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The Post-1989 Radical Right's Influence on Right Wing Extremism in Eastern Europe and the Balkans: A Comparative Analysis

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Alla mia mamma e al mio papà, a tutta la mia preziosa Famiglia, senza la quale oggi non sarei chi e dove sono.

A Roberto, il mio immenso Amore, per tutto ciò che ci dimostriamo fin da quando abbiamo desiderato di volerci l'uno accanto all'altra, in quelle famose scalette in Ateneo.

A tutti coloro che mi trasmettono da sempre affetto e sostegno.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AfD Alternative for Germany
BPNP Bosnian Movement of National Pride
CC Central Committee
CEE Central and Eastern European
DS Democratic Party
ERPs Extreme right parties
EU European Union
FAP Germany's Free German Workers' Party
FBiH Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
FN Front National
FPÖ Austria's Freedom Party
HČSP Croatian Pure Party of Rights
HDZ Croatian Democratic Union
HVIM Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement
ICTY International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia
IMF International Monetary Fund
JNA Yugoslav People's Army
LCY League of Communists of Yugoslavia
LDPR Liberal Democratic Party of Russia
LPR League of Polish Families
MIÉP Hungarian Justice and Life Party
MSI Italian Social Movement
MW All-Polish Youth
NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO non-governmental organization
NPD National Democratic Party of Germany
PiS Law and Justice
PO Civic Platform
PRL Polish People's Republic
PSG Movement of Free Citizens
PSL Polish People's Party
RAN Radicalization Awareness Network
RN Rassemblement National

RS Republika Srpska

RWE Right-wing extremism

SFRY Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

SFRY Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

SKJ League of Communists of Yugoslavia

SLD Democratic Left Alliance

SNS Serbian Progressive Party

SNSD Alliance of Independent Social Democrats

SPC Serbian Orthodox Church

SPS Socialist Party of Serbia

SRS Serbian Radical Party

SSPP Party of Freedom and Justice

UDS United Democratic Serbia

VRWE Violent Right-Wing Extremism

ZP United Right

INTRODUCTION

The collapse of communism did not merely mark the close of a historical chapter bur rather ushered in deep transformations, the consequences of which continue to shape the present. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the subsequent year across Eastern Europe and the Balkans, the political landscape of these regions has undergone a profound change. While the early 1990s were marked by hopes for democratization and economic liberalization, the transition to democracy was neither uniform nor linear, to the point of being defined as *illiberal* democracies, how Viktor Orbán defined his nation during a speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp in Romania, in 2014. Instead, many of these states experienced periods of political instability, economic hardship, and social fragmentation, dealing with the traumatic experience of the socialist regime transitions. Consequently, the communist past is sometimes viewed with harsh detachment, sometimes with circumstantial nostalgia, as expressed by the concept of *Yugonostalgia*. The existing literature on post-communist transitions often highlights the complex and multifaceted ways in which individuals and societies engage with their past and, in the meanwhile, with the legacy of their communist regimes – being an example the Hungarian Istvan Rév and its work *Retroactive Justice: Prehistory of Communism*.

This dissertation proposes to reexamine the communist transitions with the aim to better understanding the rise of the radical right after 1989 and its consequent influence on right-wing extremism. Particularly, it sought to interrogate how the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Balkans – specifically, in the case studies of Poland, Hungary, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina – was not merely a political rupture, rather a complex and multifaceted cultural departure, one deeply marked by historical trauma, contested memories, and a redefinition of national identities. This research shows that this era has been far more than a linear progression towards democratic systems – it has, in fact, been characterized by the emergence of *illiberal* democracies wherein the long shadow of the past, combined with contemporary political challenges, opened the door to the rise of the radical right and thus to the emergence of far-right ideologies. The thesis contends that the radical right has served as both a precursor to and a legitimizing force for more extreme right-wing movements, facilitating their institutional presence, when existing, and increasing their societal influence. In countries such as Poland and Hungary, the quest to reclaim national sovereignty and pride – rooted in histories of imperial domination and the legacies of Soviet control – provided fertile ground for nationalist populist movements. These movements, while positioning themselves as defenders of national identity, have increasingly propagated xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and anti-liberal rhetoric, thereby contributing to the evolution of right-wing extremism. Similarly, in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the legacy of communism intertwined with the traumatic breakup of Yugoslavia and the ensuing violent ethnic

conflicts due to the Bosnian War from 1992 to 1995, further exacerbating political fragmentation and deepening divisions. In these context, historical grievances and narratives of victimhood – it will be discussed how it will bring to a competition for "victim status" – have been mobilized by extremist actors to challenge the very foundations of liberal democracy and national unity.

This work is inspired by the lectures on right-wing extremism that I attended during my study stay in the Czech Republic, whose theories I have decided to read here in a more historical key. By reexamining the development of right-wing extremism within the broader context of post-communist transitions, this research aims to explore how the collapse of communism and the subsequent political and social upheavals created fertile ground for these ideologies to rise. This historical key allows for a deeper understanding of the continuity between the past and the present, highlighting how unresolved historical grievances, identity crises, and the contestation of national narratives have influenced the trajectory of right-wing movements, thereby offering a more comprehensive analysis of the factors contributing to the growth of the phenomenon in these regions. In reflecting on these dynamics, it may become clear that we are living in what can be described as a *liminal* era – a period marked not only by deep instability but also by the potential for profound transformation.

The study is structured in a progressive way along four chapters, leading up to nowadays right-wing extremism and security challenges to be faced for the countries under analysis, always considering the historical implications for each area. It draws on multidisciplinary approach, incorporating historical analysis, political science methodologies, and comparative studies to examine the evolution of radical right and extremist movements. Primary and secondary sources, including academic literature, political discourse, and reliable electoral data provide the foundation for this analysis. Hence, by engaging with these materials, this thesis contributes to the scholarly debate on the radical right's role in molding the contemporary political landscape in post-communist areas of Europe.

The first chapter contextualizes the historical and political causes behind the emergence of the radical right after 1989. It focuses on the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, underscoring how these events influenced the political landscape of Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Additionally, it delves into the economic and social transformations that provided fertile ground for radical right movements. Moreover, it analyzes key figures and movements that played a crucial role in molding the radical right during the 1990s, shedding light on how nationalist ideologies gained momentum in the region.

The second chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of right-wing extremism by exploring both historical and contemporary dimensions of the areas under this study. It examines the impact of global influences and the interplay between internal and external actors on the development of far-right movements. The chapter traces the evolution and quantification of the far-right surge from 1989 to the present day, situating this trend within a broader historical and socio-political context. Furthermore, it

offers a detailed explanation of what constitutes right-wing extremism, referring to its distinguishable features. Finally, it addresses the unique, country-specific challenges faced in confronting right-wing extremism across the regions.

The third chapter provides a country-specific analysis of Poland, Hungary, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, detailing the historical evolution of right-wing extremism within each state, through the lenses of historians such as Silvio Pons, Andrea Graziosi, and Norman Naimark. Through an examination of key movements, incidents, and contemporary trends, this chapter highlights the specific national conditions that have allowed for the expansion of right-wing ideologies, thus making a comparative analysis for each country.

The fourth and last chapter assesses the role of transnational influences, globalization, and security concerns. It introduces the concept of "globaphobia", referring to the fear, hostility, or strong opposition to globalization, based on concerns about its economic, cultural, and political impacts. Right-wing populist and radical right movements view globalization as a direct threat to national sovereignty. They often argue that global processes, especially those tied to the United States or supranational organizations, undermine local values and impose foreign norms. Therefore, this rhetoric frames globalizations as an existential danger that erodes the nation-state, hence fueling protectionist and nationalist narratives. Here it come the paradox: the two-sided relationship between "globaphobia" and globalization, from the moment that while criticizing, most of right-wing extremist movements leverage global networks, transnational alliances and coordinate activities across borders.

To put in a nutshell, the dissertation aims at exploring how the post-communist transitions, marked by instability, identity crises, and unresolved historical grievances, have created fertile ground for the rise of the radical right and the subsequent emergence of right-wing extremism, since it capitalized on these transitional uncertainties to embed itself within the emerging political order. By reexamining this phenomenon through historical, comparative, and multidisciplinary lenses, the subsequent chapters propose to illuminate how nationalist populism, illiberal democracy, and external influences have converged to produce the current landscape of uncertainty for democratic liberties in these societies. Consequently, it seems like nations under analysis along this work are more focused on apparently preserving democratic structures while, in reality, at the same time eroding their liberal content. This erosion is evident both in "how" and "what" is being done, the consequences of which refer, for instance, to restricted civil liberties and to non preserved minorities.

Finally, the above-mentioned dynamics are neither accidental nor merely historical remnants; rather, they reflect enduring patterns and tensions that continue to shape the region's democratic trajectory and, by extension, the broader European political arena.

CHAPTER ONE

The Rise of the Radical Right after 1989

1.1 The Collapse of the Soviet Union and the Shift to the Right

> Although there is a strong desire for freedom in the countries of Eastern Europe, there is no democratic tradition, so that the risk of anarchy and chaos continues to exist. Demagoguery and populism are rampant. We are the illegitimate children, the bastards of communism. It shaped our mentality.
>
> Adam Michnik, Interview, Der Spiegel, July 31, 2013

So as to encompass the rise of right-wing parties and the ensuing radicalism, it is first necessary to refer to the historical transition of the regimes of those countries belonging to Eastern Europe from the moment that the shift was not direct, rather a consequence of 'democratic fatigue'[1].

Hence, this section explores how initial hopes for democratization in countries belonging to Central and Eastern Europe gave way to disillusionment, thus fostering more centered and nationalist dynamics contributing to the emergence of authoritarian tendences in the region. These tendencies were often exploited by right-wing parties to consolidate and challenge democratic norms - such as the Hungary's Fidesz party founded in 1988 as an anticommunist party.

To evocate key historical glimpses, on December 8, 1991, the leaders of Russia, Ukraine and Byelorussia announced a new Commonwealth of Independent States. Consequently, on December 25, 1991, Mikhail Gorbachev, president of the Soviet Union and general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, resigned[2]. He rose to power in 1985 and shortly thereafter proposed his reforms of Glasnost and Perestroika. Gorbachev's intention to let the Soviet Union down the path of reform, and his decision to allow elections with a multi-party system and create a presidency for the Soviet Union, began a slow process of democratization that eventually destabilized Communist control and contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

To provide a broader historical context, however, the destabilization of Communist control in the Soviet Union predates Gorbachev's introduction of multi-party elections and the presidency. Key factors include the consequences of the above-mentioned Perestroika (economic restructuring) and

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[1] Pepijn, Corduwener, "The Rise and Fall of the People's Parties. A History of Democracy in Western Europe since 1918", *Oxford University Press* (2023).
[2] Matthew B. Zechiel, "The Death of Glasnost and Perestroika", *The Purdue Historian 11, 1* (2023): 1.

Glasnost' (openness)[3], which, while aiming to modernize the Soviet system[4], exposed systemic inefficiencies, increased public dissent, and weakened the Communist Party's authority. It hypothesizes that the fates of Perestroika and Gorbachev himself were determined by successes and failures in reforming the Central Committee (CC) apparat, whose resistance to change further hindered the effectiveness of these policies. Indeed, these reforms, combined with economic and political pressures, set the stage for the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union[5]. Moreover, behind the collapse lies a broader dimension of the economic, social, and ideological foundations of Soviet modernity, which could no longer compete with the capitalist[6] and, in some respects, neoliberal system, ultimately conceding defeat in 1991.

One of the most frequent reactions, both in the West and in the East, to the fall of Communism was the view that, from then on, nothing could block the progress of capitalism and democracy[7].

Consequently, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of Communism, many Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries managed to "return to Europe", this latter signaling the ultimate victory of democracy and rule of law over the legacy of totalitarianism in these countries. Nonetheless, other scholars argue that "democracies by their very nature are never definitely established', and hence the *Nations in Transit* report documented an "antidemocratic trend", a "democratic decline", "which raises real doubts about the prospects for widening the circle of democratic states in Europe"[8].

Under the circumstance of a weak democracy, how I would perhaps reductively define it as, the new democracies of the area are seen as particularly vulnerable and susceptible to a dictatorial turn, hence weakening an already "frustrated and disillusioned democracy". Ergo, the CEE countries surged a distinct form of constitutional democracy that is neither pure democracy nor full-fledged authoritarianism, but rather a "diminished" form of democracy, pervaded by strong authoritarian elements. This is why Ivan Berend, a leading historian of the region, asserted that those who expected that a decade of "EU accession" would lead to an irreversible break with the totalitarian past were simply naïve.

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[3] It is also important to recognize Gorbachev's point that Perestroika was a prerequisite for Glasnost. In other words, the freedom of speech and information was dependent upon restructuring. […] Thus, Perestroika, when applied to politics, was the liberalization of government and society. The need for Glasnost became readily apparent considering the level of repression of thought within the Soviet Union when Gorbachev came to power. […] Perestroika and Glasnost, while most certainly flawed in implementation, were honest attempts to transform Russia into a free-liberal-society (Matthew B. Zechiel, "The Death of Glasnost and Perestroika", *The Purdue Historian 11, 1* (2023): 2).

[4] These two policies were Gorbachev's attempt to introduce freedom to the citizens of the Soviet Union; an honest attempt to reform the "evil empire". Today, with the invasion of Ukraine alongside the blatant use of corruption, coercion, and conspiracy within Russia, it is clear the "evil empire" has returned to Moscow (Matthew B. Zechiel, "The Death of Glasnost and Perestroika", *The Purdue Historian 11, 1* (2023): 1).

[5] Gordon M. Hahn, "Gorbachev versus the CPSU CC apparat: The bureaucratic politics of reforming the party apparat, 1988-1991", *Boston University ProQuest Dissertations & Theses* (1995): iv.

[6] Capitalism in principle is a great eliminator of oppositions (Andre Foursov, "Communism, Capitalism, and the Bells of History", Review (Fernand Braudel Center), Vol. 19, No.2 (1996): 111).

[7] Andre Foursov, "Communism, Capitalism, and the Bells of History", *Review (Fernand Braudel Center), Vol. 19, No.2* (1996): 1.

[8] Bojan Bugarič, "A crisis of constitutional democracy in post-Communist Europe: "Lands in-between" democracy and authoritarianism", *Oxford University Press and New York University School of Law* (2015): 219-245.

Indeed, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were proclaimed to be consolidated democracies when they joined the European Union (EU) in 2004-2007, seeming to have workable constitutions, administrations, and markets, but then, since history is moving fast, things are perhaps expectantly changed.

However, political change in Central and Eastern European countries in the late 1980s and early 1990s has been beyond our imagination. It took only from several months to a few weeks for most countries in this area to change from one-party dominant authoritarian regime to multi-party parliament system[9][10]. Nonetheless, it is essential to contextualize that the transitions of Eastern European republics were far from uniform. For instance, Hungary and Poland experienced markedly different paths during the transition from communist rule in the late 20th century. Indeed, the case of Hungary, shaped by the changes introduced under János Kádár's leadership, as the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party attempted self-reform, differs significantly from Poland's transition, which was driven by the grassroots opposition of Solidarność. Founded in 1980 as a trade union, Solidarność quickly grew into a nationwide movement that challenged the communist regime. Unlike in Poland, Hungary's transition to democracy was negotiated. The government worked with opposition leaders to create a peaceful transition. Contrarily, unlike Hungary's top-down approach, Poland's transition was bottom-up, characterized by years of strikes, protests, and civil disobedience. The movement's resilience, combined with economic crises and waning Soviet support, forced the communist government to negotiate with opposition leaders. The 1989 Round Table Agreements between Solidarność and the Polish United Workers' Party paved the way for partially free elections, marking the beginning of the end of communist rule in Poland[11].
To outline, these contrasting paths underscore the complexities of the region's democratization process and highlight how diverse political, economic, and social factors shaped each country's trajectory.

Therefore, it seems to have come to the conclusion that the transition to radical right-wing and authoritarian regimes was not immediate, but somewhat the result of a process of disillusionment and frustration with the new democracies that emerged after 1991, which may be attributed to several factors, such as weak institutions and political corruption, economic hardships, cultural and social changes, unmet expectations, populist leaders exploiting frustrations, and so forth.

Along with to this democratic crisis, an essential factor behind the rise of the right must be highlighted: nationalism. In this regard, in many post-Soviet states and Eastern European countries, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the resurgence of ethnic nationalism. Nay, the collapse of the Soviet

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[9] In retrospect, the revolutions of 1989 that brought down communism in Eastern Europe seem to have been inevitable. By that year, corruption, economic decay and staleness of the ideology had become apparent to all. Poland was not exception. Suffering from years of divisiveness, managerial inefficiency and political corruption the communists had weakened their control of the country (Hongsub Lee, "Transition to Democracy in Poland", *East European Quarterly, XXXV, No.1* (2001): 87).
[10] Hongsub Lee, "Transition to Democracy in Poland", *East European Quarterly, XXXV, No.1* (2001): 87.
[11] *Ibidem*.

Union was caused in good measure by nationalism, that is, by the demands of the subsequent nationalities of the USSR for genuine independence and autonomy. In the shadow of potential war and violence, nations are being born and reborn[12]. However, according to Tamir Bar-On, a specialist on the radical right, nationalism is the master concept of the radical right[13]. Hence, the newly independent countries were often divided along ethnic or cultural lines, and radical right-wing parties used these divisions to fuel support.

