



**THE  
DANGERS  
AHEAD**

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Covid-19,  
Authoritarianism  
and Democracy

Luke Cooper & Guy Aitchison

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# THE DANGERS AND THE ANSWERS

The Coronavirus crisis has massively aggravated the existing systemic risks facing the international order. Prior to the crisis a powerful global tendency towards authoritarian governance already existed. Political nationalism has proven very amenable to the economic conditions created after the 2008 financial crisis. At the level of domestic politics nationalism provides a vocabulary of fear and diversion, directing grievances towards 'aliens' and other minorities within the polity and raising hostility towards imagined 'foreign' enemies outside it. At the international level it creates tensions between states, which, in the contemporary world, primarily concern economics. But there are still a host of examples of territorial disputes animated by traditional territorial nationalism. Recent examples include the Russian annexation of Crimea, the US proposed Israeli formal annexation of most of the Palestinian administered West Bank, the Chinese territorial claims over Taiwan and the denial of self-determination for the people of Kashmir.

The crisis created by the virus is genuinely universal and global. Solutions to it require international cooperation. Unfortunately, there are good reasons to believe that the existing trend towards authoritarian government will continue in the post-virus world. In a world already beset with a dangerous rise in nationalism the Coronavirus crisis risks adding fuel to the fire.

Shutting down the global economy has created the most serious peacetime economic crisis the world has ever seen. Even with unprecedented state interventions to support employment and prevent bankruptcy, unemployment is spiking rapidly. The public health element of the crisis also compounds inequalities across the world. Britain and the United States are at the apex of a category of wealthy countries where state capacity has been weakened by decades of marketisation exposing populations, and particularly BAME communities and other marginalised social groups, to much higher levels of risk. Poorer countries without the same levels of economic capacity are facing the crisis at a clear disadvantage, due less to bad political choices than structural inequalities. Globalisation, particularly the conditions attached to accessing credit and investment in the international financial system, expose poorer states to far greater risks in a pandemic situation. At the political level, the response to the crisis poses big questions for

human rights and the drift towards surveillance societies. The communications technology being used, or prepared, to monitor and contain the spread of the virus has potentially serious privacy and surveillance implications.

As 'ground zero' for the pandemic, China is at the centre of the crisis. Its economic strength combined with its lack of democracy also poses big questions for the future of the world system. The country stands out globally as one of a handful of remaining communist party states, a legacy of the failed project of twentieth century social revolution. Unlike most of the 'new' authoritarians, i.e. countries at various stages of drift towards authoritarian governance, it openly opposes liberal democratic rights and freedoms. In Hong Kong, it has engaged in an on-going, violent conflict with pro-democracy protests and has now unilaterally imposed a national security law that dramatically curtails the polity's freedoms under the 'one country, two systems' agreement. In its similarly restless Xinjiang province it has used Han Chinese ethnic nationalism to systematically repress the Uyghur population with a million people detained in 're-education' camps designed to enforce changes in belief system, cultural and religious identity, and politics. On the other hand, while western states have floundered in their response to the crisis, China has by contrast drawn on its extraordinary levels of state capacity to make dramatic large scale interventions to successfully contain its spread. While it initially tried to cover up the outbreak, once it changed course the results were impressive. For example, when new cases reappeared in Wuhan following an easing of the lockdown, the authorities set about testing *all* 11m residents within the space of ten days (they didn't meet the target but still managed over 6m<sup>1</sup>). This is a remarkable logistical accomplishment that underlines the capacity the state has to mobilise and apply social resources. No Western country has come close to matching such capabilities.

Reviewing the massive pressures that Covid-19 is storing up for the post-crisis world, the potential for Chinese 'soft power' interventions has clearly increased given its impressive response to the crisis. Indeed, looking to the future, the global authoritarian challenge is perhaps encapsulated by the figures of Xi Jinping, the Chinese president, and Donald Trump in the United States. Under Xi the Chinese state has moved in an autocratic direction. He has cultivated a cult of personality which

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-52651651>

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While there is considerable hope that Coronavirus will bring about a system-change, the new global authoritarianism can also adapt to this changing context

is summed up, totemically, by 'Xi Jinping Thought' being written into the communist party constitution in 2019. China's rise has become a *bête noire* for Trump who regularly engages in anti-Chinese rhetoric. Given that China is challenging a world system previously dominated by the United States, this is perhaps unsurprising. But the two countries are also major trading partners and have a very high level of economic interdependence. China has financed the American public debt in exchange for running a large trade surplus in US-China trade. Trump, with his slogan of 'America first', has launched an ongoing trade war, introducing tariffs on imports with a value of \$360 billion. He has threatened to go further still and also used diplomacy to try to lock Chinese firm Huawei out of the global 5G mobile rollout. Trump symbolises the global decay of democracy and the hollowing out of its emancipatory ideal. China, by contrast, remains committed to its outright rejection of liberal democratic governance.

The contrast between Trump and Xi is revealing in what it tells us about the state of the global authoritarian threat. Trump is an authoritarian personality governing a liberal democratic system, albeit one full of flaws. Xi shares some of Trump's preferences for ethnic nationalist discourses, most evident in the Xinjiang province, but in a completely different institutional context of one-party rule. On the world stage, however, their approach could not be more different. Under Xi, Chinese foreign policy has promoted support for the continued existence of a multilateral global order that avoids a collapse in world trade. Chinese nationalism aggressively asserts its interests in relation to what it considers an East Asian

sphere of influence, but adopts a more moderate tone elsewhere. China has turned its economic strength into 'soft power', notably with its 'belt and road' infrastructure investment initiative. While the incentives are clearly different for a 'rising power', China is not pursuing an 'America first' style policy. It is more consistent in its strategic calculations than Donald Trump; and CCP policy appears much less disruptive and more inclined to the status quo. But in these very different ways they both encapsulate the 'authoritarian temptation' for global elites. China and the US form two faces of the sovereignty-ist, strong state ethnic nationalism that risks becoming a new global 'norm'.

The world's two most powerful states are joined in a roll call of others experiencing a drift towards authoritarianism. Vladimir Putin has now been in power for two decades in Russia and shows no sign of letting go; Narendra Modi in India has pursued an aggressive ethnic nationalist agenda on the sub-continent; Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil talks positively about the country's historic dictatorship; and within Europe the far right has also made considerable gains, governing autocratically in Hungary and Poland and rising in electoral support in a host of other states. Britain's decision to leave the EU was also motivated, in part, by flag-waving jingoism. In short, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic many of the most powerful states were moving in this direction. While there is considerable hope, and even expectation, that Coronavirus will bring about a system-change, the new global authoritarianism can also adapt to this changing context.

We summarise these dangers as four threats.

# FOUR THREATS

## 1. 'Deglobalisation' takes a nationalist form

'Deglobalisation' refers to a process of uncoupling taking place in the global economy. Since the 2008 financial crisis regional markets have become more important than global ones. Financial flows between countries have never recovered to their pre 2008 levels.<sup>2</sup> A range of other indicators also suggests that deglobalisation is happening.<sup>3</sup> Simply put, states (and regional blocs like the EU) are becoming less interdependent with the rest of the world. In other ways, however, the economic model has not changed. Pumping up asset bubbles with debt and speculation continue to be more important than 'real world' capital investment. Many Western countries have struggled with low productivity, low investment and low wages going into the crisis and show no signs of reversing these trends since. Austerity was a disastrous economic experiment that compounded the problem because low private sector investment was not compensated for by a more active intervention by the state. As a policy its backers are now few and far between.

An acceleration of deglobalisation looks likely as we move forward. New technology is expected to incentivise 'onshoring', i.e. developing more locally embedded production networks, and not 'offshoring' driven by lower labour costs. Tackling climate change will require more locally sourced, sustainable agriculture and a radically reorganised transport infrastructure. And the scale of state-investment required to deal with the Covid-19 crisis also illustrates the ongoing importance and primacy of nation states to tackling social and climate emergencies.

These factors all create dynamics pushing towards greater deglobalisation. This could undoubtedly be managed in progressive ways with a new approach to global multilateralism. This would be a form of *multilateralist deglobalisation*: a managed retrenchment in international capital freedoms that restored greater democracy to states and regions. But given the global support for authoritarian regimes there is a danger that the form deglobalisation takes is politically and economically nationalist: throwing up barriers to the movement of people, persecuting minorities and beggary-neighbour economic policies towards other states.

## 2. Less democratic participation, more centralisation

The nation-state has demonstrated its importance in the Covid-19 crisis. This reflects a certain institutional reality in how politics works: it is embedded within particular locations with distinctive identities and citizenship regimes. But while perhaps 'inevitable' it is also full of potential dangers. States like China that have been most effective in fighting the pandemic have mobilised resources centrally and planned their allocation with a very high level of centralisation. Globally this need for emergency, war-like levels of planning does risk normalising bureaucratisation and taking even more decisions out of the reach of citizens.

