing the gaze and measures of Western security only outwards – towards Africa, the Middle East, China – these centers of policy formulation now find themselves forced to confront a more introspective line of questioning: Is the identity of ‘the liberal West’ and its agenda of a rule-based, institutionalized world order under threat from within? In this brief we unpack the visions of world order espoused by the new Western Right, its ideological overlap with conservative ideas in Putin’s Russia, as well as the built-in tensions and uncertainties of that emerging alliance. Our focus is on potential implications of these political developments for i) international institutionalism, and ii) interventionism.

In short, we argue that anti-globalism must not be mistaken for anti-internationalism. The most basic political agenda of the national Right – from the Trumpian US to Putin’s Russia – is one of battling globalism and its liberal vision of a trans-national or cosmopolitan world order, by defending older Western concepts of sovereignty-centred, inter-national co-existence. In contrast to the extreme Right, the current European-US-Russian alliance of national Right politicians largely want to fight this battle from the inside and through, not outside, established institutions such as the UN and the EU.

Introduction

At the close of 2018, the idiom of a liberal world order in ‘crisis’ has grown commonplace. So too has the listing of three events considered pivotal in both the production and manifestation of this unravelling: The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Brexit referendum in June 2016, and the election of President Donald Trump in the US in November 2016.¹ Most agree that these three political incidents were not isolated phenomena, but expressions of more profound transformations of the post-Cold War order. In key European countries as Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland, parties or politicians committed to challenging liberal principles of global governance now play central political roles. And unlike the ‘extreme’ Right from which some of them grew, their desire is to reform the political establishment from within: wedded to popular democracy and risen to power through electoral politics.²

What to make of this development from the angle of Western security? For decades, Western foreign-, defense- and security strategy has become used to focusing mainly on potential threats from the *outside*: Middle Eastern terrorism, African state fragility, authoritarian strongholds or Chinese assertiveness. We now know that this idea of a post-conflictual liberal transatlantic zone was too optimistic. Indeed, as a recent Norwegian white paper holds, the most urgent threat to existing liberal principles (human rights, rule of law, division of power) and Western-anchored institutions (EU, NATO, WTO) may now very well come from within the West itself.¹ What we have yet to unpack, is the

¹ The financial crisis of 2008-9 is thought to be an important underlying cause of these political developments, but it was not before Brexit and Trump’s election in 2016 that media, academics and politicians in Western states started speaking of a ‘liberal world in crisis’. The national Right’s varied and complicated relationship to capitalism is a question that will be addressed later on in this project.

² It is highly difficult to identify a suitable label for the many different ‘Rights’ on the rise. In the context of this brief we shall be using the label ‘national Right’ – a term which most of the Right addressed here itself ascribes to. There is no doubt though, that much of its ideological baggage comes out of the ‘far right’ – a label most often rejected by the parties and movements themselves. And yet the label does not fully fit the more ‘centrist’ components of either the Trump administration or of many parties and movements in Europe. Since our aim is to discuss the phenomenon of nationalist right-wing discourse broadly, we use the more inclusive term ‘national Right’ but specify when we are speaking of explicitly far-right parties and ideologues. On definitions of ‘the far-right’, see Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg (2017), *Far-Right Politics in Europe*. London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, pp. 44-45.

deeper nuances of *why* and *how*. To begin that unpacking, we must understand the concern with identity, culture and difference on the rising national Right, beyond simple labels of anti-Islamism, anti-immigration or anti-globalization. Only if we grasp the extent to which the national Right not only rejects, but in some ways views itself as a ‘savior’ of older paradigms of Western or pan-European civilization can we grasp the extent to which its agenda is inherently one of *foreign* policy. The national Right is trans-national or even global in its network and alliances, and ultimately aimed at influencing global, not just domestic, ideas, structures and order.