In conclusion, the rise of radical right-wing movements in Central and Eastern Europe is deeply intertwined with the historical trajectory of democratization in the region. The disillusionment that followed the initial democratic transition after 1991, coupled with the resurgence of nationalism, creating fertile ground for the emergence of authoritarian tendencies. The role of nationalism, as both a cause of the Soviet Union's collapse and a tool for the radical right, remains central in understanding the region's political evolution. These dynamics were capitalized on by right-wing parties like Hungary's Fidesz, which leveraged nationalist sentiment and political frustrations to consolidate power. This will be further explored in a later section devoted more specifically to the rise of right-wing parties, in a radical way, in Hungary. For now, we turn to the reasons for the right-wing shift in former Yugoslav countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

1.2 The Dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Rise of the Right

At the beginning of the 1990s, Yugoslavia was marked by a massive political and economic transformation, as were all Eastern European states[14]. However, this section stands on a core premise, based on the consideration that in the former Yugoslav countries – such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina - the post-communist transition followed a different trajectory compared to countries like the above-mentioned Hungary, which experienced a phase of democratization influenced by the EU accession before shifting towards right-wing regimes. Hence, while Hungary initially underwent a (failing) process of democratization after the fall of communism – with the EU fostering the implementation of democratic structures – the context in the Balkans was way complicated due to war and entrenched ethnic tensions. Indeed, these countries saw a rapid rise of nationalism and authoritarianism, which had a direct impact on their post-communist political trajectory.

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[12] Ronald Grigor Suny, "The Revenge of the Past. Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union", *Stanford University Press* (1993): ix.
[13] Tamir Bar-On, "The Radical Right and Nationalism", *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (2018): 17-41.
[14] Đorđe Tomić, "On the 'right' side? The Radical Right in the Post-Yugoslav Area and the Serbian Case", *BRILL Fascism* (2013): 95.

Indeed, "the surprisingly stable support of the partly authoritarian-oriented political classes by the majority of voters stems from the specific situation in which the disintegration of the ethnic-federation and the birth of nation-states helps spread an ethnic-nationalistic attitude"[15]. Although this nationalistic sentiment among elites and ordinary citizens helped stabilize electoral democracy for several years, in the past two decades, political scientists have focused on the third or fourth wave of democratization. However, despite numerous studies on democratization worldwide, the region of the former Yugoslavia has remained largely unexplored in this analysis. The different reasons for this could include the difficulty to for a unified and consistent conclusion concerning this subregion. For instance, Slovenia proved to be a successful transition process, whereas Serbia is a fractious country and Bosnia and Herzegovina is, despite international support, still a highly crisis-driven country dominated by ethno-nationalist rhetoric and politics and with very unstable governing institutions.

Tracking the trajectory of this ethno-nationalistic rhetoric, it is proper to refer to the subsequent study to relate back to the rise of the right wing: "In the 1990s, the Balkan Peninsula was awash in nationalism resulting from the outbreak of wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. The attempt to create governments for the independent states saw mainstream parties become agents of nationalism; on the basis, they would probably best be classed as parties of the political Far Right"[16].

Therefore, the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s is deeply connected to the rise of right-wing nationalism, from the moment that as Yugoslavia broke apart, a vacuum of identify and authority was left, creating conditions for nationalism to thrive. Another point that needs to be emphasized is that with the fall of communism across Eastern Europe, including Yugoslavia, there was a rejection of its unifying ideology, and the right-wing populist rhetoric aimed at gaining appeal among populations feeling insecure in the post-communist era. Indeed, the degree of democratic participation slowly increased, and the elites used this limited participation so as to consolidate their own power[17].

However, understanding this process requires a more nuanced perspective. Indeed, Yugoslav communism had long charted a unique path, breaking away from the Soviet bloc as early as the late 1940s. This divergence was formalized in 1948 when Yugoslavia, under the Josip Broz Tito's leadership, was expelled from the Cominform[18] for refusing to subordinate its policies to Soviet directives. This 'schism'

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[15] Vedran Džihić, "Lessons from 'Post-Yugoslav' Democratization", SAGE *Publications* (2012): 240.
[16] Vera Stojarová, "The Far Right in the Balkans", *Manchester University Press* (2013): 1.
[17] Vedran Džihić, "Lessons from 'Post-Yugoslav' Democratization", SAGE *Publications* (2012): 241.
[18] To provide a definition, "the Cominform was the centralized organization of the international communist movement in the period from 1947 to 1956. It was in a way the successor of the Comintern. The name of Cominform comes from the contraction, in Russian, of the Information Bureau of the and Workers' Parties. The aim of the organization is to closely control the ideological and political evolution of the participating states or communist parties. Since 1945, the USSR had sought to expand its political power. The Cominform is thus created on October 5, 1947, on the occasion of the conference of the European Communist Parties of Szklarska Poreba, in Polish Lower Silesia, from September 22 to 27. The organization centralizes the link between the European communist parties, reinforcing the Soviet influence on the latter. Proof of the organization's Eurocentrism, Chinese and Vietnamese PCs are not invited. The creation of the Cominform by Stalin appears

marked the beginning of a distinctly Yugoslav model of socialism, one that blended centralized political control with decentralized economic policies and promoted the idea of 'self-management'. In other words, Soviet and Yugoslav Communist ideology have their roots in the theories advanced by Lenin. But whereas in the Soviet case the roots have become enmeshed with the tree itself to form the single doctrine of Marxism-Leninism, in the Yugoslav case the Leninist roots remain roots, with some of Lenin's theories incorporated into Titoist theory and others not[19]. Moreover, by rejecting Soviet orthodoxy, Yugoslavia positioned itself as a leader of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War, cultivating an image of ideological autonomy and neutrality between East and West. This point is essential to catch from the moment that this unique positioning allowed Yugoslavia to foster a sense of national pride and unity among its diverse ethnic groups. As mentioned before, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 19991 undeniably destabilized the region, but a key internal factor is Tito's death. It was a seismic moment that deeply undermined the stability of the federation. As a matter of fact, Tito had been not only the architect but also the central figure holding together Yugoslavia's ethnic and political balance. His leadership, often seen as authoritarian but pragmatic, provided a unifying force that suppressed nationalist tensions. Consequently, with his passing, the absence of a similarly strong and unifying leader left a vacuum, exposing the underlying fragility of the federal system. This sense of loss, both structural and symbolic, became a key theme in the collective memory of many former Yugoslav citizens. Regarding this, I refer to the concept of Yugonostalgia as describing the general relation to Yugoslavia, or the relation of the people from the former country; remembering the country could be extremely nostalgic for former Yugoslavs[20]. To sum up, the death of Tito is perceived as the first major breach in Yugoslavia's federal structure, signaling the beginning of its disintegration. Indeed, in the years that followed, economic crises, rising nationalist rhetoric, and the weakening of federal institutions further eroded the cohesion of the region, culminating in its violent dissolution in the 1990s. At this proposal, there are seven major types of arguments on the reason for the collapse of Yugoslavia: (i) the economic; (ii) the 'ancient ethnic hastred'; (iii) the 'nationalist'; (iv) the cultural; (v) the 'internal politics'; (vi) the 'role of personality'; and, ultimately (viii) the 'fall of empires' argument[21]. It follows an explanation of the points. The economic argument highlights how rising debt, inflation, and regional disparities created tensions that undermined federal stability. The 'ancient ethnic hatred' one suggests that deep-rooted historical conflicts resurfaced, fueling division, though this view is often criticized as oversimplified. The nationalist argument instead

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as a response to the American Marshall Plan, rejected by the popular democracies of Eastern Europe, under Soviet pressure" (https://schoolhistory.co.uk/notes/cominform-and-comecon/).

[19] Fred Warner Neal, "Yugoslav Communist Theory", *The American Slavic and East European Review, Vol. 19, No. 1* (1960): p. 43.

[20] To go deepen I would refer to the following study: Claire Bancroft, "Yugonostalgia: The Pain of the Present", *SIT Study Abroad* (2009).

[21] In relation to it, please refer to the subsequent source: Dejan Jovic, "The Disintegration of Yugoslavia: A Critical Review of Explanatory Approaches", European Journal of Social Theory 4(1): 101-120

focuses on the role of nationalist leaders and their rhetoric in mobilizing ethnic identities against the federal structure. The cultural one emphasizes differences in religion, language, and historical allegiances as factors that hindered long-ter unity. The internal politics argument points to the weakening of institutions and power struggles among republic leaders after Tito's death. The role of personality point examines how figures like Milošević and Tuđman escalated tensions through their policies and ambitions. Finally, the fall of empires argument situates Yugoslavia's collapse within a broader historical pattern of multiethnic states dissolving after the decline of centralized authority.

In the final analysis, what we need to keep in mind is that the fall of Yugoslavia opened space for nationalist and right-wing movements to reshape Balkan politics by tapping into fears of uncertainty and promoting a sense of ethnic solidarity. Indeed, movements like the Serbian Radical Party (Srpska Radikalna Stranka, SRS) leveraged ideological frameworks based on nationalism, protectionism, and identity politics, so that ideology became a tool to unite these groups. In other words, the nationalisms set in all post-Yugoslav states during the 1990s, became the ideological ground on which radical right groups could thrive their own political agendas[22].

The nationalisms rooted in the 1990s also shaped how post-Yugoslav states related to European institutions like NATO and the EU. Indeed, a historical glimpse to point out is that the Yugoslav conflict (1990 – 2001) influenced the development of nationalist ideologies and shaped the relationship between Balkan countries and the rest of Europe in profoundly different ways, according to each country's specific historical experiences during and after the war. For instance, for Bosniaks, who lived through genocide and benefited from international intervention, NATO and the EU are often seen as symbols of stability and protection. By contrast, in Belgrade, where the population endured NATO bombings during the Kosovo war (1998 – 1999) these same institutions are perceived as aggressors and enemies. Consequently, the legacy of the conflict and the differing relationships with Europe continue to influence how these states define their identities and political allegiances today.

Before turning to the ideological aspect of the radical right, I would like to echo a summing quote, which reports that: "To a historian, today's Balkan crises are rooted in, above all, the crippling dependence of all Balkan peoples on the ideology and psychology of expansionist nationalism"[23].

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[22] Đorđe Tomić, "On the 'right' side? The Radical Right in the Post-Yugoslav Area and the Serbian Case", *BRILL Fascism* (2013): 96.
[23] William W. Hagen, "The Balkan's Lethal Nationalisms", *Foreign Affairs: Vol. 78, No. 4* (1999): 52.

1.3 Core Ideologies of the Radical Right

Prior to dealing with the core ideologies of the radical right along this section, it is perhaps appropriate to first introduce the meaning of the "radical right" to better understand the ideologies underpinning this phenomenon. This taking into consideration that while ideologies share a common foundation, they vary widely across regions, resonating differently depending on each cultural and political landscape. For instance, to reiterate what previously analyzed, in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, the radical right frequently taps into ethnic nationalism and historical tensions, emphasizing cultural and ethnic homogeneity as safeguards against perceived external threats.

However, the radical right can be broadly understood as a political movement characterized by nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, three interconnected ideologies which, according to Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde, collectively define the radical right[24]. A brief explanation of these three terms is listed here: (a) nativism – a belief in prioritizing the interests of the native-born population, often expressing anti-immigration sentiments and promoting cultural homogeneity; (b) authoritarianism – support for a strict- law-and-order approach, with a focus on maintaining social order and hierarchical social structures, and finally (c) populism – a tendency to depict politics as a struggle between the 'pure people' and a corrupt or out-of-touch elite, framing the radical right as the voice of the 'real' citizens.

A new radical right since 1990s that needed to be contextualized within the post-industrial society and transformations of the welfare state. The contextualization made the new wave of right-wing parties divergent, defining them as radical, extreme or populist, the degree to which they represent a threat to liberal democracy and over the causes for their rise and continued success. Extreme parties were deeply researched by the Italian political scientist Piero Ignazi who, in the early 1990s, labeled the right-wing parties as extreme ones, distinguishing them in two forms:

(a) Parties with direct links with inter-war fascism[25];
(b) A new post-industrial extreme right.

The last one, differing ideologically from earlier versions of fascism and neo-fascism, and located spatially at the extreme of the political system, remaining an anti-system political force. And here we come to the bottom line: from the ideological point of view, the new post-industrial extreme right represents a counter post-material response to the so-called post-material revolution, fusing neo-conservatism with support

[24] Cas Mudde, "The Ideology of the Extreme Right", Manchester University Press (2000).
[25] For a more in-depth look at this topic, please refer to Matthew Feldman, and John Pollard, "The ideologues and ideologies of the radical right: an introduction", *Patterns of Prejudice (*2016): 327-336.

for authoritarian values (in opposition to post-material values) such as law and order and traditional family values, while opposing excessive immigration[26].

Consequently, the new post-industrial extreme right possess an ideology based upon core concepts such as nationalism and authoritarianism, keywords for the right-wing parties under our study. Along the first one, one may define nationalism as "the sense of belonging to and serving a perceived national community"[27]. A general consensus in the literature argues that ethnic nationalism – or what the above-mentioned Mudde beckons "nativism"[28] - is the master concept of the radical right. Indeed, in Tamir Bar-On words[29], it is important to stress that the radical right includes political parties, Internet sites, social movements, radio stations, intellectuals, and think tanks, all of which promote nationalistic or ultra-nationalistic discourses. Furthermore, he reviews that as the radical right's understanding of nationalism is ethnically driven, it privileges ethnic variants of nationalism as opposed to more liberal, civic variants. To point out this thought, Tamir Bar-On asserts that:

> "Ethnic nationalism is the savior of the radical right, its daily oxygen, and – without any disrespect to Christianity – its Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Without ethnic nationalism, the radical right would be deprived of its principal arguments […]"[30].

Although ethnic nationalism is shared by most of the radical right, the political scientist suggests that some elements of the radical right have increasingly stressed regionalism and pan-Europeanism. Nevertheless, to take a Tamir Bar-On citation, while the radical right might flirt with regionalism and pan-Europeanism, its bread and butter is ethnic nationalism.

In closing, ethnic nationalism is a defining feature of the radical right across Europe, where it is not confined to one country or region but rather is a pervasive phenomenon that can be observed in several contexts, *e.g.,* from the rise of far-right parties in Hungary, which emphasize the protection of ethnic Hungarian identity, to the Serbian nationalist movements that promote the dominance of ethnic Serbs in the Balkans, or still, for what is even closer to us, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the British National Party (BNP). From these examples I will get inspiration to write down a next paragraph pertaining to the main figures and movements of the radical right in the 1990s.

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[26] Piero Ignazi, "The Silent Counter-Revolution: Hypotheses on the Emergence of Extreme Right-Wing Parties in Europe", *European Journal of Political Research* (1992): 3-34.
[27] Roger Griffin, "Nationalism", *Contemporary Political Ideologies* (2003): 163-178.
[28] *vide supra.*
[29] Tamir Bar-On, "The Radical Right and Nationalism", *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (2018): 17-19.
[30] *Ibidem.*

1.4 Leading Figures and Movements in the 1990s

As witnessed so far, the 1990s marked a turning point in the rise of radical right ideologies worldwide, with key figures and movements influencing not only their domestic spheres but also inspiring counterparts in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. The 1990s marked the electoral breakthrough of populist radical right parties in Europe, a period in which these movements shifted from the margins to substantial political influence by exploiting issues such as immigration, globalization, and the perceived failure of mainstream parties[31]. This tendance was found in the Balkans, where Serbia's Radical Party[32], established in 1991 by Vojislav Šešelj and Tomislav Nijolić, embodied the intersection of ultranationalism, xenophobia, and anti-globalist sentiments that characterized the era.

This section is thereby focused on passing through leaders and movements that provided both political strategies and ideological inspiration, directly or indirectly shaping the narratives and tactics of the radical right in the area under our study. This because so as to understand the emergence and influence of right-wing extremism – covered in the next Chapter – it might be imperative to start with the ideological expansion and right-wing party leaders and movements, also in reason to figure out whether and what transition occurred to the point of speaking of "extremism".

During the 1990s, radical right leaders and groups were ideologically and literally on the right side[33]. In Russia, Vladimir Žirinovskij, founder of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) – in Russian, ЛДПР — Либерально-демократическая партия России – was known for his ultranationalist and provocative statements, embodying the radical right's rise in post-Soviet politics. His promotion of ultranationalism, anti-Western sentiment, and assertive Slavic identity resonated, for instance, with Serbian nationalist parties, particularly during the tumultuous 1990s. Indeed, to make an example, Žirinovskij's vision of a reasserted Russian empire paralleled Serbian nationalist aspirations to establish a "Greater Serbia", with territorial claims justifies by ethnic and historical arguments.

Yet influences or connections are not only from around the corner, rather, even from the other side of the world. And this is because I had introduced this section by referring to radical right ideologies worldwide. To provide a case, the American political figure associated with the Republican Party Pat Buchanan played a significant role in shaping right-wing ideologies during the 1990s. His influence in Eastern Europe and the Balkans is more indirect than the Russian case but can be traced through the wider international network of far-right movements and ideological exchanges in the post- Cold War era, referring to his nationalism, isolationism, skepticism of immigration and anti-globalization sentiments. His anti-interventionist rhetoric – Pat Buchanan was notably critical of U.S. involvement in the Balkans,

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[31] Cas Mudde, "Populist radical right parties in Europe", *Cambridge University Press* (2007).
[32] Abbr. SRS, in Serbian Српска радикална странка.
[33] Đorđe Tomić, "On the 'right' side? The Radical Right in the Post-Yugoslav Area and the Serbian Case", *FASCISM – Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* (2013): 113.

particularly the NATO intervention in the Kosovo War (1999) and earlier interventions in Bosnia (1990s) – had some resonance with nationalist factions in the Balkans, including Serbian nationalists who opposed Western interference.