The feeling of 'not being listened to', i.e. a pervasive sense of disempowerment, has been found to be an important indicator of support for Brexit.<sup>4</sup> Populist and authoritarian nationalism tends to feed off the perception of an out of touch, even corrupt, elite. But it is rarely associated with support for remedies that seek to decentralise decision making back down to local levels. Nationalism substitutes for greater substantive involvement in political decision making through the mobilisation of identity politics. This has already become a norm of political mobilisation in many states, cohering a form of governance based on greater autocracy. There seems little reason to believe that a strategy, which has proven successful for those that use it, will not continue in the years ahead and requires a robust challenge by democratic forces.

## 3. Surveillance state<sup>5</sup> and erosion of human rights

Covid-19 can be situated as part of a package of 'organic', i.e. genuine, threats to human security that are prone to instrumentalisation by forces hostile to the protection of human rights. The internet and telecommunications revolution has created extraordinary avenues for ongoing monitoring of human behaviour by states and private corporations alike. The cycle of war and terrorism that has dominated international politics in this century has already led to a significant increase in the

2 Matthieu Bussière, Julia Schmidt, and Natacha Valla, 'International Financial Flows in the New Normal: Key Patterns (and Why We Should Care)', in *International Macroeconomics in the Wake of the Global Financial Crisis*, ed. Laurent Ferrara, Ignacio Hernando, and Daniela Marconi, Financial and Monetary Policy Studies (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 249–69.

3 Michael A. Witt, 'De-Globalization: Theories, Predictions, and Opportunities for International Business Research', *Journal of International Business Studies* 50, no. 7 (1 September 2019): 1053–77, doi:10.1057/s41267-019-00219-7.

4 Jose Javier Olivas-Osuna et al., 'Understanding Brexit at a Local Level: Causes of Discontent and Asymmetric Impacts' (LSE CCS, 4 March 2019), <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100204/>.

5 On this see Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

power of the security and surveillance apparatus. These processes have already been normalised in states across the world. Securitisation carries particular implications for marginalised communities that already live with harassment and persecution by state authorities.

The major danger going forward is that popular support for human rights still rests on weak foundations in society. While populations will often lack trust in public authorities (itself a problem driving populist voting), this rarely translates into support for a human rights agenda that provides some protections for individuals and vulnerable groups from state coercion. The abuse of powers assumed by the state in the exceptional circumstances of fighting Covid-19 - and their subsequent normalisation - carries obvious dangers for protecting basic liberties, including freedom of association, speech and privacy. The economic disruption of the crisis and the accompanying debt burdens placed on states may lead to renewed austerity, further jeopardising economic and social human rights.

#### 4. Inequality goes unchallenged

The convulsions of capitalism we are living through are increasingly settling upon a particular political form: an authoritarian and kleptocratic state.<sup>6</sup> Modern capitalist economies incentivise ‘rent-seeking’ behaviour through financialisation and speculation, rather than pursuing productive investment.<sup>7</sup> This model has produced eye-watering levels of global inequality. Oxfam has shown that 2,153 billionaires have more wealth than 60 percent of the planet’s population or 4.6 billion people.<sup>8</sup> The economics that produces this inequality requires a high level of capital mobility, allowing money to move effortlessly across borders, concentrating in low tax jurisdictions and with an accompanying legal global infrastructure to enable high levels of financial secrecy. While the model arose through ‘the retreat of the state’, in a celebration of supposedly ‘free markets’, today it has necessitated ‘the advance of the state’. The system of financial globalisation is now underwritten by the massive fiscal largesse of states propping up this malfunctioning system.

New authoritarians play a particular role in this context. They do not propose reforms to substantially



Alekssey Gavrilov

A security guard checks a visitor's temperature in Wuhan, China

alter the economic model. Their criticism of globalisation is limited to its alleged embrace of multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism and open borders. They also oppose the international cooperation needed to confront tax evasion and promote financial transparency. And in domestic politics, by turning attention away from economic inequalities towards the persecution of the marginalised, they can play a helpful role in upholding the oligarchic global system.

6 Paul Mason, ‘Ellen Meiksins Wood Prize Lecture’, 22 March 2018, [https://d3n8a8pro7v7hmx.cloudfront.net/broadbent/pages/6854/attachments/original/1536175790/Paul\\_Mason\\_Lecture.pdf](https://d3n8a8pro7v7hmx.cloudfront.net/broadbent/pages/6854/attachments/original/1536175790/Paul_Mason_Lecture.pdf).

7 Guy Standing, *The Corruption of Capitalism: Why Rentiers Thrive and Work Does Not Pay* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2016).

8 Oxfam International, ‘Time to Care: Unpaid and Underpaid Care Work and the Global Inequality Crisis’ (London: Oxfam, January 2020).

# FOUR RESPONSES

In response to these threats we propose four alternatives, based on democracy and social justice. We can manage the profound changes underway in our economy and politics in ways that boost democratic participation. But to do that we have to confront the alternative: a much more authoritarian and kleptocratic capitalism. So we face a stark choice between a more social democratic, or socialist, approach rooted in the importance of democratic regulation of public and private spheres, or a continuation on the current path where increasingly authoritarian states mobilise to protect private financial wealth: socialising losses on the whole of society, while the profits stay private.

## 1. Multilateralist deglobalisation

Since the 1990s ‘alternative globalisation’ (*‘altermondialism’*) campaigns have advocated proposals for changing how globalisation works in ways that reject nationalism. Recognising that trade and production should be more locally and regionally embedded does not have to mean supporting nationalism. This agenda is about delivering greater social and environmental justice. In the two decades after the Second World War international cooperation successfully regulated cross border financial flows to prioritise productive investment and trade over financial speculation. We cannot ‘go back’ to this period, but we can update and develop some of the lessons. Technological developments such as the ‘internet of things’ (connecting physical infrastructure to communications technology to radically reduce production costs) and the need to invest in sustainable energy are likely to change the material incentives that exist in global trade and production. This may result in ongoing stagnation, or even reduction, in international trade. Multilateralism will be vitally important to ensure that this does not adversely affect poorer states. To deal with this we must ensure the benefits of new technology are shared across the globe. So, amongst other things, globalising knowledge and democratising access to information should go alongside ‘deglobalising’ some production networks. And international regulation will be vital to protect the *general interest*, and prioritise it over the narrow, particularist interests of wealthy states and individuals at the apex of the new oligarchic model of financialisation.

## 2. Defend and extend democracy

The rise of China and the voluntary withdrawal of the US from the world stage under a chaotic and incompetent President will create a strong gravitational pull towards an authoritarian bureaucratic model of state power. The ostensible success of authoritarian states like China in containing the virus should not lead to the false conclusion that democratic citizenship can be dispensed with in the interests of decisive action. The success of democratic countries, such as South Korea, Taiwan and New Zealand, in managing the pandemic shows that sacrificing democracy on the altar of public health is not necessary. If anything, the opposite is true. The virus has likely taken a far worse toll than it might have done as a result of China’s initial cover-up, which included silencing whistle-blowers and suppressing information on the nature and scale of the virus. Had there been proper transparency, the virus might have been slowed in its tracks and other countries would have had more time to prepare. There is still no substitute for empowered democratic citizenship when it comes to the protection of basic interests.

The challenge for democrats today is to contest the drive towards a permanent centralisation of state power under the cover of COVID19 and advocate for reforms that would redistribute power to citizens. In the UK, as we will set out, this means opposing the populist constitutional settlement proposed by Boris Johnson’s Conservative party in the context of recent struggles over Brexit. Johnson’s planned reforms would enhance the discretionary powers of the Prime Minister and weaken constitutional checks and balances – the very opposite of the aspiration to “take back control” voiced in the referendum campaign. The reform process, as currently envisaged, is entirely elite-driven with no hint of popular participation. In response, democrats should demand that any far-reaching constitutional reform should be put to a popular constitutional convention of citizens. The convention should be representative of the opinions and interests of people from across the UK. It would be empowered to deliberate on what reforms to the political system are needed and make recommendations, without having its agenda pre-determined in the interests of any one government or party. Only a popular convention process such as this can ensure democratic legitimacy.

### **3. Winning popular support for human rights**

The pandemic has revealed the central and overriding importance that populations across the world attach to at least one human right: the right to health. Both authoritarian and democratic governments have been compelled to shut down their economies to preserve the health and well-being of their citizens (despite the fact the virus mostly kills the least “productive” sectors of the population that some autocrats and neoliberals might prefer to dispense with). This was emphatically not the case with earlier pandemics, such as the H3N2 virus that swept the world in 1968. Apart from a small libertarian fringe, support for lockdown measures among the general public has been higher than many expected. Citizens and their governments have in the most part been willing to place the common good of public health over the private liberties of buying and selling that underpin the capitalist market place.