In this policy brief, we aim to do three things. First, to explore the ideas and aims of what we consider the distinctly *international* dimension of an admittedly diverse national Western Right. Secondly, to unpack the ideological and strategic relationship of the US and European national Right with Vladimir Putin’s conservative domestic and foreign policy agenda in Russia. And finally – crucially – to discuss the built-in tensions, dilemmas and unpredictabilities in the composite ideological landscape that ties the foreign policy agenda of this peculiar US-Europe-Russian alliance together.

Identity, Civilization and the ‘Inter-national’

The two political agendas most readily associated with a rising national Right are those of anti-globalization and anti-migration – slogans which seem squarely to opt-out of the international. At first glance, the ‘go home immigrants’ or ‘EU, we want out’ paroles surrounding the European migrant crisis in 2015 or the Eurozone debt crisis of 2009, do indeed sound like a simple return inward.

A closer look at the categories of identity and culture which underpins the broader ideological foundations of the new national Right – in the West as well as the East – suggests something more complex. Amongst the national Right ideologues that inspire many of the new political movements and parties in such varied countries as France, the US or Russia, there is a deep nostalgia for historical, religious or ethnic ‘civilizations’ that exceed national borders. Their visions involve dreams of rebuilding real or imagined trans-national ties between the countries of what is often cast within the fairly wide net of ‘Judeo-Christian civilization’.

These ties go well beyond those of mere personal and political gestures – such as those of President Trump supporting Marine Le Pen for her positions on ‘borders’ in the French election, or the Austrian Freedom Party signing a five-year cooperation agreement with the pro-Kremlin party United Russia.ⁱⁱ More profoundly, these ties go back to

what is possibly the fundamental idea of most of the national Right varieties as such: the notion that ‘the West’ as a cultural community is ‘dying’ – in fact, ‘committing suicide’ - because it has given in to the decadent trends of liberal relativism, materialism, and hedonism. The Russian, Polish and Hungarian governments speak recurrently of ‘saving Europe’ from itself, while a figure like Steve Bannon, former chief strategist in the Trump Administration, has launched an initiative called ‘The Movement’ to create a transatlantic national Right movement under banners of ‘defending a Judeo-Christian West’.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is within this prism that the anti-Muslim agenda of the national Right must be understood – and nuanced. Indisputably, the recent rise of national Right politics in the US and Europe is deeply enmeshed with the migration-centered political agenda that followed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the US. There can be no doubt, that in the US and in such European countries as France, Italy, Germany, Denmark or Hungary, securitizations of ‘radical Islam’ or idioms of a hostile ‘Muslim other’ have become central to the mobilization of popular support for national Right parties and politics.^{iv} And yet anti-Islamism is not the most basic or ‘root’ ideological source of either the American or European national Right. In Russia, the government is careful not to alienate its significant Muslim population, securitizing ‘extreme religion’ instead. The leading ideologue of the Russian far-right, Aleksander Dugin, even imagines out-right alliances with Muslims.^v And amongst several American and Western European national Right thinkers and political figures, the idea of forming strategic alliances with conservative or traditionalist Muslim (or Hindu) global networks continue to appear.^{vi}

While Muslim immigration may be a top electoral issue to the national Right, it is not its real ideological ‘other’: a confused, eroding, and decadent West and its self-destructive religion of ‘globalism’ is. To most of the national Right, ‘globalism’ is the name of a destructive disease that eats away at the very heart of Western culture and history. It is the wish to battle with that disease, which has caused the American and Western European Right to find genuine ideological, not just strategic, common ground with Putin’s Russia.^{vii} For the Western national Right the ideology of ‘globalism’ has led to unhealthy amounts of migrants, and politically correct elites, dilute Western culture, history, and identity. This is a culture, history and identity which they, like increasingly in Putin’s Russia since his third term in 2012, see as being rooted in Christian, ‘traditional’ values. Globalism has diluted their culture and identity, because its elites have no appreciation for the fundamental category of political community and social virtues: borders. National borders, seen through this ideological prism, are not simply vile or cynical instruments of keeping others out. They are part and parcel of

normative, moral vision of diversity – a precondition for meaning, belonging, and solidarity. This vision, most the new national Right would claim, is one that predates the recent follies of globalist liberalism and its attachment to the individual rather than the organic whole: the state, the nation, the order. To defend them, is not to reject the Western creed but to act as its savior or steward: guardians of the Westphalian peace and its constitutive principle of state sovereignty.