Concerning the reality closest to us territorially, in the 1990s, the radical right in Italy experienced significant shifts, shaped by both the legacy of fascism and the political upheaval that followed the collapse of the so called 'First Republic' (1948-1992)[34]. As pointed out by Umberto Gentiloni Silveri, many historians have hailed 1992-1994 as a turning point that marked the start of the 'Italian transition', an all-encompassing term used to describe the collapse of the political and institutional structures of the first fifty years of the Republic and the gradual process of reconstruction of a new political and institutional model[35]. Indeed, the early 1990s saw the disintegration of Italy's traditional party system due to widespread corruption scandals revealed by the "Tangentopoli" investigations and the consequent "Mani Pulite" operation, known as the Clean Hands trial. The implosion of dominant parties like the Christian Democrats (DC) and the Socialist Party (PSI) created a political vacuum and delegitimized the traditional political elite, opening space for radical alternatives. Indeed, in 1995, under Gianfranco Fini, the Italian Social Movement (MSI) saw the sift into Alleanza Nazionale (AN), which attempted to distance from its fascist roots by embracing a more moderate, conservative image, thus appealing to broader right-wing voters. Simultaneously, the Lega Nord emerged as a major player and lastly, Silvio Berlusconi's entry to politics with Forza Italia in 1994 reshaped the right-wing landscape, forming alliances with both AN and Lega Nord, creating a broad right-wing coalition. However, beyond this brief but necessary parenthesis, the point is that the Italian right's shift towards modernization and mainstream conservatism – while retaining symbolic ties to nationalism – bears similarities to trends seen in Eastern Europe and the Balkans in the same period. For instance, the Fidesz or Hungarian Civic Alliance, shifted to a nationalist and conservative platform under Viktor Orbán in the 1990s, mirroring Alleanza Nazionale's strategy of rebranding to appeal to a broader audience. However, it is important to distinguish the specific motivations behind these shifts. Orbán's shift toward nationalism and his emphasis on anti-internationalism – distinct from an outright anti-globalist position – can be traced back to Hungary's historical context, particularly its rejection of communist internationalism. Unlike Western European far-right movements that often framed their rhetoric around globalization, Orbán's stance was deeply rooted in a specific historical memory of Hungary's past struggles against Soviet influence. Hence, this rejection of internationalism became a cornerstone of Orbán 's political narrative, which sought to distance

[34] The term 'First Republic' refers to the political system in Italy from 1948 to 1992, characterized by a dominance of political parties. For further study, please refer to Pietro Scoppola, "La repubblica dei partiti: Evoluzione e crisi di un sistema politico 1945-1996", *Il Mulino* (2007).

[35] Umberto Gentiloni Silveri, "Italy 1990-2014: the transition that never happened", *Routledge Taylor & Francis (*2015): 171-172.

Hungary from both its communist legacy and external influences that might threaten its newfound independence post-1989[36].

To come to the point, the 1990s represented a transformative decade for radical right-wing parties, globally. Figures like Vojislav Šešelj, Vladimir Žirinovskij, and Pat Buchanan, alongside movements such as the Italian Alleanza Nazionale and the Hungarian Fidesz, showcased how nationalist ideologies evolved to align with the shifting dynamics of contemporary politics. What must be kept in mind is that, probably, these leaders and organizations leveraged anti-globalist, nationalist, and xenophobic rhetoric to redefine right-wing politics, influencing domestic trajectories while inspiring ideological and strategic parallels across Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

This evolution highlights the interconnectedness of radical right ideologies during the post-Cold War era, setting the stage for extremism.

1.5 A Convergence of Forces: Economic, Cultural, and Political Drivers of Radical Right Emergence

Prior to moving on to right-wing extremism, figuring out what it is, where it most allocated and what has resulted from it, it is perhaps necessary to make one last parenthesis on the factors that contributed to the rise of the radical right, emphasizing how these dynamics interplayed and evolved during the post-1989 period. Indeed, the title "A Convergence of Forces" suggests that this emergence is not driven by a single cause, but rather by the interaction of multiple factors, such as economic, cultural, and political ones. This is way essential to understand because it better explains the reason why like many other political actors, the radical right is also currently expanding beyond national borders, creating cross-national links and establishing international cooperation[37].

Coming to the economic transition, one must highlight the impact of globalization; indeed, across Europe, globalization has led to deindustrialization, job insecurity, and income polarization. For instance, in Eastern Europe, always bearing in mind the post-1989 context, the transition from centrally planned to market economies led to significant industrial restructuring, with former state-run industries collapsed or undergoing privatization, causing job losses. This was a response to economic liberalization and the adoption of market mechanisms. Concerning Western Europe, deindustrialization had been underway since the 1970s, but the 1990s and 2000s saw a shift toward service-based economies, with the relocation

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[36] Vujo Ilić, "Orbán and Vučić", Routledge (2024): 19. Chapter taken from "Civic and Uncivic Values in Hungary: Value Transformation, Politics, and Religion", edited by Sabrina P. Ramet, and László Kürti (September 16, 2024).
[37] Manuela Caiani, "20 Radical Right Cross-National Links and International Cooperation", *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (2018): 394-411.

of industries to countries with cheaper labor becoming more pronounced, further eroding manufacturing jobs in Western countries. Therefore, in this context, income inequality grew due to globalization's influence, where Western Europe saw a rise in inequality, exacerbated by the global financial markets, and Eastern Europe faced a similar divide between newly wealthy elites and economically marginalized populations after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

As these changes began to have visible effects in the 1990s and 2000s, radical right parties capitalized on the frustrations surrounding economic displacement and loss of jobs due to global competition. Consequently, protectionist rhetoric became more prominent as political movements focused on blaming globalization for harming national industries, since the sovereignty of the nation state was weakened by global influences[38].

Turning on to cultural drivers, they have been critical in shaping the radical right's appeal, tapping into anxieties about identity, tradition, and perceived threats to cultural homogeneity. In Eastern Europe, the collapse of communism left a vacuum in collective identity; indeed, without the ideological framework of socialism, societies grappled with questions of national identity. Hence, radical-right movements framed themselves as defenders of national culture and tradition, contrasting this with globalization and Western liberalism. In the meanwhile, in Western Europe, radical-right parties presented themselves as protectors of heritage, often tying this to anti-immigration rhetoric. Indeed, immigration is one of the key issues of contestation in contemporary European politics[39]. In the Eastern European Region, though immigration levels were lower, radical-right parties adopted anti-multicultural rhetoric inspired by Western counterparts, portraying themselves as bulwarks against "foreign" cultural influences. These appeals resonate across different contexts in Europe, contributing significantly to the radical right movements in the post-1989 period.

For what concerns the political drivers, I mentioned at the beginning of the Chapter that in the aftermath of the Cold War, many countries in Eastern Europe and beyond transitioned to democratic systems, but these new democracies frequently suffered from weak institutions and political instability, and these conditions provided fertile ground for radical right parties to want to establish an order. In the interim, in Western Europe, a similar erosion of trust in traditional parties became evident as they struggled to adapt to global challenges like immigration, and the growing influence of supranational bodies like the European Union. Therefore, the fragmentation of the political landscape allowed radical right parties to gain influence in coalitions or as significant opposition forces, framing the above-mentioned issues as existential threats, and portraying themselves as the only political actors willing to take bold and decisive actions.

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[38] Ahmet Karadağ, and M. Nazum Uygur, "Globalization, Nation State and Radical Right in Western Europe: A Relational Analysis", *International Journal of Politics and Security* (2019): 1-2.
[39] C. Boswell, "European Migration Policies in Flux: Changing Patterns of Inclusion and Exclusion", *Oxford Wiley-Blackwell* (2003).

This dynamic emboldens far-right extremist groups, who interpret such rhetoric as validation of their cause, creating a cycle in which political radicalization fuels extremist behavior and vice versa. Let this serve as a prelude to the next chapter, which delves into right-wing extremism, with a particular focus on the regions of Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

CHAPTER TWO

Global Influence on Right-Wing Extremism in Eastern Europe and the Balkans

> Right-wing extremism is primarily characterized by a rejection of the fundamental values of the liberal democratic order, particularly equality, pluralism, and tolerance. It promotes the idea of an ethnonationalist order often built around the belief of the superiority of a particular ethnic, religious, or cultural group.
>
> Cas Mudde, *The Populist Radical Right: A Path to Exclusion?*

2.1 The Role of Internal and External Actors

An essential premise to initiate this section refers to the assumption that both external actors, whether states, transnational networks, or ideologically aligned movements, and internal actors, such as domestic political actors, national governments, and local socio-political dynamics, serve as catalysts for the radical right's growth in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Some practical examples will cover this section for the purpose of explaining this theory in a concrete way.

To start with a premise pertaining to Eastern Europe, the radical right's influence has extended to major parties in the region, and various governments have adopted parts of the radical right's agenda, as the current governments in Hungary and Poland illustrate.

One point to consider understanding why influence occurred – and still occurs - can be traced back to the subsequent narrative. Compared to Lipset and Rokkan's idea[1] of "frozen" party alternatives in the West, a very different kind of "freezing" occurred in the East with the disappearance of democracy and party competition in the interwar and postwar eras. Indeed, the party systems in the entire region today are characterized by low levels of voters' party affiliation and unstable cleavage patterns: the average membership for all Eastern European countries around 2005 was 3.04 percent of the electorate, as compared to 4.64 percent in Western Europe. Pursuant to the Professor Micheael Minkenberg's words[2], this reveals that Eastern European party systems are significantly under-institutionalized and thus function as fertile grounds for new and radical parties to succeed; most radical right parties in the region mobilize support along an ethno-cultural or ethno-nationalist cleavage. Moreover, even though countries preparing to join the EU before 2004 has to adopt and implement many EU laws, standards, and policies

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[1] Seymour Martin Lipset, and Stein Rokkan, "Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-national Perspectives", *New York: Free Press* (1967): 554.

[2] Michael Minkenberg, "The Rise of the Radical Right in Eastern Europe: Between Mainstreaming and Radicalization", *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (2017): pp. 29-32.

– the so known *acquis communautaire* – this process did not significantly limit the ability of the radical right parties or movements in those countries to operate, grow, or push their agendas. Hence, radical right parties were still able to find ways to thrive, build support, and influence politics. In this respect, the RR was invited to join various national governments in a coalition soon after the introduction of democracy: it is worth mentioning Romania (1994-1996), Slovakia (1994-1998, 2006-2010, and again in 2016), Poland (2005-2006), and Latvia (since 2011). To take the Poland case, between 2005 and 2006, the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland formed a coalition government with radical right groups, including the League of Polish Families (LPR) and Self-Defense (Samoobrona), to secure parliamentary support and maintain a majority in the government. This leads us to the conclusion that governments of the countries themselves may invite radical right groups into power, capturing that the external actors influencing radical right parties in a country can be both foreign governments and domestic political actors. The consequence to be taken into consideration for the next observations is that unlike in Western Europe, evidence suggests that the Eastern European radical right in government or in cooperation with other parties did not result in a mainstreaming of the radical right but instead in a radicalization of the mainstream[3].

Turning the point to external actors, parties like France's National Rally (RN), Austria's Freedom Party (FPÖ), and Italy's Lega have acted as role models for radical right movements in Eastern Europe. To take a more current example, the cooperation signed in November 2022 between the Austrian FPÖ and Hungarian right-wing actors like Fidesz to promote sovereignty and anti-EU sentiments, thus referring to Euroscepticism[4]. However, before getting into more detail, it is perhaps appropriate to point out what kind of influences are to be encountered when discussing external actors; indeed, while for internal actors the influence is more of interest – e.g., in the case of the above-mentioned government coalitions – the matter becomes somewhat more complex vis-à-vis external ones.

Hence, I would suggest three branches of influence as a helpful analytical framework since it allows for a further comprehensive understanding of *how* external actors contribute to the spread of the radical right, highlighting the multi-dimensional nature of influence. Indeed, it refers to the idea that external actors impact the spread and growth of radical right movements in multiple ways, not rather just through one level of interaction. The three branches are as follows:

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[3] Michael Minkenberg, "The Rise of the Radical Right in Eastern Europe: Between Mainstreaming and Radicalization", *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (2017): pp. 29-32.
[4] Eric Miklin, "The Populist Radical-right Freedom Party in the Austrian 2024 EU elections", *European Center for Populism Studies* (2024).

External Actors: Which Influences?		
IDEOLOGICAL	STRUCTURAL	OPERATIONAL
Exportation of narratives, values, and ideologies	Creation or reinforcement of organizational and institutional links	Practical and tangible support for on-the-ground activities

Since the ideological perspective has been addressed in the first Chapter – focusing on concepts such as nationalism, traditional values, and so forth – the emphasis will now shift to structural and operational influences, arguably the two ones that most led to the staging of right-wing extremism.

For what concerns the structural influence, it refers to the broader political, social, and economic conditions that provide the opportunities for radical right movements to thrive. Hence, this implemented the radical right to expand, often fueling post-conflict grievances exploited by the radical right movements. That is, to explain further, unresolved tensions from the Yugoslav Wars in the Balkans created structural divisions fostering the radical right movements and later extremism to flourish. For instance, in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the legacy of the Bosnian War (1992–1995) and the 1995 Dayton Agreement that ended the conflict created an ethnically divided political system where Milorad Dodik, a Bosnian Serb politician currently serving as the 8th President of Republika Srpska since 2022, used ethnic identity and division as political tools, thus he has used the autonomy of Republika Srpska as a means to promote Serb nationalism, calling for the Republika to break away from Bosnia and join Serbia[5]. In the meanwhile, Dodik has built strong organizational links with Serbia, thus reinforcing his claim that Serbs in Bosnia should unite with Serbia. Consequently, his efforts to push for the secession of Republika Srpska from Bosnia and his promotion of Serb nationalism are linked to the structural influence derived from the autonomous institutional framework established by the Dayton Agreement. This autonomy allowed him to build organizational and institutional links with Serbia, giving him the necessary political space to advocate for a Serb dominated political reality, creating a pathway for his rise within the Republika – anyway not officially under Serbia's control - and beyond.

Regarding operational influence, it refers to the practical and tangible support that external actors provide to radical right movements, enabling them to carry out their activities more effectively in the ground[6]. It often involves direct assistance in training, funding, and logistical support, allowing radical right parties to organize and mobilize more. A representative case is the Russian financial aid and logistical support to Hungary, when Russia supported far-right parties like the conservative political party Jobbik – originating with radical and nationalist roots - in Hungary and the right-wing populist political party Dveri in Serbia, reflecting Moscow's increasing strategic interest in supporting radical right movements

[5] Nađa Beglerović, "Milorad Dodik's Use of Contentious Rhetoric in (De)constructing Bosnia and Herzegovina's Identity: A Discourse-Historical Analysis", Uniwersytet Adama Mickiewicza (2020): 113-132.
[6] Michael Minkenberg, "The Radical Right in Eastern Europe: The Role of External Actors and their Impact", *European University Viadrina* (2017).

as part of its geopolitical agenda to destabilize the EU, NATO, and Western-oriented policies. Indeed, between 2015 and 2018, Russian state media – such as Sputnik and Russia Today – provided coverage of Jobbik, amplifying its nationalist and anti-EU messages. This is why one may assert that the most prominent extreme-right (paramilitary) groups operate under some form of Russian influence[7]. About Serbia, one must also mention the Serbian anti-government far-right group People's Patrol, which has quickly emerged as the most violent far-right agent of Russian influence[8]. What constitutes at this point one of the issues is that the relationship between the Serbian authorities and the far-right groups has always been pragmatic and tolerant, thus undermining national and regional security.

However, apart from a security component that will be briefly discussed later – while examining right-wing extremism in the more specific cases of Poland, Hungary, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina - it is pertinent to conclude this section by reiterating the importance of the influence exerted by both internal and external actors in the countries on the establishment of radical right-wing parties, often creating support that goes beyond what is expected, engendering violence and abuse.

2.2 Quantifying the Rise: Far-Right Surge from 1989 to nowadays

So far, the insights about the rise of the 'radical right' have been bibliographical, that is, literary. Therefore, for a comprehensive view, this section aims at empirical evidence, meaning I will be reviewing reliable graphs depicting the rise of the far right since 1989. Although the graphs are representative of Europe or the European Union member countries – for instance, Hungary or Poland[9] - depending on the chart, a major focus will be on the area of our interest[10].

Here an explanation of terms is essential as we delve into the rise of extremism originating from the radical right. In this context, I have chosen to approach the topic through the broader concept that encompasses the more conservative wing of the radical right, specifically the far right [11]. The significance

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[7] Zgut Przybylska, "Hungary: The pro-Russian Far-Right is Reinforced by the Orbán Regime", taken from "Russia and the Far-Right: Insights from Ten European Countries", *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) Press* (2024): 111-113.

[8] Predrag Petrović, "Serbia: Government and the Scarecrow", taken from "Russia and the Far-Right: Insights from Ten European Countries", *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) Press* (2024): 77-78.

[9] On 1 May 2004, the citizens of Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia became citizens of the EU (https://commission.europa.eu/20-years-together_en).

[10] About the specificity of the area – specifically for countries in the EU, like Hungary and Poland – reference can be made to "Mapping the Radical Right's Positions on Foreign Policy", an interactive map that serves as an in-depth visual and analytical tool to explore the positions of fourteen European radical right parties on different foreign policy issues. The map draws on the data and the findings collected in the compilation "Charting the Radical Right's Influence on EU Foreign Policy", supplemented by original research conducted by the map's authors (https://carnegieendowment.org/features/radical-right-europe-foreign-policy?lang=en).

[11] The term 'far right' is an umbrella concept used to refer to the '(populist) radical' and 'extreme' variants of right-wing politics. It is, by definition, a generic term used to identify and bring together collective actors located on the rightmost end of the ideological left–right spectrum, but it is not devoid of meaning because of this aggregative property. Although the term

of a deliberately generic but fundamentally meaningful concept such as 'far right' is motivated by the growing links between illiberal-democratic ('radical right') and anti-democratic ('extreme right') collective actors[12]. The far right, as a political category, is not monolithic, but rather consists of a wide range of all those ultranationalist collective actors sharing a common exclusionary and authoritarian worldview – predominantly determined on sociocultural criteria – while also reflecting varying degrees of commitment to democratic principles[13]. Here it follows the representation of the far right as un umbrella concept:

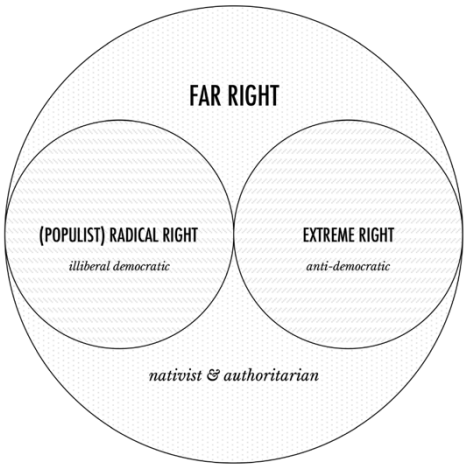


FIGURE 1 Visualisation of the 'far right' set, its constituent subsets, and their defining characteristics

After providing a brief but essential terminological explanation, the notes of which refer to a more detailed explanation, I will now review the aforesaid objective of this section.