While the political and economic consequences of the pandemic pose significant dangers for civil liberties and material well-being, there are also positive dynamics at work that can be built on. In addition to the importance of a robust public healthcare system, the pandemic underlines the interdependence of human rights and their universal character. It makes clear that the right to health cannot be meaningfully enjoyed in isolation, given that no one person is truly safe so long as others have the virus. This has been accompanied by the recognition that especially vulnerable populations, such as the homeless, prisoners and refugees cannot be abandoned to their fate in cramped and squalid conditions, with Spain even emptying out its immigration detention centres. We can now appreciate how the human right to health depends on the enjoyment of other rights, such as the right to housing (offering a space to isolate); the right to food and welfare support (supporting isolation and a strong immune system); the right to an education (to follow public health advice and rebut conspiracy theories) and the right to a healthy environment (reducing the risk of cross-species contamination).

Crucially, the crisis has also shown the vital role that the political rights of democratic citizenship have to play in guaranteeing transparent and responsive government. This includes the right to trade union representation, which in the UK and elsewhere was vital to securing a furlough scheme that protects workers. The importance of political rights provides additional grounds for

opposing the introduction of a permanent surveillance infrastructure under cover of the pandemic. Such surveillance not only threatens rights to privacy, but also enhances the arbitrary power of government to monitor opposition and even blackmail dissidents. Progressives today must make the case for deepening, rather than diluting, human rights protections underpinned by a post-virus vision of the interdependence and universality of protections that can mobilise a broad-based coalition across civil society.

### **4. A package of measures to fight inequality**

Covid-19 is not a ‘leveller’. The risk the virus poses to individuals and societies is hugely shaped by existing social and economic conditions. Economically the impact of the shutdown is particularly asymmetrical. White collar office workers are more likely to be able to work from home. Meanwhile, blue collar jobs are hit hardest in both the exposure to the virus and the ensuing economic fallout. As we come out of the crisis we face a perfect storm of rising inequality, increased hardship and growing political nationalism and authoritarianism. To address this we have to promote a package of measures on a national and international level to tackle social inequality in all its forms. Doing this will require rebalancing the economy away from a model of state-underwritten private wealth generation. Instead we need a state-managed economy run for the public interest. The state will need to make investments in profitable assets to offset the liabilities accrued through the course of the crisis. To address the explosion of social hardship we are already seeing, measures such as universal basic services or universal basic income should be explored. Greater progressive taxation, coordinated internationally to tackle tax competition and combined with closing down tax havens and delivering tax transparency, can cohere support for an internationalist approach to rebuilding in the post-Covid world. Through these efforts we must demonstrate the superiority of democratic governance, over authoritarianism, bringing about a set of practical changes to greatly improve human wellbeing.

# WHAT IS IT? PICKING APART THE NEW AUTHORITARIANISM

## The response to Covid-19: an eclectic mix?<sup>9</sup>

There is no uniform pattern to how the new authoritarians have responded to the Covid-19 crisis. This reflects their relatively amorphous ideological nature. Indeed, a feature of these forces, which is perhaps part of their success, has been their eclectic ideological stance, allowing them to pivot between different postures in a rather flexible way. In their response to Coronavirus there are broadly two approaches: one group has pursued an authoritarian security response; another has instead favoured a response based on market egoism that asserts the primacy of a perceived economic interest over and above all public health considerations. The authoritarian security camp has mobilised to close down democracy. Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Modi in India are both clear examples of this tendency. They have taken draconian action to curtail political freedoms in the name of fighting the virus. In Israel, prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu has similarly authorised sweeping surveillance powers to be used without oversight. In the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte threatened martial law and instructed security services to ‘shoot dead’ those breaking the curfew. ‘Instead of causing trouble, I’ll send you to the grave’ he was reported as saying in a statement consistent with his history of using ‘law and order’ violence to curtail civil liberties under the pretext of fighting the war on drugs.<sup>10</sup> In contrast to this approach, others in the global authoritarian camp have taken a dismissive line on Covid-19. Trump and Bolsonaro draw on highly masculinised and egoistic discourses to pour scorn on the risks to human life and prioritise restarting the economy, above all else. The latter dismissals of Covid-19, which draw on a register of toxic masculinity in relation to the threat the virus represents to human life, are distinct from, but nonetheless compatible with, a broader conspiracy-prone mindset amongst the alt-right media universe (see

Titus Molkenbur’s discussion of Germany in this report). Drawing on existing anti-vaccine conspiracy movements, they present public health authority as a threat to the sanctity of the individual and family.

## Defining the new authoritarianism: three key features

Sadly we now have a large number of case study examples across the world’s major continents to investigate the phenomena of rising political nationalism and authoritarianism. Until the last ten to fifteen years, the study of far right movements in the post-war period has primarily concerned anti-establishment protest parties and street movements. Today, however, the new far right has coalesced into a governing force. The process of achieving this level of weight in society has also involved a blurring of distinctions between the traditional centre-right and the far right.<sup>11</sup> This has taken several forms: the creation of coalition governments between centre and far right parties (as we have seen in Austria); the lurch of traditionally conservative parties much further to the right (most starkly in the United States but also here in Britain); or some combination of these (e.g. Bolsonaro and, to a much lesser degree, Modi, both rule with the support of a number of different parties). Prominent figures on the ‘right of the centre-right’, such as Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi,<sup>12</sup> have also talked openly of striking a formal alliance with far right parties. Despite the great diversity found across these national terrains, we maintain that the new authoritarians have a strikingly similar set of ideological preferences and policy orientation across the globe.

These similarities centre on three broad categories: (a) crony capitalism, (b) democratic erosion, and (c) ethnic nationalism and toxic masculinity.<sup>13</sup>

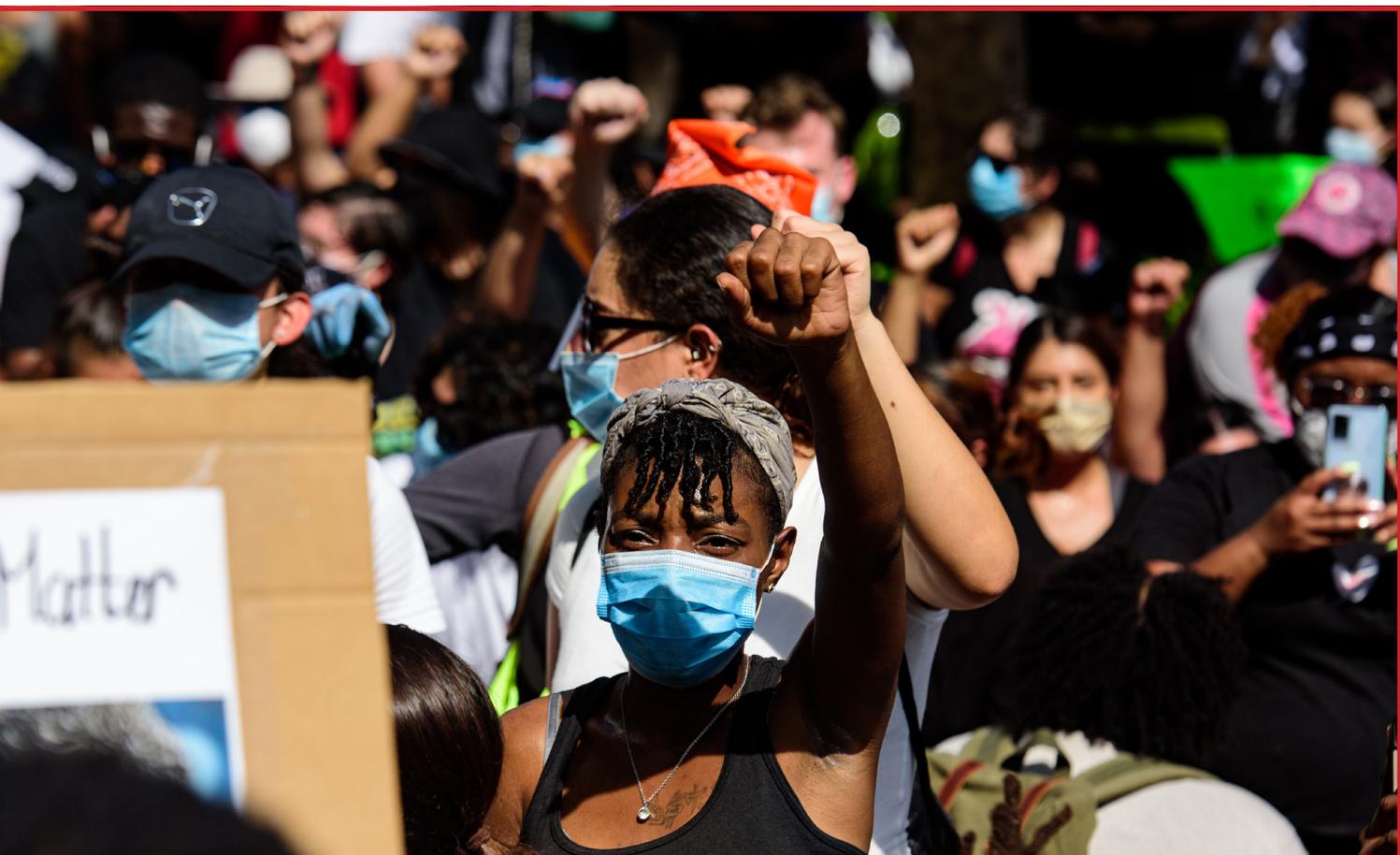
9 On this see, David Renton, ‘The New Authoritarians: Revisiting the Argument’, *Lives; Running*, 2 May 2020, <https://livesrunning.wordpress.com/2020/05/02/the-new-authoritarian-revisiting-the-argument/>, see also David Renton, *The New Authoritarians: Convergence on the Right* (London: Pluto Press, 2019).