Rejecting or Restoring Western World Order?

Arguably then, the most basic political agenda of the national Right – from the Trumpian US to Putin’s Russia – is one of battling globalism and its liberal vision of a trans-national or cosmopolitan world order, by defending older Western concepts of sovereignty-centred, inter-national co-existence. What are the implications for Western security institutions and practices?

International Institutions: Rejection and Appropriation

Often, Western rightwing populism or nationalism is taken to mean ‘anti-multilateralism’: a simple pulling out of international institutions and a strategic as well as ideological rejection of inter-national cooperation. This is not the case. Yes, the national Right rejects what it considers ‘naïve’ or ‘hypocritical’ liberal nonsense about a world free of great power, bi-lateral deal-making. Yes, it wants to reform – in many cases to de-liberalize – Western-backed institutions such as the EU or UN, and to strip them of their post-national elements. But it also seeks to appropriate those elements which enhance trans-national conservative cooperation and the concern with sovereignty shared by traditionalists and more authoritarian-leaning governments across the globe.

This dual strategy of rejection and appropriation is particularly clear in relation to the UN. In contrast to the extreme, radical Right, most of the national Right are not interested in upending the UN-based order itself. On the one hand, the UN remains the embodiment of the decadent globalism which the national Right despises: politically correct, ever concerned with endless postulates about ‘traumas’, victims and human rights while basically serving the ideological and financial interest of the global elites only. This critique is brought forth ritually by many within the Western European national Right – but it has a particular standing in the context of a US always skeptical of supra-national institutional hegemonies. Current US security advisor John Bolton has written several books and articles in the spirit of this critique. During this fall’s US mid-term elections, president Trump himself repeated it, when announcing at a Houston rally that “radical democrats want to turn back the clock to

restore the rule of corrupt, power-hungry globalists” but that his government remains “nationalist, nationalist”.^{viii}

And yet – on the other hand – the rising American and Western national Right has a very different narrative of the UN too: one concerned with original UN principles of ‘sovereignty’ and ‘non-interference’.^{ix} Within this narrative, the original UN Charter of 1945 is something of ‘constitutional absolute’, that must be saved from the hands of the globalists and restored to central prominence. President Trump’s remarks to the UN General Assembly in September 2018 was held in exactly this vein, highlighting that he honored ‘the right of every nation in this room to pursue its own customs, beliefs, and traditions. We only ask that you honor our sovereignty in return. (...) America will always choose independence and cooperation over global governance, control, and domination (...) America is governed by Americans. We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism’.^x That perspective is remarkably similar to the vision of the UN laid out by President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov. As President Putin said in a speech in 2017 with reference to the centrality of the UN in the international system: ‘It is important to combine global interdependence and openness with preserving the unique identity of each nation and each region. We must respect sovereignty as the basis underlying the entire system of international relations.’^{xi} Across US-Russia boundaries in other words, a UN long viewed as the instrument of human rights agendas, genocide-prevention, or minority-protection, is now recast as a site of state authority and sovereign equality.

This intricate dynamic between rejection and appropriation is also at play in relation to the EU: a framework which the European national Right has generally moved from rejecting to hoping to appropriate and remodel. In this vein, the Hungarian government under Viktor Orbán has been harshly critical of the globalist elites and the EU’s demands on them – yes espoused no interest in leaving the union. In a 2018 interview with the Russian media channel *RT*, the Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó stressed that their desire was to have ‘a strong EU, based on strong member countries. (...) [but] we don’t want to give up our nationality, our culture, our heritage, and so on.’^{xii} This is very similar to the rhetoric of the Polish government. In Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki’s inaugural speech in 2017, he stressed that ‘the European Union should take care of what made it a great project and a great success – the Europe of homelands. Rich because of its diversity, underpinned by dialogue, mutual respect and cooperation.’^{xiii} Likewise, Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, from the far-right *Lega*, has made it his mission to reform the EU from within – and the German AfD wants