As the site of the European Trade Union Institute presents[14], far right political parties have been on the rise across Europe since the 1980s, and one of the most striking indicators of the far-right's rise across Europe is geographic spread and increasing electoral success of far-right parties over the past three decades. To illustrate this trend, the following scheme[15] taken from ETUI site visualizes the expansion of far-right political influence across European nations:

evokes position and spatial location, it is also substantive as it refers to constituent parts (i.e. radical/extremist collective actors) discernible on the basis of their democratic/anti-democratic outlook (cf. Carter, 2005). Carter, E., "The Extreme Right in Western Europe: Success or Failure?" *Manchester University Press* (2005).

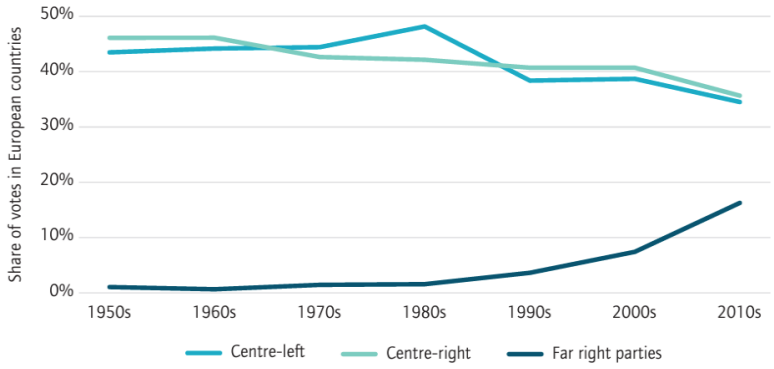
[12] Andrea L.P. Pirro, "Far right: The significance of an umbrella concept", *WILEY Research Note* (2022): 101.

[13] *Ibidem,* p. 103.

[14] https://www.etui.org/publications/how-counter-exclusionary-far-right-politics-progressive-inclusionary-agenda-equality

[15] Halikiopoulou D. and Vlandas T. (2022) Understanding right-wing populism and what to do about it, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

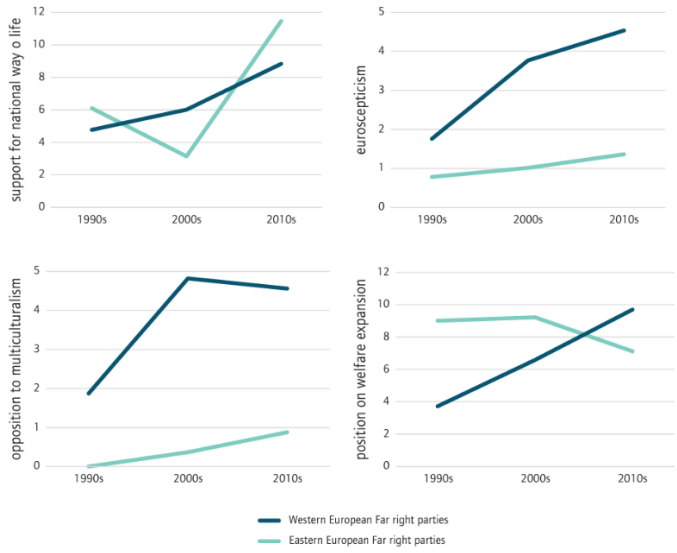
Figure 1 **The rise of far right parties since the 1950s**



The rise of radical right-wing parties is thus evident, albeit it appears to be not as influential at the percentage as the center-right or the center-left.

Aside from this general tendency, a focus on Eastern European far right parties[16] increase is followed, illustrating the general trends of *support for national way of life, opposition to multiculturalism, welfare explanation*, and lastly *Euroscepticism*[17]:

Figure 2 **Far right party manifesto emphases of National way of life (top left), opposition to multiculturalism (bottom left), welfare expansion (bottom right), and Euroscepticism (top right)**



About the (a) *support for national way of life* (top left), Eastern Europe shows a sharp rise in the 2010s, surpassing Western Europe, indicating a late but significant adoption of nationalistic rhetoric already understood[18] as lying on a largely ethnic nationalistic approach, focusing on ascriptive criteria of

[16] For an in-depth empirical analysis about the main theories explaining the electoral support for the European far right, please refer to "Mapping the European far right in the 21st century: A meso-level analysis" by Vasiliki, Georgiadou (2018). https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S026137941830026X?via%3Dihub

[17] *Ibidem.*

[18] In this regard, please refer to Chapter One, section 1.3 Core Ideologies of the Radical Right.

national belonging and mobilizing voters on socially conservative positions and a rejection of minority rights. Concerning (b) *Euroscepticism* (top right), the value remains relatively low, with only a modest rise that will be increasing in the subsequent years. Issuing (c) *opposition to multiculturalism* (bottom left), it starts much lower and remains minimal, showing a slight rise, suggesting this is less central for Eastern European far-right parties like Poland or Hungary, question that is instead fundamental for the Balkan countries, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. Lastly, regarding the (d) *position on welfare expansion* (bottom right), EE countries demonstrate a steady increase over time, indicating greater emphasis on welfare policies, likely tied to populist appeals.

In conclusion, the brief but concise evidence supports the claim that the far right has surged from 1989 to the present. This surge has laid the groundwork for the rise of right-wing extremism, setting the stage for more radicalized movements. Up to this point, we have examined the rise of the radical right, exploring its historical, ideological, economic, and cultural causes, supported by empirical evidence. From this point onward, the focus will shift to a deeper analysis of right-wing extremism.

2.3 Overarching Background of Right-Wing Extremism in the Region

This passage will explore the broad context of right-wing extremism (RWE) in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, i.e., the emergence and rationale behind it. Indeed, RWE in this area has had a strong connection to radical right ideologies, which, while not necessarily adopting violent or subversive forms, have created fertile ground for the emergence of extremist movements.

Hence, right-wing extremism has roots that trace back to the interwar period, when nationalist and fascist movements were influential across the region. Indeed, in the last 30 years, Europe has witnessed a surge in right-wing extremism[19]. Specifically, the radical right ideologies began to influence the rise of RWE in Eastern Europe and the Balkans after 1989, but RWE itself often emerged later, particularly as these ideologies evolved and gained more traction in the 1990s and beyond. Indeed, the post-1989 era witnessed the rise of radical right movements, which in some cases gave way to more violent and anti-democratic forms of right-wing extremism. To provide an example, in the 2000s in Serbia, the Chetniks – a Serbian nationalist and royalist paramilitary group led by Draža Mihailović that initially formed during World War II as resistance fighters against Axis forces in Yugoslavia - highlight how radical right movements transitioned from nationalist and anti-communist stances to more explicitly violent and anti-democratic ideologies in the post-1989 period. This movement, once seen as royalist resistance, became associated with a form of violent right-wing extremism that

[19] Mariana Tepfenhart, "Right-wing Extremists in Europe", *Comparative Civilizations Review* (2011): Vol. 65: No. 65, Article 8, p. 57.

advocated for an ethnically homogeneous Serbia, a vision that was in direct conflict with the more democratic and inclusive principles emerging in post-communist Europe.

Thus, the late 1980s and early 1990s marked a turning point in the region, as the end of communist rule led to a resurgence of nationalist ideologies. The collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Balkans was followed by a growing sense of 'ethnic revivalism'. In the case of Yugoslavia, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent breakup of the federation in 1991 were pivotal events that accelerated the rise of nationalist movements, such as in Serbia. The emergence of violent right-wing extremism followed this ideological shift, as groups like Chetniks in Serbia, and Bosnian Serb paramilitaries, became more radicalized, moving from nationalist rhetoric to more overtly anti-democratic and violent actions[20]. To give a preview of what will be explored in depth on the Chapter concerning right-wing extremism in Serbia, the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), by the time the war ended in the mid-1990s, had evolved into the face of right-wing extremism, with paramilitary actions and genocidal campaigns, such as the Srebrenica massacre, underscoring their violent opposition to the democratic reforms being imposed by the international community. Along with it, while Poland and Hungary have not experienced the same level of violent paramilitary activities as in the Balkans, the ideological shift towards nationalism – Fischer-Galati's words "Once again nationalism is the sine qua non for political success in Eastern Europe" - and the rise of right-wing populism in these countries represents a significant part of the broader post-1989 right-wing extremism landscape in Eastern Europe.

Moreover, right-wing extremists promoted an anti-globalization narrative that resonated with segments of the population disillusioned by the rapid changes associated with Westernization. They portrayed themselves as protectors of national independence, standing against what they claimed was the homogenizing effect of globalization, which they argued eroded unique cultural identities and undermined traditional social structures. In particular, the EU's emphasis on liberal values, such as human rights and multiculturalism, became a focal point for criticism among these groups. They viewed such policies as contrary to their vision of a conservative, ethnically homogeneous society. Similarly, NATO's military presence and its role in regional conflicts – such as the intervention in Kosovo – were interpreted by some as infringements on national sovereignty and evidence of Western dominance. This opposition to Western influence allowed right-wing extremists to position themselves as champions of the 'authentic' nation, offering an alternative vision rooted in nationalism, cultural preservation, and resistance to perceived foreign control. Indeed, their rhetoric often invoked

[20] Tea SindbÆk, "The Fall and Rise of a National Hero: Interpretation of Draža Mihailović and the Chetniks in Yugoslavia and Serbia since 1945", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* (20019): Volume 17.

historical grievances and fears of cultural dissolution, fostering a climate of mistrust towards Western institutions and further fueling the rise of right-wing extremism in the region.

In conclusion, from its roots in interwar nationalist and fascist movements[21] to its resurgence after 1989, right-wing extremism has evolved in response to changing regional and global dynamics. The collapse of communist regimes created a fertile ground for nationalist ideologies to reemerge, while the perceived threats of globalization and Western influence further improved extremist narrative. Having addressed the chronological and rationale aspect so far, the next section allows us to delve into what is meant by right-wing extremism, or, at least, tries to.

2.4 What is Right-Wing Extremism?

This section aims to provide an understanding of the right-wing extremism phenomenon, usually perceived as a specific ideology characterized by 'anti-democratic opposition towards equality'[22], while integrating various theoretical perspectives. Indeed, right-wing extremism (RWE) might be considered as an ideology that encompasses a range of far-right beliefs, often characterized by the rejection of democratic principles, hostility toward minorities, and the promotion of authoritarianism. Moreover, it typically includes nationalism, xenophobia, racism, and anti-globalization sentiments. However, this definition is merely conceptual from the moment that there are issues of contention amongst the different definitions of right-wing extremism/radicalism. Truth be told, there is a lack of a universal definition, and experts and practitioners have used various terms to frame VRWE[23].

However, there are two points on which most scholars do agree. The prevailing view holds that right-wing extremism, or radicalism is best understood as an ideology. While some scholars content that political style, behavior, strategy, organization, or electoral support can also define such movements, these aspects are generally considered secondary, as they stem from and are shaped by the underlying ideology. This emphasis on ideology helps explain why radical or extreme right parties are often grouped into a single, distinct party family characterized by ideological consistency and distinguishable from other political families. Secondly, there is consensus that this ideology is fundamentally *right-wing*; many scholars have turned to essentialist categorizations in discussing the

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[21] Quentin Liger, and Mirja Gutheil, "Right-wing extremism in the EU", *European Parliament Study,* requested by the LIBE committee (2022): p. 21.
[22] Elisabeth Carter, "Right-wing extremism/radicalism: reconstructing the concept", *Journal of Political Ideologies* (2018) *23*(2): 157-182.
[23] *Ibidem*, p. 161.

extreme/radical right's 'rightness' and have drawn in particular on the work of Bobbio[24] whose central argument is that it is attitudes towards (in)equality that distinguish left from right.

Still, these two points are embedded in a definition elaborated in 2021. In the latter year, a group of Member States of the European Union (EU) participating in a Project Based Collaboration on Violent Right-Wing Extremism[25] (Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, and Sweden) decided to adopt the following non-legally binding working definition[26]:

> "Violent right-wing extremism are acts of individuals or groups who use, incite, threaten with, legitimize or support violence and hatred to further their political or ideological goals, motivated by ideologies based on the rejection of democratic order and values as well as of fundamental rights, and centered on exclusionary nationalism, racism, xenophobia and/or related intolerance."

During the Project-Based Collaboration (PBC) works, it was underlined that a non-legally binding working definition at EU level is essential to identify, better understand, and acknowledge the extent of the problem, and thus help EU Member States to effectively address this common threat.

Hence, RWE might be intended as an ideology that "encompasses authoritarianism, anti-democracy and exclusionary and/or holistic nationalism". Therefore, while it is not a single, unified ideology, RWE typically encompasses a range of far-right beliefs that share common features with the radical right, and this is why of the title I chose for this work "[…] Radical Right's Influence on Right-Wing Extremism […]". These common features are generally defined as six, i.e., the strong state or authoritarianism, nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and populism or anti-establishment rhetoric. However, Mudde argues that 'the radical right is (nominally) democratic, even if they oppose some fundamental values of liberal democracy, whereas the extreme right is in essence antidemocratic, opposing the fundamental principle of sovereignty of the people'[27]. The subsequent figure confirms how right extremism is cut off from democratic order (see far-right box)[28]:

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[24] N. Bobbio, "Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction", *Cambridge: Polity* (1996).
[25] The working definition is a result of the work of EU Member States within the project-based collaboration facilitated by the European Commission. The works on the definition started during the Finnish Presidency in 2019 and finished in September 2021 during the Slovenian Presidency. For deepening, look at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-02/VRWE%20working%20definition_en.pdf.
[26] Mirza Buljabašić, "Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE", *Radicalisation Awareness Network - Publication Office of the European Union* (2022): 4.
[27] Cas Mudde, "Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe", *Cambridge University Press* (2007).
[28] Figure taken from **Figure 2.1** Model of extremism (Mareš 2003: 33, modified model from Stöss, R. (1999) *Rechtsextremismus im vereinten Deutschland*, Bonn: Fridrich Ebert Stiftung, p. 18)

Far Left			Far Right	
Left extremism	Left radicalism	Democratic centre	Right radicalism	Right extremism
	A constitutionally delineated spectrum characterized by democratic order			

Also, Skenderovic maintains that while the radical right embraces ideological traits characteristic of the extreme right's worldview, e.g. nationalism, (neo)racism and xenophobia, it does not share other key ideological features of the extreme right, in particular that hostility towards liberal democracy and its basic foundations[29]. The hostility of the extreme right toward liberal democracy stems from its rejection of core principles that liberal democracies uphold, such as equality, pluralism, individual rights, and the rule of law. Indeed, the extreme right often advocates for a strong, authoritarian leader who can bypass democratic institutions and procedures to enforce their vision of order and tradition. Indeed, Sartori's broad definition of the anti-system party includes the idea that "extreme right parties…exhibit an *opposition of principles* through a well-constructed ideology or a rather loose *mentality*, which undermines the constitutional rules of the democratic regime"[30]. Consequently, extreme right groups may resort to violence or intimidation to suppress political opponents, discourage voting, or disrupt public discourse. What is here imperative to take into account from a fact-finding and preventive perspective, is that its violent manifestation is a form of political violence that has fluid boundaries between hate crime, terrorism and atrocity (e.g., genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, ethnic cleansing).

Furthermore, the extremism that emerges from this violence often seeks to destabilize the political fabric of democratic societies, feeding into broader narratives of victimization ad societal decline. In this context, the fusion of radical right ideologies and extreme right tactics becomes a dangerous combination that threatens the very foundations of liberal democracy, creating a potent and growing challenge to both national and international security.

As Hannah Arendt insightfully argued, the rise of totalitarian movements often exploits feelings of disenfranchisement and alienation, which can be manipulated to cultivate fear and hatred towards perceived enemies. H. Arendt's concept of 'the banality of Evil' in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*[31] suggests that ordinary individuals can be drawn into violent political movements when

[29] Damir Skenderovic, "The Radical Right in Switzerland: Continuity and Change, 1945-2009", Berghahn Books (2009): 275-276.
[30] Giovanni Sartori, "Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis", Cambridge University Press (1976): 32.
[31] Hannah Arendt, "The Origins of Totalitarianism", New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (1951): 460-480.

they are presented with simple, binary worldviews that provide a sense of meaning and order. In other words, ordinary individuals, feeling alienated or powerless, may embrace extreme ideologies that offer simple solutions to complex problems, ultimately becoming complicit in acts of violence. This psychological and social dynamic underscores the importance of addressing not only the ideologies of radical right movements so far but also the societal conditions that enable such movements to gain traction. The intersection Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism and contemporary right-wing extremism highlights how these movements often thrive in environments of political instability and social division, where marginalized groups are scapegoated, and authoritarian rhetoric is normalized. Arendt's warning about the dangers of depersonalized political violence resonated with the current challenges of combating right-wing extremism, where individuals, under the influence of radical ideologies, may become perpetrators of violence in the name of a distorted vision of social order. Thus, understanding Arendt's theories helps illuminate the deep psychological and political processes that enable right-wing extremism to flourish, providing crucial insights for counteracting its rise and mitigating its harmful impact on democratic societies.