10 ‘Duterte Vows to “shoot Dead” Lockdown Violators as Unrest Grows in Philippines’, *The Telegraph*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/04/02/duterte-vows-shoot-dead-lockdown-violators-unrest-grows-philippines/>.

11 On this see David Renton, *The New Authoritarians: Convergence on the Right* (London: Pluto Press, 2019).

12 Zia Weise, ‘Berlusconi Wants EPP to Form Alliance with Far Right’, *POLITICO*, 10 May 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/silvio-berlusconi-epp-far-right-alliance/>.

13 This taxonomy was developed out of Shalini Randeria’s concluding remarks at the February 2019 workshop of the LSE and IWM Visions of Europe programme, *Globalisation, Europe and the Democratic Crisis* (LSE, London). The workshop was supported by the Independent Social Research Foundation Small Group Flexi Grant and the Open Society Foundation Initiative for Europe.



Hanna Tverdokhib

### **America: at the abyss?**

The killing of George Floyd has led to a democratic uprising in the United States. Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin and three other officers now face criminal charges - a stage that in most cases of police killing of African Americans is never reached. Protests and riots erupted across the United States. Taking place at a time of pandemic, these events represent a huge reckoning for America and global society: a pivotal point in history where a number of different trajectories are possible. The pandemic has already exposed the huge health inequalities of America's system of privatised healthcare, while the government response has been bungled by Trump. Deficiencies in the American bailout have also led to a huge spike in unemployment with 1 in 5 Americans now on the dole (end of May 2020). Little wonder the American philosopher and activist Cornel West has described the country as a 'failed social experiment'.<sup>14</sup>

Trump's reaction to the George Floyd protests represents a new and harrowing moment in the crisis of American democracy. He has talked of mobilising the American federal army to restore 'law and order', a threat that led to the public rebuke by

his own Defence Secretary, Mark Esper. Pentagon officials are also reported to be opposed.<sup>15</sup> He has glorified the violent police crackdown on protests, described them as perpetrated by 'anarchists' and 'domestic terrorists', attacked governors for failing to mobilise the national guard, and presented himself as the 'president of law and order' who will call on the military to 'dominate the streets'.<sup>16</sup> Crucially, this violent rhetoric was combined with a commitment to protect 'second amendment rights', i.e. to the right to 'keep and bear arms'. The comments amounted to endorsing the armed, far right militias that have threatened black communities and protested the lockdown.

This is a deep crisis of American democracy. Backing domestic militia activity by far right groups is, in particular, a 'genie out of the bottle' moment for the Republican party. The hostility of even the neo-conservative elements of the American defence establishment and 'deep state' to Trump provides a thin layer of protection in this crisis, making it harder for him to mobilise the military for a full-scale armed crackdown on dissent. But this is certainly the most serious moment American democracy has faced in the post-war era, with no clear escape hatch.

14 Cornel West, 'A Boot Is Crushing the Neck of American Democracy | Cornel West', *The Guardian*, 1 June 2020, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/01/george-floyd-protests-cornel-west-american-democracy>.

15 Barbara Starr, Ryan Browne, and Nicole Gaoette, 'Pentagon Officials Express Concern as Trump Threatens to Use Military to "dominate" Protestors', *CNN*, accessed 4 June 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/01/politics/troops-deploying-washington-dc/index.html>.

16 NBC News, *Donald Trump Delivers Statement Amid George Floyd Protests* | *NBC News*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQFotIUg5MA>.

## Crony capitalism and state-supported financialisation

Crony capitalism refers to a situation where the relationship between officials and an economic elite dominates policy-making and the state is used in a corrupt fashion to favour supporters of the ruling clique.<sup>17</sup> Crony capitalism may sound like it is counter-posed to free market liberalism. Certainly supporters of the latter have routinely justified rolling back the state with privatisation according to a discourse that identifies state intervention in the economy with corruption and nepotism. This myth is, however, no longer sustainable in a world economy where the process of financialisation has been underwritten by huge levels of state intervention. This was seen in the 2008 financial crisis but has reached an entirely new level with the state support needed in 2020.

In any case, across the entire history of neoliberalism,<sup>18</sup> the idea of rolling back the state was a politically salient vocabulary, not a policy reality. Rather than withdrawing from society the state became much more attuned to the demands of financial capital. This has created a rentier, not 'free market', system where state regulation, subsidies and taxation regimes are designed to allow capital, especially the digital giants with huge global reach, to maximise surpluses<sup>19</sup> from the ongoing commodification of human behaviour.<sup>20</sup> Recognising that globalisation has created a structural system favouring rentier economics is crucial to understanding why the policy preferences of the far right are gaining traction. For authoritarians, crony capitalism is an application of their own belief system to this economic structure. They seek to develop a *national elite* which is supposedly attuned to the interests of the nation. The far right regimes in Hungary and Poland have been open about this as a goal of policy-making: the creation of a national economic ruling class that is not sullied with the alleged multiculturalism of globalisation. This leads inevitably to corrupt relationships between the state and private sector.

Decades of reform to the financial system then allows money to move across borders concealing this corruption. Indeed, a *legal* global infrastructure for money laundering and tax evasion exists to hide *illegality*.<sup>21</sup> Kleptocratic rulers can readily draw on this system as and when required to consolidate and expand the ruling clique. As nationalists the far right also have an ideological opposition to the international cooperation needed to reign in financialisation, restore democratic oversight of capital and close down the global infrastructure for money laundering.

The new authoritarians have therefore pursued crony capitalism with varying levels of *shamelessness*.<sup>22</sup> Their support for a strong state that creates a private sector elite attuned to the interests of the nation (represented by the party and leader) ideologically legitimises cronyism:

**Hungary.** Orbán's clique of supporters receive 90 per cent of the income from EU funded, systematically over-priced public tenders.<sup>23</sup> Lorinc Meszaros, who ran a gas repair company in Viktor Orbán's hometown, has become a billionaire as a result of government contracts.<sup>24</sup> He received \$170 million in dividend payments in 2018 alone.<sup>25</sup>

**Italy.** In 2019, a close aide to Matteo Salvini, the leader of the far right Lega party who was at the time the Deputy Prime Minister of Italy, held talks with three Russian businessmen to agree an oil deal that would involve illegally channeling tens of millions of euros to the far right party.<sup>26</sup>

**Austria.** In 2019, the 'Ibiza scandal' broke out which saw Freedom Party leader Heinz-Christian Strache declare his intention to follow Orbán's model in Hungary. In an undercover sting operation he agreed to the demands of a woman posing as a wealthy Russian investor. The fake deal would see her purchase the tabloid, *Kronen Zeitung*, and shift its editorial policy, in exchange for lucrative

17 This definition is developed from Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *Political Consequences of Crony Capitalism Inside Russia* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 2–3.

18 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, New Ed edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

19 Standing, *The Corruption of Capitalism*.

20 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

21 Oliver Bullough, *Moneyland: Why Thieves And Crooks Now Rule The World And How To Take It Back* (London: Profile Books, 2018); Glenn, McMafia.

22 This is the term used by Ruth Wodak. See Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean*, 2nd edition (London: Sage Publications Ltd, Forthcoming).

23 Balint Magyar and Balint Madlovics, 'Hungary's Mafia State Fights for Impunity', *Balkan Insight*, 21 June 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/21/hungarys-mafia-state-fights-for-impunity/>.

24 Forbes Rich List, 'Lorinc Meszaros', *Forbes*, 9 March 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/lorinc-meszaros/>.

25 Magyar and Madlovics, 'Hungary's Mafia State Fights for Impunity'.

26 Alberto Nardelli, 'Revealed: The Explosive Secret Recording That Shows How Russia Tried To Funnel Millions To The "European Trump"', *BuzzFeed News*, 10 July 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/albertonardelli/salvini-russia-oil-deal-secret-recording>.