to pull out if the EU fails to reform. Austria's far-right Freedom Party leader Heinz-Christian Strache also stressed after forming government with the center-right People's Party that 'We stand by the European Union, we stand by Europe's peace project'.^{xiv} Only Marine Le Pen of the French *National Rally* (formerly *Front Nationale*) and the Finns Party in Finland remain staunch advocates for leaving the EU. The European national Right is now mobilizing for the May 2019 European Parliament elections, hoping to form an alternative bloc to the Macron-Merkel axis. Notably, in countries including Hungary, France, Germany and Austria, the national Right has been sceptical of Steve Bannon's beforementioned attempt at mobilizing a European coalition ahead of the elections. The fact that he is American, not a European, is seen as a problem; 'We're not in America', the German party AfD's leader Alexander Gauland stated in response to a question on Bannon's initiative.^{xv}

Perhaps the most complicated and unpredictable question is that of NATO: a security alliance formed to defend transatlantic liberal democracies against Soviet Russia in the Cold War context. For several reasons, both the American and the European national Right is now somewhat skeptical of NATO, at least its current construction and identity. This is partly because NATO's demarcation of a 'transatlantic community of liberal states', and its renewed securitization of (Putin's) Russia, runs against the ideological ties which large parts of the Western national Right experience in relation to Russia's conservative leadership.^{xvi} Partly it is because such national Right governments as the American or Polish^{xvii} ones consider the construction of high-spending military countries defending low-spending or even 'pacifist' ones unreasonable and humiliating: this is the recurring 2 percent of BNP discussion. And finally – but importantly - because the kinds of liberal interventionist, out-of-area operations undertaken by NATO since the end of the Cold War appear the problem, not the solution, to Western decay for much of the national Right. The occasional battle cry from President Trump aside however, so far few – with the exception of the French National Rally - have suggested leaving NATO.^{xviii}

Anti-interventionism?

Interventionism is a complex issue for the national Right. The Trump administration came to power partly on a platform of ending the extensive and expensive military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. This was done not just by reference to their drainage of American money and blood, but also to deeper ideological argumentation around American nationalism as a geographically limited phenomenon, perverted by liberal notions of universalism and 'democracy export'. That theme runs deep in the longer annals of American conservatism –

the neo-conservative decade an exception – and is profound amongst the intellectual authors, magazines, and blogs.^{xix} This interpretation of the ‘particularism’ of American liberal democracy, closely parallels the vision of ‘respect for’ national pluralism and cultural distinctness persistently espoused by Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and also found with the central Russian far-right ideologue, Alexander Dugin. This is more than just a critique of what Putin has often called out as the ‘hypocrisy’ of liberal interventionism – that is, the accusation that liberal interventionism is little but self-interest dressed as universalism.^{xx} There is also a deeper ideological understanding of the value of cultural difference amongst states, and of the principle of sovereignty as the noble protector of such difference – not simply the cynical instrument of ‘self-interest’. Most of the European national Right echo variations of this opposition to Western interventionism – from Le Pen in France to Salvini in Italy or Orban in Hungary. Interventionism is thus understood both in the military sense, and through imposition of values foreign to their national culture. In Russia and Hungary, the latter position has resulted in a clampdown on foreign-funded NGOs.

And yet, the anti-interventionist part of the opposition to liberal order is a difficult line to walk for the national Right. First of all, because its pairing of state sovereignty with a fetishization of the abstract category of the people is inherently tension-filled. Respecting the sovereignty of a nation means accepting the legitimacy of its political regime, democratic or not. And yet that separation of state and people often runs counter to many of the national Right’s own claims to legitimacy – to its notion that nationalism is virtuous because it reflects the unique culture and values of ‘the people’. As such, much of the rising nationalist Right has found itself in a tight spot figuring out its position on cases like Syria: when does the sovereign prerogative of a state to exercise authority over ‘unruly’ or ‘terrorist’ parts of population become a case of war on the people – after all a holy category to the national Right – itself? In the European and Russian context, the emphasis of the national Right has so far been on the primacy of the regime in power and the potential destabilizing and chaotic effects of forcefully removing a leader such as Assad in Syria. Central figures on the far-right, such as Marine Le Pen in France and Alexander Dugin in Russia, were thus deeply disappointed with Trump’s decision to order a missile strike on Syria in April 2017: as the latter wrote, ‘In doing so, he stopped being Trump, and became Hillary [Clinton] disguised as a man’.^{xxi}