To sum up, the analysis of right-wing extremism reveals a complex phenomenon that intertwines ideological, political, and psychological elements. Firstly, the EU's working definition emphasized RWE's rejection of democratic values and promotion of exclusionary ideologies. While radical right movements share many features with the extreme right, they retain certain democratic elements, unlike the extreme right, which fundamentally opposes liberal democracy. Secondly, the role of political violence, as explored through Sartori's theory, demonstrates how RWE destabilizes democratic institutions. Thirdly, Arendt's theories help explain, in my own reinterpretative view, how extremist ideologies are internalized, leading individuals toward violent actions. In conclusion, addressing both the ideologies and societal conditions that enable RWE is crucial for developing effective strategies to counter its harmful impact on democratic societies.

2.5 Methodology: What are the Extreme Right Organizations?

Since the 1990s, right-wing extremist groups have proliferated, leveraging the political and economic upheaval following the collapse of communism[32]. These movements are here analyzed in the two regional contexts of our interests: Eastern Europe and the Balkans. What is historically essential to remind is that in Eastern Europe, the fall of communist regimes gave rise to nationalist and far-right

[32] Wilhelm Heitmeyer, "Authoritarian Temptations and Right-Wing Threat Alliance: The Crisis of Capitalist Societies in an Uncertain Future", Springer (2024): 20-21.

groups that capitalized on social and economic instability. National identity became a rallying point, often accompanied by xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and resistance to globalization. Differently, in the Balkans, right-wing extremism has been deeply influenced by the nationalist grievances and ethnic conflicts stemming from the Yugoslav wars. The legacy of war, genocide, and ethnic cleansing reinforced divisions and fueled extremist rhetoric.

Hence, while right-wing extremist groups share some general characteristics – such as nationalism, intolerance towards minorities, and opposition to certain globalist or progressive values, among the others mentioned so far – the historical motivations and socio-political contexts of their regions profoundly influence their nature and development. Consequently, the different historical nature also makes the motivations for the development of these movements distinct, reflecting the specific need and dynamics. Before discussing the right-wing extremist groups, it may therefore be useful to recap the different nature of these groups according to the area where they developed, as well as depending on their context. In this regard, I have come up with the subsequent table, mostly according to the above-mentioned information:

EXTREME RIGHT ORGANIZATIONS

Aspect	Eastern Europe	The Balkans
Historical Context	Post-communist transition	Legacy of the Yugoslav wars
Primary Focus	National identity, anti-globalization	Ethnic purity, territorial claims
Key Motivations	Economic instability, cultural resistance, anti-EU	Nationalist grievances, war trauma, ethnic rivalries
Target Groups	LGBTQ+, immigrants	Ethnic minorities (e.g., Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks)
Transnational Influence	Aligned with European far-right networks	Rooted in local ethnic and territorial disputes

In summary, while extreme right-wing organizations in Eastern Europe and the Balkans share overarching themes, their origins and motivations are rooted in distinct historical and socio-political contexts[33]. Understanding these differences is crucial for examining the evolution of far-right groups in each region. With this contextual framework in mind, we now turn to identifying specific extremist organizations operating within these areas.

[33] Refer to Chapter I, Sections 1.1, 1.2 and 1.5 for additional insights.

For what concerns Eastern Europe, from the moment the Berlin Wall came down scholars and politicians around the world expressed concern about an upsurge of extreme-right politics in Eastern Europe. Despite the general warnings about the rise of extreme right parties (ERPs) in this area, very little empirical work has appeared on the subject[34]. Consequently, the aim of my work is to provide an umbrella but essential context for understanding the importance of this phenomenon and the movements and organizations around it. Movements in Hungary and Poland for Eastern Europe, and Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina for the Balkans will be further developed in the next Chapters.

Post-Communist ERPs locate the source of their identities in the post-Communist period: these organizations are new, and their focus is on current political issues. Indeed, post-communist ERPs are the East European extreme-right parties of the future. However, within Eastern Europe post-Communist ERPs will travel different routes, looking to different geographical and cultural areas for inspiration. Namely, within countries belonging to the so-called "Western Christian civilization" – particularly in East-Central Europe and the Baltic states – post-Communist ERPs modeled after Western Europe have emerged. These parties draw political and ideological inspiration from contemporary (predominantly Catholic) Western Europe. Their platforms increasingly align with those of Western European ERPs, including informal collaboration with similar parties in European Union countries. Currently, examples of this subtype can be found in the Czech Republic (SPR-SRC) and Slovenia (SNS), while Hungary's MIEP and Slovakia's SNS are gradually evolving in this direction. Likewise, leading ERPs in the Baltic states also align closely to this model, although they remain primarily focused on addressing the post-Soviet challenge of substantial Russian minority population. Hungary, as mentioned, fits into this view as an example of a country where post-Communist ERPs have evolved along the lines of Western-style ERPs, thus drawing inspiration from Western Europe[35]. Also, Poland can be included in this framework, as it shares characteristics with other East-Central European countries that are part of the "Western Christian civilization". In this proposal, Poland's far-right parties – such as Law and Justice, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS) or smaller nationalist movements – fit the specific subtype of post-Communist ERPS modeled after Western Europe, from the moment that its parties also tied a collaboration with EU far-right ones. Indeed, Poland's far-right movements have participated in European Parliament alliances with other right-wing parties, such as Italy's Lega and France's National Rally.

Regarding to the Balkans, extreme right narratives have become commonplace in mainstream politics and are often used to mobilize voters, instill fear and shift focus from rampant corruption and state capture. Extreme-right movements in the region differ in their influence, structure, activities and ideas. While some have strict set-up, with leaders and activists, others are loose networks.

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[34] Cas Mudde, "Extreme-right Parties in Eastern Europe", *Patterns of Prejudice Routledge Taylor & Francis Group* (2008): 6.
[35] *Ibid.,* p. 26.

Furthermore, not all violent groups can be qualified as ideologically or politically extremist, and not all extremism is necessarily violent. However, to facilitate the comprehension of these movements in the Balkans, extreme-right organizations are identified, in relevant academic research, through two main categories, and at least one supplementary category[36]: (a) *Nativism*, defined as a radical, exclusionary form of nationalism, implying that the nation-state should be governed only by members of that one ethnic group. It also rests on the distinction between the good "us" and the evil "them"; (b) *Authoritarianism*, which is evident through its opposition to, or lack of interest in, liberal democratic principles such as constitutionalism, human rights, and the system of checks and balances, and (c) *Supplementary categories* include anti-Semitism, anti-immigrant sentiments, anti-Roma activism, homophobia, misogyny, historical revisionism, violence, far right ecologism, and others. These elements are common in ERPs in Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia, which are shaped by their unique post-Communist, ethnic, and historical contexts. A brief context, given the ethnic complexities in the Balkans - characterized by territorial disputes - is provided here for each country[37].

Montenegro

Montenegro, an independent state since 2006, has long grappled with divisions between ethnic Montenegrins and ethnic Serbs, as well as tensions between the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and the unrecognized Montenegrin Orthodox Church (CPC). These divides have fueled nationalist fervor, political polarization, and rising radicalization. The adoption of the 2019 Law on Freedom of Religion, which aimed to transfer some SOC assets to the state, escalated tensions, sparking mass protests and deepening societal divisions. In the 2020 elections, opposition blocs, including pro-Serbian parties, ended the long rule of the Democratic Party of Socialists, intensifying nationalist disputes. Montenegro remains committed to human rights conventions and monitors potential threats through its Agency for National Security.

Albania

In Albania, ultra-nationalistic narratives have emerged since the country transitioned from communist dictatorship in the early 1990s. New extreme-right groups, like Albanian Third Position (ATP) and Brerore, have gained attention in recent years. These movements, which are mainly active on social media, reject all political parties and advocate for the use of force to overhaul the system. They promote Albanian

[36] This is a recap of Chapter I, Sec. 1.3 (Pirro, A.L., "Far right: The significance of an umbrella concept", *Nations and Nationalism* (2023): 29(1), 101-112).
[37] BalkanInsight, "Who are the Extreme Right in the Balkans?". https://balkaninsight.com/extreme-right-organisations/about.php

nationalism, the unification of Albania and Kosovo, and other territories in the Balkans, and they oppose communism, globalism, and Abrahamic religions. Though their influence is currently limited, growing disillusionment with mainstream politics could fuel their support. No violence has been linked to these movements so far. The Albanian government primarily focuses on Islamic violent extremism, with laws criminalizing incitement to hatred and genocide denial.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Bosnian Movement of National Pride (BPNP) is an informal neo-Nazi group founded in 2009, promoting Bosniak nationalism along with white supremacy, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and racism. The organization advocates for a "pure" Bosniak state based on "blood and soil" ideology, rejecting multiculturalism and supporting National Socialism. Its members are opposed to Zionism, Islamism, Communism, Capitalism, and multiculturalism, and often express admiration for Adolf Hitler. They distribute anti-immigrant and white supremacy propaganda, and some members deny the Holocaust. The movement is highly authoritarian and operates in a hierarchical structure, emphasizing loyalty and sacrifice. It has also been linked to far-right movements like the Nordic Resistance Movement.

Kosovo

In Kosovo, far-right extremism has had limited influence so far, but tensions are rising, especially in the north, where ethnic Serbs and state security forces have clashed. Key issues fueling these tensions include the unresolved conflict over Kosovo's independence from Serbia and war crimes denial. In June 2023, two extremist groups, Civil Protection and the North Brigade, were designated as terrorist entities due to their aims to destabilize Kosovo. Kosovo's efforts to counter these threats include legal frameworks targeting terrorism, hate speech, and anti-democratic activities, and the government actively monitors extremist groups. Though Kosovo's ethnic Albanians are generally content with their independence, the Serb community remains disgruntled, which has allowed extreme-right movements from Serbia to exert some influence. While no significant political shift to the far-right is evident, Kosovo remains vigilant against these threats.

North Macedonia

In recent years, far-right views have been growing in North Macedonia, fueled by resentment over the country's name change to appease Greece and tensions between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians, as well as with Bulgaria. While some far-right groups have emerged, they remain small with limited influence, largely active on social media. The 2017 violent protest in parliament, led by extreme-right individuals opposing the election of a new speaker, highlighted these tensions. Nationalists also oppose the 2001

ethnic Albanian minority concessions and the Prespa Agreement with Greece. However, opposing these issues is not exclusively far-right, as some positions are seen as legitimate political stances. Despite their limited offline activity, far-right narratives have permeated mainstream politics, influencing center-right parties and religious organizations.

Serbia

A clear and successful example of a post-Communist ERP is the Srpska Radikalna Stranka (SRS, Serbian Radical Party), led and founded by Volislav Seselj in 1991[38]. However, despite the passing of time, contemporary extreme-right groups in Serbia are largely ultranationalist, with roots in the ethnic tensions following the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. These groups gained new momentum after Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence and have since centered their ideology around a "Greater Serbia." The far-right narrative gained further strength during the refugee crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea. Groups like Narodne Patrole and Levijatan have engaged in militant activities, including intimidating refugees and supporting pro-Russian stances, while others have fought in Ukraine. Although these organizations are often registered as NGOs to gain legitimacy, legal actions against them are rare, and convictions are typically weak. Several far-right organizations in Serbia continue to influence politics, including Chetnik groups, neo-Nazi factions like Srbska akcija, and the pro-monarchy Carostavnik Club[39].

After this descriptive excursus, it is perhaps good to summarize the above-mentioned countries in a table with some of the right-wing organizations next to them, in order to have an eye on the extreme right organizations and to answer the question of this paragraph promptly. The subsequent table highlights the organizations that emerged or gained influence in the post-Communist and post-Yugoslav contexts. These groups are associated with nationalism, ethnic tensions, and often xenophobic or anti-democratic ideologies, reflecting the socio-political dynamics and historical backgrounds of their respective regions:

[38] Cas Mudde, "Extreme-right Parties in Eastern Europe", *Patterns of Prejudice Routledge Taylor & Francis Group* (2008): 18.
[39] Some RWE organizations operate as formally registered non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Republika Srpska, exhibiting anti-governmental tendencies while advocating for national unity and ethnic purity, such as the Chetnik movement (Mirza Buljubašić, "Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE" (2022).

EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES	EXTREME RIGHT ORGANIZATIONS (EEC)	YEARS ACTIVE	BALKAN COUNTRIES	EXTREME RIGHT ORGANIZATIONS (BALKANS)	YEARS ACTIVE
Poland	Law and Justice (PiS), smaller nationalist movements	PiS: 2001–present	Montenegro	No specific extreme-right organizations named, but nationalist and pro-Serbian factions exist (e.g., protests, Serbian Orthodox Church tensions)	1990s–present
Hungary	MIEP, SNS (Slovakia), Western-style ERPs	MIEP: 2000–2014, SNS: 1990s–present	Albania	Albanian Third Position (ATP), Brerore	ATP: 2000s–present
Czech Republic	SPR-SRC (Czech Republic), Western-style ERPs	SPR-SRC: 2000s–2010s	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Bosnian Movement of National Pride (BPNP)	2000s–present
Slovakia	SNS (Slovakia), gradually evolving towards Western ERPs	SNS: 1990s–present	Kosovo	Civil Protection, North Brigade (extremist groups linked to Serbia)	1990s–present
Slovenia	SNS (Slovenia), Western-style ERPs	SNS: 1990s–present	North Macedonia	Far-right individuals involved in 2017 violent protest, social media activity	2017–present

Baltic States (Latvia, Estonia, Lituania)	Baltic far-right parties (similar to Western ERPs)	2000s–present	Serbia	Srpska Radikalna Stranka (SRS), Narodne Patrole, Levijatan, Chetnik groups, Srbska akcija, Carostavnik Club	1990s–present

In conclusion, right-wing extremist organizations in Eastern Europe and the Balkans have developed within specific socio-political contexts influenced by the collapse of communism and the disintegration of Yugoslavia. While some movements in Eastern Europe may draw certain elements from Western European far-right ideologies, many Eastern European organizations have their own distinct nationalist and anti-globalization motivations, often shaped by post-Communist transitions, historical legacies, and regional dynamics, particularly in countries like Hungary and Poland. Similarly, in the Balkans, right-wing extremism is largely driven by the ethnic tensions and historical conflicts arising from the breakup of Yugoslavia, with a stronger emphasis on ethnic nationalism, territorial disputes, and the legacy of war. Despite these variations, both regions share common traits, such as intolerance towards minorities, authoritarian tendences, and nativism.

2.6 Country-specific challenges regarding RWE in the Region

This section aims at highlighting the specific challenges posed by right-wing extremism in the region. As seen so far, nationalism, ethnic identity, and economic hardship are recurring themes across Eastern Europe and the Balkans, often fueling the rise of right-wing extremism in the region. However, while these factors are common to many countries – since they are intrinsic characteristics of right-wing extremism – the particular obstacles presented by right-wing extremism differ significantly based on each country's distinct historical, political, and social background. Therefore, each country faces distinct challenges shaped by its own past and political landscape.

Right-wing extremism, particularly its violent manifestation[40], is described as the spirit of the past that haunts the future[41]. Mirza Buljubašić suggests that transitional justice and peacebuilding initiatives should be tailored to effectively prevent and counter (violent) right-wing extremism. This because right-wing extremism is a serious and growing menace, not only because of its violent and exclusionary tendences, but also due to its ability to destabilize societies, erode democratic values, and fuel social divisions. As mentioned, while describing what right-wing extremism could be[42], at its core, this phenomenon thrives on a rejection of diversity, promoting ideologies of ethnonationalism, xenophobia, and intolerance towards marginalized groups. Its violence, whether physical or psychological, is aimed at undermining the social fabric and challenging the principles of equality, liberty, and justice that are essential to peaceful coexistence.

Moreover, the threat posed by right-wing extremism is particularly dangerous from the moment that it often exploits societal insecurities, economic instability, and political polarization, which can also lead to radicalization of vulnerable individuals or groups[43]. Therefore, to counter right-wing extremism, a multifaceted approach is necessary. First and foremost, addressing the roots causes of extremism – such as economic disparity, political disillusionment, and social fragmentation – can help reduce the appeal of extremist ideologies. However, many countries in Eastern Europe and the Balkans struggle with weak rule of law, corruption, and fragmented legal systems, making it difficult to counter extremism effectively. To support this, about the EU support for the rule of law in the area:

> "[…] While EU action has contributed to reforms in technical and operational areas, such as improving the efficiency of the judiciary and the development of relevant legislation, it has had little overall impact on fundamental rule of law reforms in the region. A key reason for this is the insufficient domestic political will to drive the necessary reforms.[44]"

International actors must also play a proactive role, providing technical assistance and ensuring sustained pressure on governments to prioritize reforms, but this is only rarely possible. Consequently, these structural weaknesses make it difficult to enforce accountability or implement preventative measures. Extremist groups capitalize on these gaps, embedding themselves in societies where institutional support is lacking. Indeed, one of the most pressing country-specific challenges in combating right-wing

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[40] In political contexts, the term 'extreme' is commonly associated with violence (Roger Eatwell, and Cas Mudde "Western Democracies and the New Extreme Right Challenge", Routledge (2004): 27).
[41] Mirza Buljubašić, "Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE" *Radicalisation Awareness Network* (2022): 16-17.
[42] Refer to Chapter II, Sec. 2.2.1, "What is Right-Wing Extremism?".
[43] Manuela Caiani, "Radical rigt-wing movements: Who, when, how and why?", *Sociopedia Research Gate* (2017): 8-9.
[44] Special Report on "EU support for the rule of law in the Western Balkans: despite efforts, fundamental problems persist", *European Court of Auditors*. https://op.europa.eu/webpub/eca/special-reports/eu-support-to-the-rule-of-law-in-Western-Balkans-01-2022/en/

extremism (RWE) is the lack of robust institutional support. Many nations in EE and the Balkans face structural weaknesses within their governance systems that make it difficult to implement effective counter-extremism measures. Without strong and accountable institutions, efforts to address RWE are undermined at every level, from law enforcement to education and community engagement.