Austrian government contracts. The crisis ended the participation of the party in the Austrian coalition government.

### **Democratic erosion: the assault on monitoring democracy**

The new authoritarians have an ideological preference for a strong state with reduced civil liberties. These preferences draw on ‘law and order’ traditionalism and also connect in a reciprocal way with the crony capitalist orientation to constructing a ‘new elite’. A political preference for creating compliant public authorities attuned to the interests of the party combines with a self-interested desire to hide corrupt economic activity. This agenda has been pursued by an ideological attack on the constitutional or ‘rules-based’ element of democracy. John Keane has referred to the construction of independent public authorities that scrutinise the powers used by the state as ‘monitory democracy’.<sup>27</sup> The term refers to how power has been used and monitored in post-war liberal democracies. A state that is transparent in its dealing with civil society and the private economy requires a capacity to regulate itself. Institutions, such as regulatory authorities independent of government, as well as judicial review, are a mechanism for doing this. They provide an important ‘monitory’ check against the rise of despotic politics.

New authoritarians have radically challenged this system. By transforming the state into a vehicle for a ruling clique, they seek to dismantle the capacity of the state for self-accountability.

**Hungary.** Since coming to power in 2010 Orbán has systematically colonised the state with cronies, notably the Public Prosecutors Office, but also all spheres of state regulation including education, culture, arts and sports.<sup>28</sup> He has turned the media into a mouthpiece of the government, directly controlling the public broadcaster and showered government money on compliant pro-

regime private media outlets with government funding to run highly partisan ‘information campaigns’ against George Soros and the EU.

**Poland.** Under the cover of the fight against enduring ‘communist’ influences in the state, the Law and Justice party has waged an on-going campaign against the independence of the judiciary.<sup>29</sup> Like Orbán, Jaroslaw Kaczynski has also turned the public broadcaster into a mouthpiece of the government and promised the ‘re-politisation’ of the broader media, including government checks on journalists.<sup>30</sup>

**United States.** While it has received little attention, perhaps overshadowed by the administration’s use of extreme racist and nationalist discourses, Trump has pursued policies in relation to public authority that also constitute an attack on monitory democracy. Republicans back ‘The Regulations from the Executive in Need of Scrutiny (REINS) Act’, which would decimate the capacity of independent regulatory authorities to uphold the public interest, favouring partisan and lobbying interests.<sup>31</sup> Passed by the then Republican-controlled House of Representatives in January 2017,<sup>32</sup> it is currently seeking Senate approval. Trump has also declined to make thousands of civil service appointments, leaving departments deliberately understaffed. Although this is motivated by neoliberal opposition to ‘big government’, the more radical Republican proposals in this area also massively increase the political control of regulators by the executive.<sup>33</sup>

### **Ethnic nationalism and toxic masculinity**

The third category differs from the previous two. Democratic erosion and crony capitalism are both governing practices of the new authoritarian right. But they are often not part of their toolkit of political messages that they use to mobilise support and construct legitimacy. In contrast, in this third category the new far

27 John Keane, ‘Monitory Democracy? The Secret History of Democracy since 1945’, in *The Secret History of Democracy since 1945*, ed. Benjamin Isakhan and Stephen Stockwell (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 204–18.

28 Péter Kerekó and Zsolt Enyedi, ‘Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán’s Laboratory of Illiberalism’, *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (12 July 2018): 39–51.

29 January 27th et al., ‘How Will the Latest Judicial Reform Controversy Affect Poland’s Presidential Election?’, *EUROPP*, 27 January 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2020/01/27/how-will-the-latest-judicial-reform-controversy-affect-polands-presidential-election/>.

30 Piotr Buras, ‘Poland after the Election: New Headaches for the EU’, *ECFR*, 15 October 2019, [https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_poland\\_after\\_the\\_election\\_new\\_headaches\\_for\\_the\\_eu](https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_poland_after_the_election_new_headaches_for_the_eu).

31 Susan Rose-Ackerman, ‘“Slash and Burn” in the U.S. Congress and the Trump administration: permanent damage or short-term Setback?’, *Revue française d’administration publique* N° 170, no. 2 (21 November 2019): 421–32.

32 Elizabeth Kolbert, ‘Suspending the Rules: How Congress Plans to Undermine Public Safety’, *The New Yorker*, 10 January 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/suspending-the-rules-how-congress-plans-to-undermine-public-safety>.

33 E.g. the Independent Agency Regulatory Analysis Act of 2019 as discussed in Rose-Ackerman, ‘“Slash and Burn” in the U.S. Congress and the Trump administration’, 428.

right focus on classical themes of authoritarian populist mobilisation: perceived threats to the homogeneity of the nation, especially in relation to immigration; and the assertion of ethnically inflected values structure based on religion, family values and heteronormativity, and usually also associated with a toxic masculinity typified by the attachment to ‘strong men’ party leaders.

**Italy.** Salvini draws on imagery that promotes a toxic masculinity in tandem with violent opposition to immigration and humanitarian relief efforts in the Mediterranean. His 2019 ‘beach party tour’ cultivated a highly sexualised image of male bravado and machismo. This seems close to what Dibyesh Anand has called ‘porno-nationalism’, a form of ideological movement whereby ‘sexualized’ images become central to ‘nationalism as an ideology and a lived collective political movement’ - a trait he also finds in Hindu nationalism in India.<sup>34</sup> Alongside his well-known ethno-nationalist attacks on mass immigration, Salvini has also combined this sexist imagery with an open attack on what he calls ‘gender ideology’, a catchall term for feminist, LGBT+ and reproductive rights movements.<sup>35</sup> As such, it perpetuates a typical alignment of nationalism with bigotry.

**India.** Modi’s BJP party talk openly of “Hindutva”, a definition of India that explicitly excludes the country’s large Muslim minority. The normalisation of violent rhetoric towards the country’s Muslim minority has gone hand in hand with territorial colonialism in the Muslim-majority province of Jammu and Kashmir (abolishing its autonomous status). A new citizenship law has been nominally presented as a pathway to citizenship for migrants of other countries. But it excludes Muslims in what is widely seen as an attempt to disenfranchise Indian Muslims that lack formal documentation of status.<sup>36</sup>

**Hungary.** Islamophobia has similarly become a normal component of European political discourse. Fascistic ‘blood and soil’ rhetoric sits alongside violent discourses

towards minorities in many states. Hungary is one example of this broader phenomenon, which spreads across the whole of Europe. Orbán’s final speech in the 2018 election was nonetheless an extreme case. In coded terms he promoted the classical trope of the Jewish conspiracy to flood the nation with non-white, Muslim immigrants. He spoke of ‘the alchemical workshop of George Soros’ that ‘threatens the everyday security that we take for granted’ and leaves ‘women... in danger from violent attacks’.<sup>37</sup> He linked this ‘struggle’ against immigration from the East in the present day to the defeat of Ottoman rule in 1699 - an absurd, racist reference to the supposed ‘threat’ of non-white rule.

34 Dibyesh Anand, “‘Porno-Nationalism’ and the Male Subject”, in *Rethinking the Man Question: Sex, Gender and Violence in International Relations*, ed. Jane L. Parpart and Marysia Zalewski (London and New York: Zed Books, 2008), 163.

35 Sara Garbagnoli, ‘Matteo Salvini, Renaturalizing the Racial and Sexual Boundaries of Democracy’, *OpenDemocracy*, 1 October 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/matteo-salvini-renaturalizing-racial-and-sexual-boundaries-of-dem/>.

36 Priyamvada Gopal, Zoe Williams, and Luke Cooper, *Coronavirus Lockdown - Is Modi’s India Lurching towards Fascism?*, Another Europe Podcast EP55, 2020, <https://www.anothereurope.org/episode-55-coronavirus-lockdown-is-modis-india-lurching-towards-fascism/>.

37 Viktor Orbán, ‘Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the Final Fidesz Election Campaign Event’, *Website of the Hungarian Government*, 6 April 2018, <http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-final-fidesz-election-campaign-event>.

# INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

## **Bulgaria: 'right wing discourse is the established normal'**

It is difficult to talk of the rise of the right in Bulgarian politics as anyone under the age of 30 will be hard-pressed to remember anything else but the prevalence of rightwing discourse. It is an established normal in Bulgaria's political scene.

Still, the current coalition between GERB (the party founded by Boiko Borisov, current prime minister and former mayor of Sofia, firefighter and Todor Zhivkov's bodyguard) and United Patriots (itself an unstable coalition of minority nationalist parties) has legitimised political movements that previously existed only on the fringes - and on local cable TV channels.