Secondly, and revealing of some of the broader strategies of simultaneously critiquing and appropriating the existing liberal world order, the emerging national Right at times slides into, and latches onto, language of liberal interventionism itself. In Russia’s war with Georgia

in 2008, and in the annexation of Crimea in 2014, part of the legitimizing rationale was the need to protect its citizens and compatriots abroad. Here, they used the parlance of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine to legitimize their breaches of non-interference. Yet, in contrast to the cosmopolitan part of R2P that opens up for international intervention when a state fails to protect its own citizens, Russia couched it as a communitarian defense of protecting ‘its own’ people, that is, its diaspora.^{xxii} Central Russian nationalist and far-right ideologues were deeply disappointed that the Russian regime didn’t also annex Donbas.^{xxiii} Despite emphasizing ‘sovereignty’ and ‘non-interference’, many far-right parties in Europe, including the French National Rally outright supported Russia’s annexation of Crimea.^{xxiv} As such, whilst emphasizing the ‘double standards’ of liberal Western powers, at least parts of the national Right also have inconsistencies in how and where their standards apply.

Conclusion: Paradoxes, Uncertainties, Futures

The types of Right that has gained prominence across the US and wider Europe in recent years – populist, nationalist, authoritarian – all have highly different historical and intellectual roots. In the US and Western Europe, the national or ‘alternative’ Right has emerged from traditions *within* the Western creed and finds itself ever balancing the rejection and the ‘salvation’ of this creed. In parts of Eastern Europe on the other hand, and certainly in Russia, a rising authoritarian Right can more comfortably speak of itself as democratic but ‘illiberal’, having emerged out of long lineages in opposition to, or on the receiving end of Western rule. The transatlantic Right in other words, carries and considers itself as a combatant and disruptive force engaged in civil war, while the Eastern and Russian one parades as a force of poised conservative continuity. Acknowledging such differences, is it possible to attempt cross-cutting conclusions?

It is difficult, but also necessary. In the realm of party politics and the blogosphere, a cross-American-European-Russian alliance around ‘anti-globalism’ or ‘anti-cosmopolitanism’ is manifest and growing – made possible, in part, by new technologies of communication. And in the realm of great power politics, the attraction and overlaps between a Trump US, a Putin Russia, and an Orban Hungary is visible too: recall the affectionate speech made by Trump to his Polish hosts in Krakow 2017 and compare it with his spite for a spearhead of ‘globalist governance’ like Angela Merkel.^{xxv} These attractions and overlaps will shape international affairs in the years to come.

They will do so, because anti-globalism must not be mistaken for anti-internationalism. Yes, the project of the national Right is one of preserving localism, particularism and difference. But its strategies of preservation put foreign policy and the active shaping of (sovereignty-enhancing) global structures center stage. Exactly how that project will play itself out is beyond prediction – not least because the ideological complexities of the many new national ‘Rights’ point their arrows of action in different and sometimes contradictory directions. Four key tensions are inherent to the agenda and/or alliance of the rising national Right, and should be highlighted:

- **State sovereignty or ‘the People’?** In the US, Europe and Russia, the national Right articulates itself as democratic, casting its defense of national sovereignty with reference to the state as protector of ‘the People’. This is often done in the language of respecting the ‘cultural diversity’ between national traditions. This rhetorical strategy puts a number of caveats on the future politics of the national Right. Shall its commitment to ‘cultural diversity’ amongst states force it to accept some level of cultural diversity and minority protection in the domestic realm too? And shall its fetishization of ‘the People’ occasionally force it to put intervention over sovereignty in instances where ‘the People’ is simply too blatantly abused?
- **Anti-interventionist - but militarist?** As argued, the national Right is firmly united around a position of anti-humanitarian interventionism. And yet its ideological agenda often revolves around, and depends upon, the symbolic language and publicly mobilizing functions of state militarism. In other words: while the national Right may reject the kinds of long, legally regulated wars of democratization or ‘peacebuilding’ waged by the West in recent decades, may it still be likely to commit to other forms of visible military action (in the realm of counterterrorism for instance) seeking out security politics as an arena within which to display leadership, authority or virility?
- **Global trans-national conservatism or local Anglo-Saxon identity?** As touched upon throughout this brief, the national Right in both the US and Europe occasionally articulates itself as part of a larger global trend, casting the divide of future global politics as one between atheist, decadent materialism and religious or conservative traditionalism (be it Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or Confusian). This vision completely disrupts the existing Western security community, including the foundational identity of NATO. Is this the most likely

development? Or will the national Right in the transatlantic zone ultimately fall upon, or prioritize its other and in some ways competing narrative of a distinct and superior 'European' civilization? And if so: Will Russia be constructed as cultural entity within or outside of that 'Europe'?

- **Disrupting or empowering the state?** Finally, and equally crucial but unpredictable: can the tensions between the disruptive, combative and anti-establishment ethos of a British, American or Italian nationalist Right, battling globalist elites within their own government and bureaucracy and at war with 'their' current states, be squared with the kind of 'big state' – even *total* state – vision espoused in such countries as Poland, Hungary and Russia? This question is not simply one about the ultimate 'unitability' of ideas. It is also one about the 'unitability' of *personalities* or *styles* of politics. Beyond the immediate temptations of joining hands, can the combative, disruptive, 'civil warrior' cast of characters that tend to head the agenda of 'anti-establishment' politics in the US and Western Europe, find long-term working relationships with national Right leaders outside of the Western realm, which tend to prefer to carry themselves more as the poised and steady stewards, of an older, wiser creed of order?

On these tensions, and more, the question of a future il/liberal order rests.

Endnotes

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- ^{vii} Franklin Foer (2016), 'It's Putins World: How Russia's Leader Became the Hero of Nationalists Everywhere.' *The Atlantic*.
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- ^x Donald Trump's speech to the UN General Assembly, <https://www.vox.com/2018/9/25/17901082/trump-un-2018-speech-full-text>.
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- ^{xiv} 'Austria's (not so) pro-European government', *Politico*, 18 December 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/austrias-not-so-pro-european-government/>.
- ^{xv} Gauland: „Potenzial der AfD liegt deutlich über 20 Prozent“, <https://www.waz.de/politik/gauland-ja-ich-habe-gespraech-mit-herrn-maassen-gefuehrt-id215062463.html>. See also 'Marine Le Pen: Steve Bannon has no part to play in 'saving Europe', *The Guardian*, 8 October 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/08/marine-le-pen-steve-bannon-has-no-part-to-play-in-saving-europe>.
- ^{xvi} See for example Anton Shekhovtsov (2018), *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*, Routledge and Marlene Laruelle, ed. (2015), *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe–Russia Relationship*, Lexington Books.
- ^{xvii} Poland is an interesting case: ideologically in tune with much of Russia's conservative orthodoxies, yet averse to Russia and in need of US protection, and hence an unusually willing and US-friendly NATO-contributor. See for instance: Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki speaking to the Sejm, <https://www.premier.gov.pl/en/policy-statement-by-prime-minister-mateusz-morawiecki-stenographic-record.html>.
- ^{xviii} 'Frexit: Le Pen promises to take France out of EU & NATO', *RT*, December 24 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zF6gD86UP40>.
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Suicide of the West (2011). Buchanan has been a central and staunch supporter of the Trump administration.

^{xx} A critique in which the national Right has often made common cause with much of the left and far left.

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