Beyond these regional dynamics, challenges differ from one country to another[45]. I preferred to take into consideration the countries that will be object of deep discussion in the next Chapter. To start with Poland, it faces the rise of right-wing nationalism, often intertwined with anti-immigrant sentiments, Euroscepticism, and the promotion of Catholic conservatism. The government's tacit or overt support for nationalist rhetoric has emboldened extremist groups. In this context, Poland should collaborate with the EU and other organizations to strengthen counter-extremism policies, such as monitoring extremist groups and regulating online hate speech. For what concerns Hungary's right-wing extremism, it is fueled by government-endorsed narratives that promote anti-immigration, anti-EU, and xenophobic sentiments. Extremist groups align ideologically with the ruling party's policies, creating a blurred line between extremism and governance. Here, the EU should intensity its efforts to hold Hungary accountable for upholding democratic principles and combating hate speech and extremist groups.
Concerning the Balkan countries, Serbia grapples with unresolved ethnic tensions, nationalism, and the glorification of war criminals, which provide fertile ground for right-wing extremism. The state's reluctance to fully confront its wartime past exacerbates the issue. Collaborating with neighboring countries to address cross-border extremist networks may help contain the spread of far-right ideologies. Secondly, Bosnia and Herzegovina face deep ethnic divisions stemming from the Bosnian War, with political leaders often exploiting nationalist rhetoric to consolidate power. The fragmentation of governance and weak state institutions further hinder counter-extremism efforts. International actors should exert pressure on political leaders to avoid using nationalist rhetoric for political gain, from the moment that enhancing the capacity of law enforcement and the judiciary to address extremism is critical.

To conclude, addressing right-wing extremism in the region requires a multifaceted approach that combines domestic reforms, international cooperation, and community-based initiatives. However, beyond the immediate measures targeting extremist groups and rhetoric, it is essential to tackle the root causes that fuel these ideologies. Structural weaknesses – such as fragile state institutions, inadequate rule of law, and socio-economic disparities – must be addressed to prevent extremist narratives from gaining traction. Moreover, fostering dialogue and reconciliation at both national and regional level is vital to reducing ethnic and societal tensions. Efforts should also focus as well on education and awareness campaigns to counter hate speech and promote inclusive narratives, particularly among young

[45] Hans-Jakob Schindler, and Marcin Zaborowski, "Mapping of Violent Right-Wing Extremist Groups in Central and Eastern Europe", *GLOBSEC* (2023).

generations. Finally, international organizations, including the EU, must not only hold governments accountable but also provide support for democratic reforms, capacity building, and the strengthening of civil society. Consequently, through sustained collaboration and comprehensive strategies, one may assert that countries in Eastern Europe and the Balkans can build resilience against the growing threat of right-wing extremism.

CHAPTER THREE

Case Studies: Poland, Hungary, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina

Tvá vláda, lide, se k tobì navrátila!
People, your government has returned to you!
Václav Havel, 1990

3.0 The Crisis of Communism and the Post-1989 Transition

The crisis of international communism at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s marked a pivotal moment in global history. As Silvio Pons aptly observed, "Communism was many things together" [1]– simultaneously a political ideology, a socio-economic system, and a global movement. He further added, "[…] For a long time, it was a quintessential international phenomenon in its political culture, the geopolitical dimension of its movement, and the strategies and myths of the Soviet state"[2].

The collapse of communist regimes, from Europe to Africa[3] and Asia[4], revealed systemic vulnerabilities in a political project that had once claimed global influence. These vulnerabilities included economic stagnation, as central planning failed to keep up with the dynamic growth of capitalist economies; ideological exhaustion, with Marxist-Leninist principles losing their appeal amid widespread corruption and repression; and political inefficiencies, as communist states struggled to address demands for democratization and human rights. Indeed, its collapse in Europe, Russia, and Central Asia has only left room for political heirs who have either become marginal or undergone a democratic or nationalist metamorphosis[5]. At this proposal, communist regimes faced growing dissent from within, fueled by movements like Solidarność in Poland in the 1980s and intellectual critiques from dissidents in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Ideologically, the erosion of faith in Marxist-Leninist principles left regimes without legitimacy to suppress demands for reform. As Silvio Pons emphasizes, communism's global identity – spanning Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America – also meant that its crisis had far-reaching repercussions, from the decline of Soviet-aligned regimes in Africa to the political realignments in Nicaragua and Vietnam. Additionally, the growing inability of communist regimes to adapt to global technological advancements further isolate them from the rapidly modernizing world. These structural

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[1] Silvio Pons, "The Global Revolution: A History of International Communism 1917-1991", *Oxford University Press* (2014): xi.
[2] *Ibid.*, xii.
[3] See Allison Drew, "Communism in Africa", *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism* (2013): 285-302.
[4] See G.F. Hudson, "Communism in Asia", Sage Publications, Ltd. (1949): Vol. 5, No. 1, 43-53.
[5] Silvio Pons, "The Global Revolution: A History of International Communism 1917-1991", *Oxford University Press* (2014): xi.

flaws were compounded by external pressures, such as the arms race with the United States – which intensified throughout the Cold War from 1947 to 1991 – and the global wave of democratization, gaining momentum in the 1980s, particularly following events like the 1980 Solidarność ovement in Poland and the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall. These factors exposed the fragility of communist systems on multiple fronts. Concerning the external pressures for the collapse of the Soviet Union, Vladislav Zubok wrote[6]:

> "The international context was also crucial for understanding the reasons for the Soviet demise. The pressures of the global economy and the need for foreign capital, the sudden collapse of trade between the Soviet Union and East European countries after the decision to use hard currency as the only form of payment, and the persistent clash between Soviet domestic pressures and international commitments, the stance of the United States and the institutional demands of the international financial system, represented by the IMF, all contributed powerfully to the sense of urgency, the debates and the choices within the Soviet leadership, between Gorbachev and the anti-communist opposition, and between the center and the republics. In a sense, the end of the Soviet Union indeed can be conceptualized not only as a farewell to global communism, but also as the first major casualty of the new era of capitalist liberal globalization."

However, scholars have proposed two primary historiographical interpretations to explain the crisis of international communism and the collapse of its regimes in the 20th century. The first interpretation emphasizes the inherent structural crises *within* communist systems, such as economic stagnation, political inefficiency, and ideological decay. Silvio Pons, in *The Global Revolution*, underscores how these systemic flaws were deeply rooted in the inability of communist states to modernize their economies and adapt to global changes, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s[7], leaving them vulnerable to internal collapse. Furthermore, the crisis was profoundly ideological: communism, as both a political project and an economic model, had exhausted its ability to inspire and mobilize populations by the 1980s. Therefore, the 1970s and 1980s saw a significant erosion of belief in the communist system, particularly as the failures of economic policies became evident and the ideological foundations of the system were increasingly questioned, both within the Soviet Union and in its satellite states. Zubok underlined the inability of Soviet-type regimes in Europe (unlike in Asia) to adapt to the new challenges of modernization and globalization, or to overcome old ones such as nationalism[8].

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[6] Vladislav M. Zubok, "The Collapse of the Soviet Uion", from "The Cambridge History of Communism. VOLUME III. Endgames? Late Communism in Global Perspective, 1968 to the Present, *Cambridge University Press* (2017): 251.
[7] Niall Ferguson, Charles S.Maier, Erez Manela, and Daniel J. Sargent, "Shock of the Global: the 1970s in perspective", *The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press* (2011): 316.
[8] Vladislav M. Zubok, "The Collapse of the Soviet Uion", from "The Cambridge History of Communism. VOLUME III. Endgames? Late Communism in Global Perspective, 1968 to the Present, *Cambridge University Press* (2017): 250.

The second interpretation shifts the focus toward the role of democratic revolutions in driving change, particularly in Eastern Europe. According to this view, the collapse of communism was not solely the result of internal systemic decay but was significantly influenced by popular movements and the wave of democratization that swept through the region in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These movements, such as the rise of Solidarność in Poland and the fall of the Berlin Wall, were pivotal in challenging the legitimacy of communist regimes and demanding greater political freedom. However, this wave of democratization extended beyond Eastern Europe, contributing to the broader global shift toward democracy. In Latin America, democratic transitions were already underway with movements in countries like Chile and Argentina, while in East Asia, the People Power Revolution in the Philippines (1986)[9] exemplified the global demand for political change. These parallel revolutions around the world reinforce the pressure on communist governments to reform or face collapse, demonstrating that the fall of communism was part of a wider trend of democratization across the globe. In essence, scholars argue that the strength and persistence of these grassroots revolutions, fueled by the desire for political autonomy and human rights, created and irreversible momentum that led to the collapse of communist regimes across the Soviet bloc. Thus, the collapse of communism was deeply connected to the emergence of civil society and the strengthening of democratic values, which undermined the authoritarian structures of the communist governments. The fall of the Berlin Wall symbolized not just the end of a physical barrier but the collapse of the ideological and political foundations that had sustained Soviet power in Eastern Europe.

These two perspectives – the structural crisis and the democratic revolution – offer complementary insights into the multifaceted nature of the collapse of communism. While the first interpretation highlights the long-term, systemic issues that made communist regimes unsustainable, the second emphasizes the agency of the people and the power of democratic ideas in precipitating the downfall of these regimes. Ultimately, the interaction between these forces, rather than the dominance of one over the other, provides a fuller explanation of the dramatic transformations that unfolded in the final years of the Cold War. Perhaps neither the structural crisis nor the democratic revolutions alone could have caused the collapse; without the structural weaknesses, the regimes might have been able to suppress or manage dissent, as they did in earlier decades, and without the democratic movements, the systemic flaws might have continued to simmer without necessarily leading to collapse.

In analyzing the collapse of international communism and post-communist transitions, it is crucial to reflect on how these dynamics were intertwined with specific national trajectories, highlighting the peculiarities of the Polish case and, more generally, of Eastern Europe. The Polish case, as already mentioned, traces its roots back to the early 1980s with the rise of 'Solidarity', a movement that openly

[9] Larry Diamond, and Marc F. Plattner, "Democracy after Communism", *The Johns Hopkins University Press* (2002): 132.

challenged the communist regime and helped erode the legitimacy of the Soviet system in the entire region. Moving further into the historiography, I'd delve into the importance of a case such as that of Hungary, examined by István Rév, in its work *Retroactive Justice: Prehistory of Post-Communism*.

About the fall of communism in Hungary - more specifically, in Budapest, from the moment that "Hungary is a hopelessly country, where Budapest is the only real urban center on a European scale, where everything happens in that single city. Either you lived in Budapest during the Communist times, or you did not live anywhere"[10] – the above-mentioned scholar wrote down:

> "In 1989, without due forewarning, the State Socialist regime, the party-state, together with the protecting iron curtain and the Berlin Wall, fell, and the country found itself once again in an unknown world. […] In that year the past fell to pieces and became extinct. Millions, hundreds of millions of people in the former Communist world became lost; they lost their future because they lost their past."[11]

He then added:

> "In Hungary there was no revolution in 1989, not even a velvet one, as in Prague. There were no strikes, no large-scale demonstrations, no signs of massive popular unrest. Hungarians skeptically watched the not-so-dramatic suicide of the system. […] The only event that was, and still is, considered in a strange way as crucial was the reburial of the revolutionary prime minister Imre Nagy on June 16, 1989."[12]

Therefore, what Rév wants to underline, is that the end of Communism just happened to the people without having been able to participate in the historic changes. Indeed, he argues that the very figures who upheld the communist system – members of the *nomenklatura*, the military, and the secret police – ultimately contributed to its downfall, largely due to their failure to anticipate the rapid collapse of the regime. Therefore, their inability to react effectively to unfolding events not only accelerated the transition but also, paradoxically, lent credence to the far-right narrative of a "stolen revolution". According to this perspective, the transition was not the result of a genuine democratic uprising but rather a process influenced, if not orchestrated, by elements within the old system who sought to maintain power in a new political framework. At this proposal, he wrote:

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[10] István Rév, "Retroactive Justice: Prehistory of Post-Communism", *Stanford University Press* (2005): 4.
[11] *Ibid.,* 6-7-8.
[12] *Ibid*., 30.

> "The peaceful nature of the changes, which differed so much from the familiar notions of revolutions (that is radical, sudden, often violent, led by a group of well-organized, usually conspiring cadres), made it difficult to believe that what had taken before the eyes of contemporaries was real and not staged. Hungary was no exception: after the changes, accusations arose about the "stolen" or "unfinished" revolution. In particular, groups from the extreme right of the political spectrum accused the post-Communist elite of alleged collaboration with the Communist secret police and the nomenclature."[13]

Hence, according to these allegations, communist elites deliberately consented to a peaceful transition to safeguard their economic interests. By leveraging the privatization process, they ensured their own financial dominance, transforming themselves into "robber barons" and key figures in the emerging market economy. In this view, their continued economic power was the trade-off for relinquishing their former political leadership. To sum up, there was tacit collaboration between members of the democratic opposition and the secret services so to led to a peaceful transition. The failure to use force in defense of the Communist rule, the author argued, is presented as crucial evidence in support of the argument. However, Rév later wrote that the outcome, the transition, turned out to be in large part the result of the interplay of concurrent, unplanned events. To say, it was in large part due to the memory of the bloody and tragic revolution – the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, a major anti-Soviet uprising that was brutally suppressed by Soviet forces – that the transition in Hungary could take place without bloodshed, in a peaceful, sad, and almost dignified way. An in this process, unexpectedly, without proper knowledge pf what they were doing, the secret police collaborated with the opposition to the regime. In a strange way, the peaceful transition was the *post mortem*, late – for too many too late – victory of revolution[14].

To put in a nutshell, the Hungarian transition from communism in 1989 was marked by an absence of revolutionary upheaval. Indeed, Garton-Ash wrote:

> "Even in Poland and Hungary, what was happening could still hardly be described as revolution. It was in fact, a mixture of reform and revolution. At the time, I called it 'refolution'. There was a strong and essential element of change 'from above', led by an enlightened minority in the still ruling communist parties. But there was also a vital element of popular pressure 'from below'. In Hungary, there was rather more of the former, in Polan of the latter, yet in both countries the story was that of an interaction between the two. The

[13] István Rév, "Retroactive Justice: Prehistory of Post-Communism", *Stanford University Press* (2005): 310-311.
[14] *Ibid.,* 334-335.

interaction was, however, largely mediate by negotiations between ruling and opposition élites"[15].

Unlike Poland's Solidarity movement or Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution[16], Hungary experienced a large passive shift, where the collapse of the regime seemed to "happen" rather than be actively driven by mass mobilization. Istvan Rév highlights this peculiarity, arguing that the transition was not the product of an organized democratic uprising but rather the interplay of unexpected and unplanned events, giving rise to accusations from the far right of a "stolen revolution". Hungary thus took a different order from Poland. In effect, it had multi-party politics before it had democracy. Garton Ash added that the government had multi-party politics before it had democracy. The government was still largely composed of members of the old-new Party. Poland, by contrast, had a largely non-communist government, but limited, popular front, coalition politics. However, in Hungary, there was perhaps no single moment in 1989 quite so decisive as the election of 4 June in Poland[17].

The Polish transition from communism was set in motion long before 1989, with roots tracing back to the emergence of the Solidarity movement in the early 1980s. Also, the Soviet Union under Gorbachev had abandoned military interventions in Eastern Europe, letting Poland's Solidarity movement rise. In Garton Ash's words: "Here the story of 1989 cannot be understood without reference to the largest and most sustained popular 'push' in the history of communist Eastern Europe, that of Solidarity since 1980"[18]. Unlike in Hungary, where the regime's collapse was largely shaped by internal elite negotiations and an absence of mass mobilization, Poland's shift away from communism was the result of prolonged negotiations and resistance, shaped by an organized opposition deeply embedded within society. Indeed, the history of the Polish People's Republic is framed largely by the drama of Polish resistance. One may remind of five dates of popular struggle against communism: 1956 (Poznań Uprising), 1968 (student protests and antisemitic purge), 1970 (Gdańsk and Baltic Coast Strikes), 1976 (Random and Ursus protests), and 1980 (Solidarity movement). At least until recently, every Pole knew the meaning of this litany of dates and could connect them to the seemingly inevitable fall of communism[19]. Indeed, the events of those years seem to accelerate and build on one another until they culminate in the victory of a presumably informed and organized society in 1988-1989. Andrea Graziosi pointed out:

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[15] Timothy Garton Ash, "The Magic Lantern. The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague", *Vintage Books a Division of Random House, Inc. New York* (1993): 5.
[16] For more details, refer to Bernard Wheaton, "The Velvet Revolution: Czechoslovakia, 1988-1991", *Routledge* (1992).
[17] Timothy Garton Ash, "The Magic Lantern. The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague", *Vintage Books a Division of Random House, Inc. New York* (1993): 35.
[18] *Ibid.*, 6.
[19] Padraic Kenney, "The Gender of Resistance in Communist Poland", *The American Historical Review* (1999): Volume 104, Issue 2, 399-400.

> "At the beginning of June, while the Congress was in session, Solidarity triumphed in the Polish elections, alarming even more the defenders of the past, Eastern European leaders included, who welcomed the Chinese decision to repress the demonstrations in Tian-An-Men Square with tanks. The use of force was thus confirmed as the main possible prop for regimes whose unpopularity had just been confirmed by the Polish elections, but the Soviet leadership thought otherwise."[20]

The reference to the beginning of June in this passage likely refers to June 1989, which is when Solidarity triumphed in the partially free elections held in Poland. These elections marked a significant turning point in Eastern Europe, as they led to the eventual collapse of the communist regime in Poland. Recalling Garton Ash, he sustained that "the end of communism in Poland followed directly from the free vote of the Polish people on that glorious fourth of June"[21]. These elections were the first time in forty-four years that the Polish people were allowed to vote freely for many seats in the legislature. So, while Solidarity emerged in 1980, the June 1989 elections were the true electoral triumph that dramatically shifted the political landscape in Poland and helped spark the larger collapse of communism in Eastern Europe.