There is little evidence that United Patriots, or the parties that constitute it, have active grassroots support. There are, however, ample examples of less coordinated but virulent hate groups tacitly endorsed by the Patriots. Among these are vigilante "refugee hunting" patrols on the south borders, as well as anti-LGBT "family rights" campaigners. Shamefully, on the left the old Bulgarian Socialist party is either silent on these developments, or is actively opposing equalities agenda policies, including the disputed ratification of the Istanbul convention for the protection of women and girls from all forms of violence

In the absence of grassroots political activity by the mainstream parties, fringe activism takes place. The hyper concentration of young people in two to three urban centres has left the rest of the country entirely bereft of any sort of progressive activity - either politically or culturally. There is a worrying revival of the importance of the Orthodox church, which is still aggressively homophobic and misogynist, but which speaks to people's sense of abandonment away from big cities.

These long-term trends are unlikely to be significantly disrupted by Coronavirus. The Bulgarian government moved swiftly to contain the spread of the Virus, allowing it to keep the total number of cases to 2519 as of the 1st June and reopen the hospitality and tourism sectors. For the time being the government has consolidated its position. But it remains to be seen how the economic downturn now underway will shape the country's political developments.

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## **France: caught between the liberal centre and a consolidated far right?**

Rassemblement Nationale is now strongly anchored in the forefront of French politics, and is probably the clearest electoral brand in the country given unprecedented political fragmentation, the collapse of the Parti Socialiste on the left and Les Republicains on the right, and the lack of any consistent political party structure around Emmanuel Macron. It is still difficult to imagine Marine Le Pen, or a successor, winning the 2022 presidential elections, given that the bulwark of French society remains deeply opposed to far-right populism and would likely vote for any other candidate at the second round. Nonetheless, a long-term process of political realignment is potentially taking place, particularly since no left-wing party is currently able to channel and build on the social anger and frustration expressed in the *gilet-jaunes* protests, or the pension reform protests. Macron himself is attempting to change his electorate from a majority of former socialist voters who supported him in 2017 to a more centre-right coalition, leaving larger and larger parts of the country feeling unrepresented. There are clear opportunities for the far right in this context.

There are three main lessons to draw from the French experience. Firstly, a socialist party, which has enough depth, diversity and credibility to renew itself, is a precious thing, which is sorely missed in France today. Secondly, the whole of French politics is diverging to the right in part because of a lack of European reform. Somewhat like Hollande before him, Macron staked his progressive promise on Eurozone reform, but this whole agenda has been stalled by intransigence from elites of other European countries, which do not realise the damage they are doing to the core social foundation of the project. Thirdly, quality and critically oriented civic education, concerning the history of French colonisation, religious diversity and the origins of the different political parties and movements, is uneven across the French territory. Both formal education and non-formal education needs reinforcement particularly in the northernmost and the south-eastern parts of the country where the vote for the Rassemblement Nationale is at its strongest. This unevenness in civic education is not a French specificity, but a problem that each European country faces.

Marine Le Pen is clearly already positioning herself as the candidate challenger for Macron in the Presidential

elections in 2022, and there is reason to think such an alternative at the second round is the preferred match-up of Macron as well.

The strategy of the Rassemblement Nationale is to be the only party in France criticising consistently and directly the government for lying and for grave errors, always with a suggestion of a conspiracy of the elites, at a time when other political parties (notably Mélenchon's La France Insoumise) are more moderated in their criticism. The Rassemblement Nationale attempts to link the 'laxism' of the state in dealing with the coronavirus to globalisation and Europeanism, and frequently makes (questionable) links between the 'gilet jaunes' and the people in the front line of addressing the health emergency. Altogether the strategy is to attempt to lay the basis for social anger to translate into votes for the far-right in the presidential elections.

Rather than address the Rassemblement Nationale directly, the government's strategy in countering the far right in the coronavirus seems to have been more focused on 'fake news'. The government launched a 'desinfox' website which claimed to only carry reliable sources of information from reputable media, but was quickly criticised for only carrying articles from Le Monde, Liberation, 20 minutes, France Info or AFP, and for barely featuring any articles critical of the government. The website was taken down after less than a week following widespread outcry amongst journalists. Altogether the exercise seems to have been counterproductive.

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The whole of French politics is diverging to the right in part because of a lack of European reform

## Hungary: the first country in Europe to be 'truly captured'

Hungary is the first country in Europe to be truly captured by a far right, populist party. Relying on his supermajority in the Hungarian Parliament, Orbán began to curb the powers of the liberal democratic institutions and to occupy them, as well as to concentrate vast powers in his own position. Within a year the Constitutional Court, the office of the President of the Republic, and the Chief Public Prosecutor's office were filled with people with personal loyalty to the prime minister. Media laws were rewritten to give the government full control over public media. The one-party-dominated legislature adopted a new Fundamental Law – and introduced a so-called 'System of National Cooperation'. The regime set out to centralise its control of municipalities, the school system, academia and culture. By these critical changes, the political opposition has become paralysed, and civil society organisations are under threat of official harassment. Hungarian society is struggling to come to terms with and resist a new form of political authoritarianism.

Hungary's story of the last decade reveals two important lessons and raises a fundamental question. First, the leading Fidesz party did not originate as a right wing party. Quite the opposite, it was once a centrist, liberal party of the '89 generation that gradually turned to the right and to populist nationalism until it became an authoritarian force. This demonstrates that the threat of the far right does not necessarily only come from the political fringes. But, lacking satisfactory checks and controls, it can easily be born in the centre.

Second, Hungary's case proved that the once unquestionable commitment to democracy in Europe has been waning. Neither European institutions, nor the complacent European political elite, were able to reflect sufficiently on what was happening in an EU member state; nor could they counter the populist nationalist turn that was first visible in Hungary. Polarisation and anti-democratic politics have been present in the West for a while. Yet, such phenomena were not perceived as a serious political problem until the year of 2016.

The question moving forward is whether the West will accept the idea that some of its countries want to be governed by a different set of rules. It is an open question whether the European Union can continue to function, or even exist, if its members do not share the



Zoltan Galantai

A Hungarian government anti-immigration poster

same principles limiting the exercise of power. In the response to Covid-19 the Hungarian government has been as extreme as it is dramatic. Orbán granted himself the freedom to rule by decree, effectively closing down Hungarian democracy. He already had a large majority in the Parliament itself and few constraints on his power. But he is using the Coronavirus to test what is possible. So far the response of the EU has been muted - a worrying sign, clearly, for the future of Europe.

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## Germany: 'the political landscape is changing rapidly'

On 19th of February 2020 a far-right extremist murdered nine people in two Shisha-Cafes in Hanau, and shook a vibrant multicultural community to its core. Right-wing extremists have killed at least 169 people in Germany between 1990 and 2017. But the response by Germany's security apparatus has been insufficient. Right-wing extremists in Germany are well-organised, well-funded and well-connected with ties within the police, military, and secret service.

The right-wing extremist party AfD (Alternative for Germany), currently the largest opposition group in the German Bundestag, been described as the political arm of right-wing terrorism in Germany. It serves as a focal point for the political ambitions of these right-wing extremist forces.

On June 2nd, 2019, Walter Luebcke, a high-ranking public official of the ruling Conservative party, was shot and killed. It was the first assassination of a politician by a right-wing extremist since 1945. Recently, the president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Josef Schuster, said "If there were coalitions with the AfD, I too would have to say: Now is the time to leave Germany".

In a famous lecture given in 1967, critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno discussed "Aspects of the new right-wing radicalism". In 2019 excerpts of the lecture became an instant bestseller in Germany. For many, Adorno accurately describes the behaviour and tactics of the AfD: "The far-right thrives on an unconscious desire for disaster. They hate democracy but pretend to be the only democratic party. Their beliefs and messages contradict objective reality. Today's fake news is yesterday's demagoguery. The substance of right-wing extremist politics is propaganda itself."

German politics reflects the difficulties of countering a party engulfed in paranoia that longs for the end of democracy. The frequently invoked *cordon sanitaire* around the AfD crumbles at an alarming rate – especially in the German East. The recent election of Thomas Kemmerich in Thuringia with votes by the AfD meant a seismic shift in German politics.

Angela Merkel's hand-picked successor within her own party, the CDU, failed at carving out a conservative agenda that keeps the AfD at bay. Conservative and liberal MPs now openly advocate for cooperation with the AfD. The centre is no longer holding.

There are three factors that provide solace and lessons for those confronting authoritarian nationalism globally. Firstly, civil society is mobilising and adapting and new alliances are forming to oppose the far-right. Secondly, no one is above the law: the AfD is in trouble for engineering illegal campaign donations and former AfD leader Alexander Gauland lost his immunity and is being investigated for tax evasion. Thirdly, there are openings for progressive politics. The Greens, positioned as the anti-AfD alternative, have consolidated their ascent over the past year. They also have strong links with the Fridays for Future protests that continue to rock German politics.

In the corona crisis the authoritarian right and its parliamentary arm the AfD have failed to find a unified response to the crisis. The party was torn between the usual response: radical opposition to Merkel's policies and the need to appear cooperative, as the electorate rallied around the governing parties.

With political and economic elites shifting the public debate towards reopening the economy, the AfD returned to traditional grounds attempting to replicate its strategy on the refugee crisis and the climate debate: accusing the government of dictatorial behaviour, fostering xenophobia and presenting itself as the only true representatives of the German people. Its leaders hope that an inevitable economic downturn, higher unemployment and discontent will enable the party once again to position itself as the sole mouthpiece of the frustrated and disadvantaged.

However, the political landscape is changing rapidly. A new party, Resistance2020, has formed in an attempt to cohere a political movement out of the loose coalition of right-wingers, left-wingers, anti-vaxers, and conspiracy theorists who take to the streets in growing numbers. This movement is powered mainly by the alt-media: right-wing bloggers, conspiracy theorists, and right-wing news outlets that were previously natural allies to the AfD's. Now these outlets for the first time differ significantly from the official AfD positions.

In the past the AfD has proven remarkably adept at fostering discontent and adapting its message to its base. It remains to be seen whether they can achieve similar results again.

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# WHERE DOES BRITAIN FIT IN?

## The Conservative agenda and Covid-19: what should we expect?

The combination of the coronavirus crisis with Brexit means that Britain now faces a perilous double-pronged crisis with far-reaching implications for how the country is governed. Boris Johnson leads a right-wing populist government hostile to democratic restraints and human rights protections. The “Vote Leave” veterans at the upper echelons of government are committed to a radical neoliberal restructuring of society once the UK is extricated from the EU’s regime of regulatory protections and standards. During the pandemic, Johnson has sought to project a unifying “One Nation” figure. Yet he is poor on policy detail and has struggled to present an image of effective - or even minimally competent - leadership. His tried-and-tested routine of breezy, flag-waving optimism jars with the reality of a crisis that has left the UK with the second worst death toll in the world.

Like other populist politicians, Johnson thrives most in an atmosphere of chaos and polarisation. This was fully on display in the run up to the Brexit deadline last autumn. Many were shocked by his illegal suspension of parliament, veiled threats to disobey the law and purging of 21 MPs from the moderate wing of the Tory party. In the subsequent general election campaign, the Tories threatened broadcasters over unfavourable coverage, avoided critical scrutiny and spread disinformation through the media. As he gave his post-election victory speech, Johnson stood in front of a large sign declaring that he would lead a “People’s Government”. In this approach, Johnson has been able to count on the critical support of a solid swathe of voters who have been mobilised by the Brexit culture war (see below). This is an ominous sign. As Milan Svobik convincingly argues, authoritarian backsliding occurs globally in a context of extreme polarisation where voters are willing to place partisan interests over the proper functioning of the democratic process.<sup>38</sup>

Johnson’s government has deployed the same tactics of media manipulation and deceit in responding to COVID19. We have seen inflated claims about levels of testing and PPE and the dodgy use of statistics. Major announcements have been given to a small select pool of

lobby journalists, rather than the House of Commons, while critical lines of media questioning have been shut down. In early June, MP’s were forced back to London to cast their votes in person after the Leader of the House of Commons, Jacob Rees-Mogg, abandoned a much safer and more practical system of electronic voting. While on the one hand the long queues snaking around Westminster seemed ridiculous, the result was to effectively disenfranchise all those MP’s who were shielding because of coronavirus.

Most worrying of all, the early failure of the government to introduce lockdown measures in line with other countries reflects the same disregard for established expertise and sense of national superiority that animates the Brexit project. Indeed, in an echo of the macho neoliberal discourse of Trump and Bolsonaro, Johnson’s early pronouncements referred to possible lockdown measures as “draconian” and even toyed with the idea of taking the virus “on the chin” as it moved through the population. Ultimately, of course, the sheer scale of the threat to human life led the British state to assume sweeping emergency powers. The Coronavirus Act 2020 gives the state power to intrude into almost every aspect of our lives. Many of these powers are no doubt necessary to deal with the virus and mirror those adopted in other liberal democratic states, but in the UK their use is not restrained by the checks and balances of a codified constitution.

Of particular concern is the development of a large-scale infrastructure for surveillance and data-gathering to deal with the pandemic under the apparent oversight of Dominic Cummings. The Prime Minister’s chief advisor has previously expressed an interest in China’s totalitarian “social credit” system which monitors citizens and assigns them a single numeric score based on their behaviour, linked to incentives and sanctions.<sup>39</sup> The AI firm Faculty - which worked on the Vote Leave campaign - has been handed UK government contracts to use personal data from across multiple domains as part of the government’s response.<sup>40</sup> A number of leading Tories are said to have financial interests in Faculty, consistent with a pattern of lucrative government contracts on coronavirus being awarded to companies with ties to the party.

38 Milan W. Svobik, ‘Polarization versus Democracy’, *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (10 July 2019): 20–32, doi:10.1353/jod.2019.0039.

39 “On the referendum #31: Project Maven, procurement, lollapalooza results & nuclear/AGI safety” Dominic Cummings, Dominic Cummings’s blog, 1 March, 2019 at <https://dominiccummings.com/tag/qian-xuesen/>

40 David Pegg and Rob Evans, “AI firm that worked with Vote Leave given new coronavirus contract”, *The Guardian*, 2 June, 2020, at <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jun/02/ai-firm-that-worked-with-vote-leave-wins-new-coronavirus-contract>

Over the course of the crisis, Johnson's support has plummeted in opinion polls thanks to the high death toll and his refusal to sanction Cummings for his flagrant violation of quarantine rules. Still, Johnson continues to enjoy a large 80 seat majority in parliament, along with the loyal backing of his MPs and the right-wing press. And while the ongoing public health crisis currently consumes government attention, we should not assume that the Tories have abandoned their core commitments to the centralising political reform agenda spelled out in their 2019 election campaign.

### **Reviewing the 2019 manifesto: dangers for democracy**

The Tory manifesto suggests that Johnson and Cummings plan to mobilise the frustration of Leave voters in pursuit of a new populist constitutional settlement that will simultaneously centralise power in government hands and get even with those who have stood in the way of their desired Brexit. The manifesto contains a chillingly vague promise to "look at the broader aspects of our constitution", squarely blaming Parliament for its "failure to deliver Brexit" and "thwarting the democratic decision of the British people". For many observers, the parliamentary deliberation and contestation which followed the referendum result were the signs of robust constitutional democracy in action. For the Tories, channeling a large section of angry voters, however, this was evidence of "chaos" and "paralysis" that proves the need to rebalance power in favour of the executive. When an ambitious populist leader proposes sweeping constitutional change to end the "chaos" of parliamentary procedure, it does not usually end well.

Danger (a): Constitutional reform. There is a long-standing critique that Britain's already centralised political system - in which the executive controls a sovereign parliament - functions as an "elective dictatorship".<sup>41</sup> It is possible for a government with a majority in Westminster to drive through sweeping constitutional change without the need to build consensual cross-party support, as is typically required in countries with codified constitutions. From what we know so far, a Constitution, Democracy and Rights Commission will oversee the government's reform agenda under the leadership of Michael Gove.

The Commission will examine the powers of the courts to review government action (the central point of contention in the two "Brexit" legal cases brought by Gina Miller). It is also likely to look at the use of parliamentary powers that MPs (with the able assistance of Speaker John Bercow) deployed to seize control of the Commons agenda, demand information and pass legislation to compel government action during the struggles over Brexit. The clear intention is to restore discretionary power to the Prime Minister, including - through the repeal of the Fixed Term Parliament Act - the power to hold elections at a time of his choosing. It is less clear how the government will approach the question of devolution and Scottish independence. In the face of growing political and cultural divergences between the nations of the UK - over both Brexit and the handling of the coronavirus crisis - we may yet see a rear-guard action by the forces of Tory unionism that attempts to erode and limit the powers of the devolved governments.

Danger (b): Human rights. The manifesto also contains plans for a clampdown on human rights and the status of unpopular minorities, including the traveller community. It talks of the need to "update" the Human Rights Act and administrative law to rebalance it in favour of "national security and effective government". Though little detail is given, there is a long-standing view on the Tory right that government should not be restrained by courts when it comes to detaining terror suspects without trial, stripping people of their citizenship and deporting people to countries that practice torture. According to the authoritarian nationalist perspective, rights are not universal entitlements, which protect the most vulnerable, but a privilege for the right sort of British citizen which the government (not judges) should be free to define as it sees fit.