According to Habermas, Furet, and many others, 1989 was not the world made new, but the restoration of a world once lost[22]. I mean, these political transformations were not solely driven by a desire to break from communism, but also by an effort to reclaim or restore the political traditions, national identities, and historical narratives that had been repressed under communist rule. In countries like Hungary and Poland, the collapse of communism created an opportunity for political elites and popular movements alike to reconnect with historical symbols and values that were deeply rooted in the national consciousness, but which had been marginalized or erased by the communist regimes. The transition was not just a forward-looking process of democratization; it was also a backward-looking process of restoring a sense of national continuity that communism had sought to disrupt.

Differently, in the Balkans, the destruction of Tito's country had its own fearsome internal dynamic. Yet the end of communism in Central Europe certainly precipitated the end of the party that had held Yugoslavia together. The Yugoslav League of Communists was effectively dissolved at its Fourteenth Special Congress in January 1990. In the spring of 1991, Yugoslavia entered another stage in the irreversible process of its dissolution. The parties began to make concrete preparations for war. Anyone closely observing the situation at the time could already sense that country was headed toward a highly explosive conflict. It is hard to imagine the subsequent bloody dismemberment of Yugoslavia – which had embroiled NATO in a European war – unfolding in the same way if still there had been a

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[20] Andrea Graziosi, "L'Unione Sovietica: 1914-1991", *il Mulino* (2011): 360-361.
[21] Timothy Garton Ash, "The Magic Lantern. The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague", *Vintage Books a Division of Random House, Inc. New York* (1993): 26.
[22] Marcus Colla, and Adéla Gjuričová, "1989: THE CHRONOPOLITICS OF REVOLUTION", *from History and Theory published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Wesleyan University* (2023): 46.

global competition between East and West[23]. Once Col War ended. The West no longer needed to support Yugoslavia as a buffer state, and there was no Soviet Union left to influence events in the region. This vacuum allowed nationalist leaders to push for independence, leading to war. Reflecting a counterfactual argument, perhaps events might have unfolded differently if the Cold War had continued. Nonetheless, even if the Cold War had continued, Yugoslavia's internal ethnic and political tensions were already significant. The death of Tito, in 1980, weakened the central government, and economic crises fueled nationalist sentiments. Therefore, the collapse of communism in the Balkans marked the end of an era of authoritarian rule and the beginning of a turbulent transition toward democracy and market economies. I would stress that nowhere was this process more dramatic than in Yugoslavia, where the fall of the one-party system exposed deep-seated ethnic, political, and economic tensions. Unlike in other Eastern European states, where has seen so far communism largely ended through negotiated transitions, Yugoslavia's unraveling was accompanied by violent conflict, as nationalist leaders in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina exploited historical grievances to consolidate power. As mentioned above, the absence of Cold War era superpower oversight further accelerated the crisis, as Western powers were initially reluctant to intervene, and the Soviet Union, already in decline, was unable to exert influence. The wars that followed led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia into independent states, leaving a legacy of contested borders, ethnic divisions, and ongoing instability in the region.

This turbulent aftermath played a crucial role in shaping Yugonostalgia[24], as many people contrasted the violence and uncertainty of the post-Yugoslav period with the relative stability of the former federation, thus representing people's longing for a time in a lost past, for the "home that no longer exists or has never existed"[25]. Even more than two decades after its dissolution, many former citizens of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY, 1943-1992) continue to view it as an *ideal* society – one that nostalgically recall as a land of prosperity and global prestige. While they recognize its flaws, Yugoslavia remains, in their memory, a country that provided for its people, ensured social security, and fostered a sense of peace, solidarity, and unity. For these individuals, Yugoslavia was not just a state but a symbol of a time when life felt more stable, opportunities seemed greater, and their homeland commanded international respect.

However, just as "Yugoslavism" frowned upon its counterpart – nationalism, so did nationalism see socialist Yugoslavia and its legacy as the main danger and enemy[26]. For instance, the Serbian Slobodan Milošević is a prime example of how nationalism positioned itself in direct opposition to the legacy of

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[23] Timothy Garton Ash, "The Magic Lantern. The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague", *Vintage Books a Division of Random House, Inc. New York* (1993): 101.
[24] References to this concept were also made in the Chapter I, Section 1.2 The Dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Rise of the Right.
[25] Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents", *The Hedgehog Review 7* (2007): 7-18.
[26] Maja Maksimović, "Unattainable past, unsatisfying present – Yugonostalgia: an omen of a better future?", *Nationalities Papers by Routledge* (2017): 1067.

SFRY. For instance, growing tension in Kosovo pushed the Serbian parliament in March 1989 to rescind the province's autonomy for all practical purposes. In doing so, Belgrade improved its authority over the entire republic, but at the same time it squandered any remaining trust in the federal state[27]. While "Yugoslavism" promoted a supranational identity based on unity, socialism, and multicultural coexistence, nationalist movements – especially those emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s – viewed Yugoslavia as an artificial construct that suppressed ethnic identities and national ambitions. This is why Yugonostalgia is oriented toward "past fantasies" – unfulfilled dreams, lost opportunities, and elusive ideals of the socialist Yugoslav past; toward all that was probable back then and seems so inaccessible today[28]. Indeed, many young people also engage in Yugonostalgia due to difficult life conditions and a lack of good prospects. This disillusionment is especially pronounced among younger generations who did not personally experience life in Yugoslavia but who encounter its legacy through family narratives, cultural memory, and the stark contrast between the prosperity their parents or grandparents recall and their own struggles in the present[29].

Therefore, as communist regimes collapsed one another throughout Eastern Europe, centrifugal forces in the multinational state of Yugoslavia grew stronger and the crisis there reached an unprecedented, dramatic climax. Political deadlocks prevented any hope of an orderly transfer to multiparty democracy and a market economy[30]. On 25 June 1991, both Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence. Suddenly the international community was confronted with several contentious issues, and that the path to independence would be clouded by violence had been obvious for months. Unfortunately, the international community had few tools for managing such a crisis at the time[31]. It was the "war within the war".

In conclusion, as communism crumbled, Yugoslavia's central authority weakened, and nationalist movements gained strength, especially among the republics of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia. The transition was characterized by political deadlock and the failure to create a consensual path to democracy. The lack of agreement on how to manage the diverse ethnic groups, coupled with economic decline and rising nationalism, led to violent conflicts, including the terrible wars of the 1990s.

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[27] Marie-Janine Calic, "A History of Yugoslavia", *Purdue University Press* (2019): 284-285.
[28] Maja Maksimović, "Unattainable past, unsatisfying present – Yugonostalgia: an omen of a better future?", *Nationalities Papers by Routledge* (2017): 1068.
[29] I recommend reading: Jelena Spasenić, "The Shadows of the Past: A Study of Life-World and Identity of Serbian Youth after the Milošević Regime", *Uppsala Universitet* (2011).
[30] Marie-Janine Calic, "A History of Yugoslavia", *Purdue University Press* (2019): 284.
[31] *Ibid.,* 297-298.

3.1 Overview of Right-Wing Extremism in Poland

The next sections will examine the evolution of RWE in Poland since the political transformation of 1989, a period marked by the country's transition away from communist rule and toward a pluralistic political system. While this shift brought significant political and economic reforms, it also gave rise to new social and cultural tensions, creating fertile ground for the re-emergence and growth of far-right ideologies.

To take a historical leap into the past, the term "re-emergence" refers indeed to the historical presence of far-right ideologies prior to the communist period, particularly during the interwar years (1918-1939), when Poland regained independence after over a century of partition under Russian, Prussian, and Austrian rule (1772-1918)[32]. This period was marked by significant political, economic, and social challenges as the newly reconstitute Polish state sought to unify its diverse territories and populations. Within this context, far-right ideologies began to take shape and gain traction, driven by nationalism, anti-Semitism, and the desire to assert a strong Polish identity. With the advent of communist rule after World War II, these movements were suppressed by the state. At this proposal, the communist government outlawed far-right organizations, censored their ideologies, and repressed individuals associated with them.

Nevertheless, this suppression did not entirely eliminate nationalist sentiments or far-right ideas. Instead, they persisted underground, in the collective memory, or through cultural and religious institutions, waiting for the opportunity to resurface post-1989. For instance, the Catholic Church played a crucial role in maintaining traditionalist and nationalist values, which were often aligned with far-right sentiments. Indeed, the political transformation created a space for previously repressed ideologies to revival. As Poland transitioned to a more open political and social system, far-right movements found fertile ground in the uncertainties of the new era, drawing on historical legacies and appealing to nationalist and traditionalist values that had deep roots in Polish society. Therefore, this re-emergence was not a new phenomenon but rather a revival of ideologies that had been part of Poland's historical narrative before being forced underground during communism.

After this pre-1989 historical parenthesis, there now ensues the historical context and evolution of right-wing extremism in the Poland's territory in the post-communist period.

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[32] See Jerzy Lukowski, "The Partitions of Poland: 1772, 1793, 1795", *Routledge* (1999), and Piotr S. Wandycz, "The Lands of Partitioned Poland, 1795: 1918", *University of Washington Press* (1974).

3.1.1 Historical Context and Evolution of RWE in Poland

This section starts with a premise, namely right-wing politics has been a constant feature of Poland since 1989, according to the Polish Panel Survey (POLPAN) which has been conducted every five years since 1988[33]. At this proposal, Professor Ślarzyński[34] asserts:

> "Right-wing politics, also in the form of governments led by right-wing parties, is hardly a novelty – it has been a constant feature of Poland since 1989. The novelty after 2015 consists in the *radicalization* – along traditionalist and nationalist lines – of policies pursued by the political actors present on the Polish democratic political scene since 1989".

Contrary to Western Europe, Polish society has the experience of living in an authoritarian single-party socialist state established in the end of the Second World War and known in 1952-1989 under its official name as PRL (Polish People's Republic)[35]. The post-communist specificity consequently resulted in right-wing parties and politicians being explicitly anti-communist and emphasizing their roots in Solidarity (Solidarność). Indeed, right-wing parties and politicians in post-communist Poland strongly emphasized their anti-communist stance, framing themselves as defenders of Polish sovereignty and freedom against past Soviet domination. This narrative often linked their legitimacy to the Solidarity movement, a grassroots trade union and political movement that played a pivotal role in toppling the communist regime. Therefore, the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s were marked by a general consensus among post-Solidarity and post-communist elites. This post-communist "transitional culture" extended over the second decade of the twenty-first century and referred to economic and foreign policies. So far, the explanation provides a strong historical foundation, linking right-wing politics to Poland's post-communist legacy and the Solidarity movement.

Moreover, the trajectory of right-wing politics in Poland resembles the "populist polarization" in Hungary in its paradoxical institutionalization of anti-establishment politics and polarization in the form of relatively stable governments, as well as a stable party system – for almost 20 years – in which citizens vote for systemic alternatives instead of parties. Indeed, in terms of substantive attitudes, the right-wing electorate in Poland was characterized by a set of stable features in the last thirty years. One of them, as mentioned before, has been (i) anti-communism, then (ii) the attachment to the Catholic Church; people

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[33] Marcin Ślarzyński, "The Emergence of Right-Wing Partisanship in Poland, 1993-2018: Reconciling Demand-Side Explanations of the Success of Illiberalism", *Cambridge University Press* (2023): 693.

[34] Dr Ślarzyński is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences. His research focuses on the national movement of local elites in Poland, 2005–2015. Information taken from the University of Oxford at: https://www.rees.ox.ac.uk/people/dr-marcin-slarzynski-0.

[35] Marcin Ślarzyński, "The Emergence of Right-Wing Partisanship in Poland, 1993-2018: Reconciling Demand-Side Explanations of the Success of Illiberalism", *Cambridge University Press* (2023): 693.

who are more attached to the institution of the Catholic Church, who regularly attend church services and declare that traditional Catholic values are inseparable from the Polish national identity, are more likely to support right-wing parties. It is, therefore, not an accident that all right-wing parties emphasized the importance of the Catholic Church for Poland's independence. Also, (iii) authoritarian conservatism is often displayed by individuals supporting right-wing policies and parties in Poland and abroad. In conclusion, these cultural and historical identities, rather than economic factors, were argued to be the most efficient weapons of the Right on the political battleground.

After considering that right-wing is a constant and three are its constant characteristics as well, I will delve into the historical context deeply, which I mentioned above to substantiate the phenomenon.

The fall of the Polish People's Republic (PRL) in 1989 marked the end of four decades of communist rule and the beginning of Poland's transformation into a 'democratic' state. The 1989 Round Table Talks[36] and the semi-free elections that followed – the 1989 Polish legislative election, a pivotal moment in Poland's history and a turning point for the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe[37] - allowed Solidarność to emerge as the dominant political force. Simultaneously, the Catholic Church – which played a pivotal role during and after the communist era, serving as both a moral authority and a unifying force for anti-communist resistance – became after 1989 a key ally for right-wing parties. At this proposal, right-wing leaders frequently invoked religious themes to legitimize their policies and draw sharp contrasts with secular or liberal opponents. Consequently, in the 1990s, the political landscape was dominated by a dichotomy between post-Solidarity and post-communist elites. However, several smaller right-wing movements and parties also emerged, many of which espoused more extreme nationalist and anti-immigrant ideologies. Concerning attitudes with the foreign, Poland's integration into European and transatlantic institutions, such as NATO in 1999 and the European Union in 2004, was broadly supported by the political mainstream, including the post-communist left (SLD) and post-Solidarity factions. Nonetheless, right-wing actors, particularly those with nationalist leanings, viewed European integration with skepticism. The presence of hardline Euroscepticism in the political mainstream was a clear sign that the cultural weight left a lot of space for identity politics[38].

The period between 2004 and 2015 marked a significant shift in Poland's political landscape, with right-wing politics becoming increasingly radicalized. The 2003-2008 period seems to be a crucial moment for the emergence of a right-wing political identity, which will be later centered on PiS (Law and

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[36] The Polish Round Table Talks took place in Warsaw, Communist Poland, from 6 February to 5 April 1989. The government-initiated talks with the banned trade union Solidarność and other opposition groups to defuse growing social unrest.

[37] They are often called "semi-free elections" because they were the result of the Round Table Talks between the communist government and the opposition, led primarily by the Solidarity movement.

[38] David Ost, "Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe", *Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press* (2005): 1.

Justice, or Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) and ZP (United Right, or Zjednoczona Prawica). The 2003-2008 is also the time when voters in Poland witnessed the rise and fall of populist parties (LPR and SRP)[39] whose electorate was mostly absorbed by a more institutionally stable PiS which, together with PO (Civic Platform, or Platforma Obywatelska), and to a lesser extent SLD (Democratic Left Alliance, or Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej) and PSL (Polish People's Party, or Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe), modeled and adapted to the new rules of party competition, now more populist in character. Summing up, the 2000s and early 2010s saw Poland's political competition becoming incereasingly shaped by populism, with both PiS and PO adopting populist rhetoric to appeal the masses. PiS, in particular, embraced anti-elitism, often portraying themselves as the voice of the "real" Poland against the "establishment" that was seen as corrupt or out of touch with the people. Later, as PiS became more dominant, the other political parties were forced to adapt the changing political landscape. For instance, PO initially represented a centrist-liberal platform but began to incorporate elements of populism in order to compete with PiS's growing influence. Meanwhile, SLD and PSL continued to hold political sway, though their influence waned as PiS gained more support from the electorate. The period from 2004 and 2015 marked therefore an intensifying political divide in Poland, with Law and Justice rise to power.

Between 2015 and 2018, PiS consolidated its political dominance and continued to push forward with a conservative, nationalist agenda[40]. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, PiS won a second term in office with an even stronger mandate, securing a majority in the Sejm, the lower house of Parliament. Therefore, the 2019 elections marked the continuation of the Third Republic of Poland, which was established after the fall of communism in 1989. From 2019 onwards, PiS continue to dominate Polish politics but faced increasing challenges, both domestically and internationally.

To conclude, the fall of the Polish People's Republic in 1989, marked the beginning of a complex and often contradictory transformation of Poland's political and cultural identity. The Round Table Talks, and subsequent semi-free elections ushered in a new era of democratic governance while simultaneously laying the ground for the rise of right-wing politics. The Catholic Church, a critical player during the communist era, became a lasting moral and political force, aligning itself with conservative agendas. Over the decades, Poland's integration into European and transatlantic institutions brought significant modernization but also fueled nationalist anxieties and Eurosceptic tendencies, particularly within right-wing factions. Hence, this trajectory underscores the interplay between Polan's historical experiences, cultural identity, and contemporary political developments, framing the rise of right-wing extremism as both a product of domestic transformation and a response to wider European dynamics.

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[39] LPR stands for League of Polish Families, or Liga Polskich Rodzin, while SRP for Independent Polish Republic, or Samodzielna Rzeczpospolita Polska.

[40] Kamil Marcinkiewicz, and Mary Stegmaier, "The parliamentary election in Poland, October 2015", *Elsevier Electoral Studies* (2016): Volume 41, 221-224.