Danger (c): Protest and participation. Weakened human rights law would also free the state's hand to crackdown on protest. This is something that the think tank Policy Exchange (with its close links to Gove and other leading Tories) has been calling for in response to high-profile disruptive actions by the environmental group, Extinction Rebellion.<sup>42</sup> An undermining of protest rights is consistent with other Tory commitments to criminalise

<sup>41</sup> Lord Hailsham (1976) Elective dictatorship: *The Listener*, 21 October, pp. 496-500.

<sup>42</sup> Tom Wilson and Richard Walton, "Extremism Rebellion", Policy Exchange, July 16, 2019, at: <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/extremism-rebellion/>

international trespass (affecting occupations and protests on private property), prohibit boycotts by public bodies and limit transport strikes. In an echo of Republican voter suppression strategies in the US, the government also proposes to introduce voter ID laws in response to the (miniscule) problem of voter fraud. This would have the effect of preventing many young, poor and precarious voters (who traditionally support Labour) from casting their ballots.

Danger (d): Anti-immigration agenda. The Tories will end the freedom of movement of people with the EU/EEA and replace it with a version of the existing points based system for non-EU/EEA nationals. This is unfortunately an uncontroversial part of the current trade negotiations. Both the EU and UK accepted in the existing Withdrawal Agreement that freedom of movement would end and now the Immigration Bill has passed its second reading in parliament. For EU nationals living in the UK the 'pre Settled' and 'Settled Status' schemes is not the continuation of rights they were promised and creates considerable uncertainty.<sup>43</sup> With Priti Patel at the Home Office a hardline approach to immigration is likely to be a feature of government policy in the years ahead.

These developments would be concerning at the best of times. At a time when Britain faces a series of profound shocks to its economy and governance, with coronavirus and Brexit, the situation is deeply alarming. Britain has a relatively long-standing parliamentary democracy and the country successfully escaped the dark spells of dictatorship that befell many European states in the 20th century. Its political institutions are resilient and it has a lively, contestatory civil society with a critical constituency of its citizens averse to authoritarian fear-mongering. At the same time, the country has failed to deal with its colonial past, is living with the huge social inequalities created by neoliberalism, and has deeply intolerant right wing media. The path ahead is a turbulent one and there is nothing intrinsic to the UK's politics that makes it immune from the kind of authoritarian backsliding we have witnessed elsewhere.

## Where are the British Tories going?

It might be hoped that the scale of the challenge posed by the Covid-19 crisis, and the urgent need for international cooperation, leads the Tories to move away from some of the policies that they successfully popularised in the 2019 General Election. While we would like this to be true, since the Brexit referendum the Conservatives have moved in a more authoritarian direction and reaped an electoral benefit from it. The British Election Study distinguishes between the traditional left versus right scale (defined by attitudes to the economy and distribution of wealth) and the values divide comprising what they refer to as a conflict between authoritarian and liberal social values (defined by attitudes to issues such as law and order and minority rights). Crucially, the study shows how the Conservatives used Brexit to win a swathe of voters that are 'left wing' in economic terms but also have socially conservative or 'authoritarian' values.

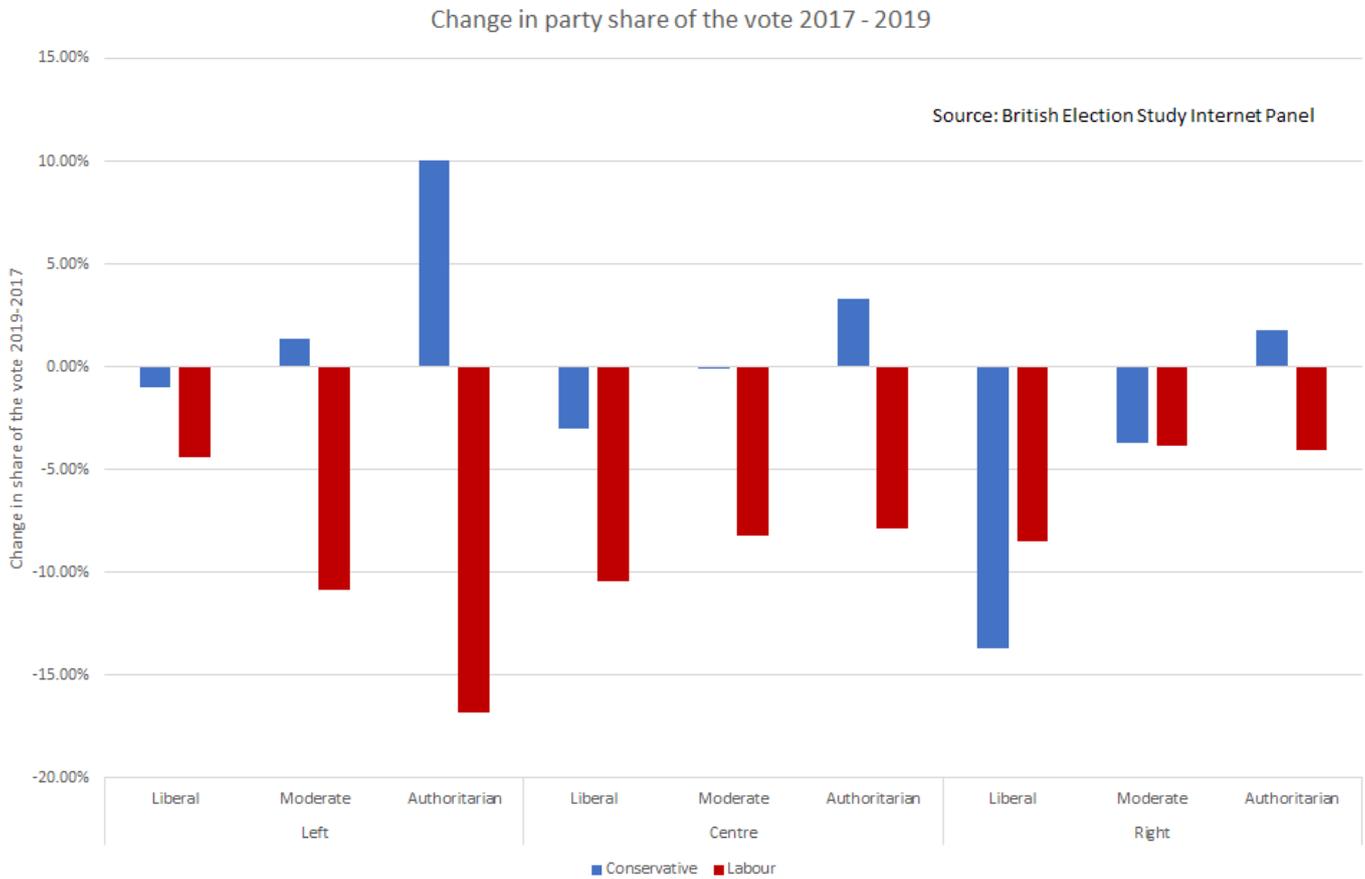
As data from the 2019 British Election Study put together by Paula Surridge<sup>44</sup> shows (see graph, next page), Labour lost many 'authoritarian - left wing' voters to the Conservatives this time around.

This suggests the Conservatives have a strong electoral case for continuing to go in the direction we describe above. Given that many in the party leadership are also ideologically committed to this direction, it would be naive to believe that, faced with the current crisis, they will not interpret it along the lines of their existing roadmap for Brexit Britain. They will, however, be electorally vulnerable to criticism from opposition parties on the economy and any issue raising social inequalities. If the 'left wing' Conservative vote judges that they are failing to uphold the interests of working classes in the crisis, it seems possible that they may switch back to Labour.

This is not an argument for conceding, however, to their authoritarian agenda. On the contrary, a robust, democratic resistance is needed. For figures such as Dominic Cummings, Brexit is part of a broader agenda to move Britain towards a model of political and economic development that combines considerable investment in infrastructure and technology with an authoritarian, nationalistic politics based on a strong, data-savvy state. The economic and social agenda has strong resemblances to the new authoritarians

<sup>43</sup> See <https://www.righttostay.org.uk/>

<sup>44</sup> Source for graph: [https://twitter.com/p\\_surridge/status/1235903843143213058?s=20](https://twitter.com/p_surridge/status/1235903843143213058?s=20)



internationally. It mixes deregulatory policies, such as support for so-called ‘free ports’ (islands of low zero tax and regulation), with Keynesian economic policies, such as increased state investment in infrastructure and services.

Many people fear that the government will use the chaos of ending the transitional period without signing a new trade deal with the EU to pursue this agenda. Given the huge and immediate economic costs this would entail for an already battered economy, we do not consider a ‘no trade deal’ 2021 to be likely. The outlines of a deal could involve staying in the single market for goods, but ending free movement, while continuing to talk about other issues.

Crucially, whatever happens with Brexit it is vital we resist the political agenda underlying it. The crisis in the United States provides a clear warning to Britain of where authoritarian nationalism can lead. It is not too late to change course.