3.1.2 Key Right-Wing Extremist Groups and Movements – Poland

The resurgence of right-wing extremism in Poland is deeply connected to the unresolved tensions surrounding the post-communist transition, particularly the legacy of 1989. In the decades following the collapse of communism, Poland witnessed the resurgence of right-wing extremism, fueled by a complex interplay of historical grievances, socio-economic challenges, and political shifts. The ideology of right-wing nationalist movements would reflect a continuation of Poland's struggle for sovereignty, thus portraying liberal democracy and European integration as threats to national identity. Indeed, many right-wing nationalist movements in Poland have adopted illiberal positions, particularly in their opposition to liberal democracy, pluralism, and certain civil liberties.
At this proposal, what I would point out here is a Paul Betts far-sighted thought:

> "The unrest of 1989 carried within it the seeds of illiberalism as well. With distance the inheritance of the 'revolutionary autumn' appears more mixed and precarious, and much harder to classify, than it once was."[41]

Indeed, Francis Fukuyama's bestseller *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) has provoked strong criticism about the way in which he trumpeted 1989 as the world-historical triumph of liberalism. Betts then followed:

> "In 2017 Timothy Garton Ash was one of the first to call these [recent] developments an 'anti-liberal counter-revolution', and other commentators have elaborated on this 'counter-revolution' as the new face of contemporary European politics more generally".[42]

Therefore, according to Paul Betts, it seems like that many contradictory elements were present in 1989 from the beginning. Indeed, he points out that the legacy of 1989 has largely been written as a bright story of liberalism triumphant, with comparatively less attention towards some of the grey and even darker tones of the inheritance. With growing distance, the excitement and enthusiasm of 1989 continued to fade from view. At the point that neither the Poles nor the Hungarians do recognize any date or event in 1989. The monumental election of 4 June 1989 still goes uncommemorated. As specified by Paul Betts, underscoring the national indifference towards any retrospective celebrations is the fact that the biggest ten-year anniversary of the victory of Polish Solidarity in 1999 didn't even take place in Poland; instead, the once lionized heroes of Solidarność assembled at a conference at the University of Michigan to

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[41] Paul Betts, "1989 At Thirty: A Recast Legacy", *The Past and Present Society, Oxford* (2019): no. 244, p. 272.
[42] *Ibid.,* 273.

discuss the historical significance of what they achieved[43]. There are no regional or transnational events to remember the 'velvet revolutions' collectively, driving home the point that these were national revolutions first and foremost, with ambivalent legacies for the next generations[44].

"The liberation of eastern Europe from communist control prompted a whole cottage industry of scholarship linking 'democratic transitions' in different parts of Europe as part of the same trajectory of liberalism on the march."[45]. But it did not reveal to be always as such, and this is why I dealt with the concept of 'weak democracy' in Chapter I[46]. Indeed, it is essential to understand the divide between *liberal* conservative parties and *illiberal* conservative parties in Poland.

Depending on what I wrote so far about the seeds of illiberalism, we then might ask whether illiberal conservative parties in Poland were born *illiberal* or whether illiberalism emerged as a recurrent response to political or social conditions. Reflecting on tis, one might come to the conclusion that many conservative parties in Poland did not start as overtly illiberal but rather evolved in that direction due to historical legacies. Nonetheless, illiberal tendencies have been a recurrent pattern in Poland's political history, particularly in moments of national crisis or perceived threats to sovereignty. For instance, the right-wing Law and Justice Party (PiS) exhibited illiberal tendencies from the outset, particularly in its nationalist rhetoric and skepticism toward liberal democratic institutions[47]. Unlike some other conservative parties that gradually embraced illiberalism, PiS integrated these elements into its political agenda early on, shaping Poland's broader trajectory away from liberal democracy. Therefore, while not an extreme-right party in itself, the PiS has absorbed the right-extremist surge through its radical, populist appeal to illiberal democracy[48]. And this is why violent nationalism, xenophobia and barbed-wire borders are just as much the legacy of 1989 as wall removal, free movement and cosmopolitanism[49]. More broadly, the party openly views the post-1989 democratic transformation and accompanying market reforms as products of an illegitimate compromise between the former communist regime and the opposition liberals who allegedly sold-out Poland's interests when they held power. These actions and ideas amount to illiberal populism[50].

Having arrived at this premise, I would move on to an assumption: the illiberal policies championed by parties like PiS provide a fertile environment for the growth of extremist movements. These movements, while more fringe, share common ideological ground with the mainstream right, particularly in their opposition to liberal democratic values, the European Union, ad multiculturalism.

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[43] Padraic Kenney, "The Burdens of Freedom: Eastern Europe since 1989", *Global History of the Present* (2006): 80.
[44] Paul Betts, "1989 At Thirty: A Recast Legacy", *The Past and Present Society, Oxford* (2019): no. 244, p. 280.
[45] *Ibid.*, 284.
[46] Chapter I, Section 1.1 The Collapse of the Soviet Union and the Shift to the Right: 1.
[47] Anna Grzymala-Busse, "Poland's Path to Illiberalism", *University of California Press* (2018): 96-101.
[48] Rafal Pankowski, "Right-Wing Extremism in Poland", *Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung* (2012): 8.
[49] Paul Betts, "1989 At Thirty: A Recast Legacy", *The Past and Present Society, Oxford* (2019): no. 244, p. 298.
[50] Anna Grzymala-Busse, "Poland's Path to Illiberalism", *University of California Press* (2018): 96.

For instance, groups like the Oboz Narodowo-Radykalny (ONR, or National Radical Camp) re-established in 1981 and Ruch Narodowy (National Movement) founded in 2012 – two prominent right-wing extremist and nationalist groups in Poland – embrace a vision of Polish identity that excludes minorities and promotes violent nationalism, whose recent seeds are in the first half of the 1990s, when pogroms were seen against Roma communities in Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria[51]. Therefore, PiS's illiberal turn – to remind, embodied in its nationalism and skepticism toward liberal democratic institutions – reinforces the same societal divisions that right-wing extremist groups exploit to gain support. Moreover, the majority of the Polish extreme-right groups subscribes to a Catholic fundamentalist ideology combined with a strongly radical ethnic version of nationalism including antisemitism. In this regard, Paul Betts wrote down:

> "In some places nationalism was tinged with anti-Semitism. […] [These] expressions of nationalism ran the gamut from liberal to conservative, inclusive to exclusive, and, like the religious context, very much depended on specific political constellations in each country that bridged the pre-revolutionary period with what came after."[52]

He followed this way:

> "The point is that today's potent brew of nationalism, religious conservatism and racism in eastern Europe is hardly just a recent reaction to 1990s neo-liberalism but found overt expression in 1989 as well."[53]

These features are embedded in the main extreme-right groups today. The above-mentioned National Radical Camp is arguably the most active right-wing extremist organization currently active at the street level and among the youth[54]. The author Pankowski explains that its name goes back even to 1934, when a radical antisemitic movement was formed under the same name. The activists often engaged in violent actions, shoot-outs and street fights. However, it is important to add that in Poland most of the victims of extremist physical violence do not belong to racial or ethnic minorities. Rather violence tends to be directed at political opponents, members of alternative youth subcultures and so on[55]. It will constitute a substantial difference with RWE in the Balkans. The ONR tradition was directly inspired by the Italian and German fascist movements in the mid-1930s, and the 1930s ONR serves as an important model for

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[51] Paul Betts, "1989 At Thirty: A Recast Legacy", *The Past and Present Society, Oxford* (2019): no. 244, p. 287.
[52] *Ibid.*, 287.
[53] *Ibid.*, 288.
[54] Rafal Pankowski, "Right-Wing Extremism in Poland", *Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung* (2012): 3-4.
[55] *Ibid.,* 7.

contemporary extremist groups. The present ONR was formed as a loose organization composed of racist skinheads active in several cities in the south of Poland in the early 2000s. Since 2010 the marches have attracted a much bigger turnout through cooperation with other extreme-right and nationalist organizations gathered under the label of *March of Independence Association*. However, the influence of right-wing extremism in Poland has become increasingly significant in recent years, especially through groups like PiS and ONR. This contributed to a growing sense of isolationism, particularly in relation to European Union policies and international cooperation. Not for accident, the EU has initiated an Article 7 procedure against Poland, which is essentially a disciplinary measure for violating EU principles. Article 7 allows the EU to act against member states that are seen as violating the rule of law, democratic valued, and human rights. In December 2017, the European Commission triggered this article to suspend Poland's voting rights in the EU, accusing the PiS government of undermining the independence of the judiciary through controversial judicial reforms. In October 2021, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled that Poland's judicial reforms, particularly the disciplinary chamber that could punish judges for ruling against the government, were incompatible with EU laws[56]. The ECJ has imposed financial penalties on Poland for not complying with rulings on judicial independence. However, even if the PiS is no longer in power since 2023[57], its legacy continues to influence Poland's political and social landscape. Perhaps this is why observers since 1989 predicted that the fall of communism and Moscow as a pole star of leftist politics worldwide would make things much more difficult for post-communist countries in the future[58].

In this context, the rise of right-wing extremist groups and movements in Poland, fueled by historical grievances and the political vacuums left by the post-communist transition, represents both a continuation of long-standing nationalist traditions and a reaction to the challenges posed by European integration and liberal democracy. The fall of communism seemed to promise a new era of liberalism and democracy, but the legacy of illiberalism, exacerbated by economic struggles and national identity crises, has enabled the rise of extremist movements that exploit these features.

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[56] Judgment of the Court (Grand Chamber) of 15 July 2021. European Commission v Republic of Poland. Failure of a Member State to fulfil obligations – Disciplinary regime applicable to judges – Rule of law – Independence of judges – Effective legal protection in the fields covered by Union law – Second subparagraph of Article 19(1) TEU – Article 47 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union – Disciplinary offences resulting from the content of judicial decisions – Independent disciplinary courts or tribunals established by law – Respect for reasonable time and the rights of the defence in disciplinary proceedings – Article 267 TFEU – Restriction of the right of national courts to submit requests for a preliminary ruling to the Court of Justice and of their obligation to do so. Case C-791/19. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:62019CJ0791.

[57] In December 2023, the Civic Coalition, led by former Prime Minister Donald Tusk, formed a new government, ending PiS tenure. It is generally considered a center-right political alliance, but it is not as far-right as the PiS.

[58] Eric Hobsbawm, "Goodbye to All That", from "After the Fall: The Failure of Communism and the Future of Socialism (1991).

In conclusion, as Poland continues to grapple with its past and future trajectory, the influence of right-wing ideologies remains deeply embedded, making the challenge of reconciling Poland's complex history with its place in the modern European order an ongoing and precarious task. The interplay between nationalism, populism, and illiberalism suggests that the seeds planted in 1989, as Paul Betts observed, have given rise to a far more ambivalent and divisive legacy.

3.1.3 Recent Incidents and Trends – Poland

Making the point so far, this post-communist specificity thus resulted in right-wing parties and politicians being explicitly anti-communist and emphasizing their roots in Solidarity[59]. Indeed, the Right has been an inherent part of the public sphere after 1989. Since then, the majority of Poles have been able to place themselves on a left-right scale.

In terms of substantive attitudes, the right-wing electorate was characterized by a set of stable features in the last thirty years. One of the most defining has been anti-communism, which translated into support for lustration and related attempts at excluding former functionaries of the communist party from public life. Additionally, support for the Catholic Church has been a central pillar. In 2005, church attendance and self-placement on the right were already predictors for being a stable voter. The cultural and historical identities, rather than economic factors, were argued to be the most efficient weapons of the Right on the political battleground[60].

This context has shaped the evolution of right-wing extremism, which is not a monolithic ideology but rather a fluid and multifaceted phenomenon that intersects with various political, cultural, and historical contexts. It encompasses nationalist, ultraconservative, ethnonationalist, and even religious fundamentalist currents. Some movements emphasize racial supremacy, others focus on anti-globalism, traditionalism, or authoritarian governance, illustrating the ideological diversity within the radical right spectrum.

In Poland, the trend is violent right-wing extremism in relation to ultranationalist and neofascist movements. These want a totalitarian, traditionalist (often Christian) and ethnic-nationalist state. Examples are the Polish National Radical Camp and All-Polish Youth. One notable event is the annual Independence Day march in Warsaw, organized by far-right groups, including ONR an MW (All-Polish Youth). By 2005, the MW clearly dominated the spectrum of youth-oriented right-wing extremist groups. In the 2017 Independence Day, the event featured slogans like "White Europe" and "Clean Blood",

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[59] Anna Gwiazda, "Party Patronage in Poland: The Democratic Left Alliance and Law and Law and Justice Compared", *East European Politics and Societies* (2008): 802-827.
[60] Kristina Skarżyńska, and Kamil Henne, "Political Self-Identification on a Left-Wing-Right-Wing Scale in Relation to Beliefs and Social Capital of Electorate", *Studia Socjologiczne* (2011): 85-108.

reflecting white supremacist ideologies. The march attracted far-right leaders from across Europe, including former English Defence League Leader Stephen Lennon, also known as Tommy Robinson. Participants displayed xenophobic and anti-Semitic banners, and some chanted nationalist slogans. The event was widely criticized both domestically and internationally for promoting extremist views. In response to the controversy, Polish President Andrzej Duda condemned the racist and xenophobic elements of the march, stating that there is no place in Poland for such attitudes. The government faced scrutiny over its perceived tolerance of far-right activities, leading to debates about nationalism and extremism in Poland[61]. To sum up, the 2017 march highlighted the growing visibility of far-right movements in Poland and raised concerns about the country's political climate and its stance on multiculturalism and inclusivity.

The annual Independence Day march in Warsaw continues to draw significant participation from far-right groups. In November 2023, tens of thousands, including nationalist opposition leaders, participated in the event. Some displayed neo-fascist symbols and chanted far-right slogans. Once again, the march has been a focal point for nationalist expression and has drawn both domestic and international criticism[62].

Additionally, Grzegorz Braun, a member of the far-right Confederation party, has been involved in several antisemitic incidents. In May 2023, he disrupted a Holocaust lecture in Warsaw by destroying the equipment. During a parliamentary session, he extinguished a Hanukkah menorah with a fire extinguisher inside the Sejm, the Polish parliament. He claimed that the Jewish holiday was a "Satanic cult" and disrupted the celebration, which was taking place in the parliament building. As a result, he was temporarily excluded from parliamentary sessions, and legal proceedings were initiated against him. His act intensified debated about the rise of far-right extremism and antisemitism in Poland.

In November 2024, authorities in Germany and Poland arrested eight members of the far-right group known as the Saxonian Separatists. Prosecutors alleged that the group planned to target "unwanted groups of people by means of ethnic cleansing". This operation some way highlighted the transnational nature of far-right extremism and the ongoing efforts by European authorities to combat it, from the moment that right-wing violence is rising across the EU, illustrating the need for adequate measures to prevent and counter the threat[63]. On January 27, 2025, the word commemorated the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. During the ceremony, survivors such as Leon Weintraub, Tova Friedman, and Marian Turski delivered poignant testimonies, reflecting on their harrowing experiences

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[61] Elżbieta Wiącek, "The Rhetoric of the "March of Independence" in Poland (2010-2017) as the Answer for the Policy of Multiculturalism in EU and the Refugee Crisis", *KSIĘGARNIA AKADEMICKA Sp. z o.o.* (2019): 149-166.
[62] Marek Strzelecki, and Aleksandra Michalska, "Far-right Independence Day march in Warsaw draws thousands", *REUTERS* (2024).
[63] Annelies Pauwels, "Contemporary manifestation of violent right-wing extremism in the EU: An overview of P/CVE practices", *RAN Publications Office of the European Union* (2021): 4.

and expressing deep concern over the resurgence of antisemitism and far-right ideologies in contemporary society. It highlighted the ongoing challenges posed by rising antisemitism and the proliferation of extremist ideologies, reinforcing the imperative to confront and counteract hate in all its forms.

The point I would like to stress here, comparing to the past, is that the far-right extremism in Poland today is deeply intertwined with the post-communist transition. However, while anti-communism provided a rallying point in the early years of 1989, this has evolved into a broader right-wing populist and exclusionary politics. Initially the anti-communist sentiment was central to the right-wing political discourse, particularly among groups that had been part of the Solidarity movement, which played a major role in overthrowing the communist government. This anti-communism was largely focused on critiquing and distancing the new 'democratic' Poland from its communist past. However, over time, the focus of right-wing politics in Poland began to shift. Anti-communism, even though still important, became less of a rallying cry for a changing society. It was replaced by a broader, more populist, and exclusionary politics. Right-wing leaders began to emphasize the dangers of globalization, immigration, and foreign influence – especially from the EU positioning themselves as defenders of a 'true' Polish identity against these external forces. Anti-communism merged with nationalism, ethnonationalism, and sometimes even racism and xenophobia. It became not just about rejecting the communist past but about protecting an ethnically homogeneous, Catholic, and traditional Poland from perceived threats, or the influence of liberal Western European values.

Picking up the thread of the position, even though there are differences in the evolution of right-wing extremism – such as the shift from an anti-communist focus to broader populist and exclusionary politics – what continues to connect this current far-right movement to the past is its consistent "illiberal" way of thinking and acting. From the beginning, right-wing ideologies in Poland have consistently resisted liberal democratic principles, particularly those that challenge the traditional cultural values or the role of the state in shaping national identity. Therefore, even though the specific issues may have shifted, the underlying illiberal approach remains the same, highlighting the unbroken thread of illiberalism, thus improving the trend of the rise of "illiberal democracy"[64].

[64] Thomas J. Main, "The Rise of Illiberalism", *Brookings Institution Press* (2021).

3.2 Overview of Right-Wing Extremism in Hungary

The next sections will analyze right-wing extremism emergence and evolution in Hungary, focusing on its historical context, thus highlighting the importance of the territorial occupation factor for Hungary, along with the major groups and trends.

From the collapse of communism in 1989, Hungary's complex history of foreign domination and the loss of national sovereignty formed a fertile ground for the rise of nationalist and far-right movements. The territorial loss following the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, which reduced Hungary's size significantly, contributed to nationalist sentiments that still resonate in the country today. Indeed, Virág Molnár, in his writing *Civil Society and the Right-wing Radicalization of the Public Sphere*, asserted:

> "These diverse groups drawn on the symbolic imagery of Hungarians' historic independence struggles against Ottoman occupation in the sixteenth and seventeenth century and later against Habsburg rule; the loss of Transylvania (and parts of Northern and Southern Hungary) after world War I; as well as Hungarian popular legends about Hungarian settlers from the time of the Hungarian Conquest at the turn of the ninth and tenth centuries. They blend this medley of historical motifs into a contemporary anti-capitalist rhetoric in which Hungarian independence is lost, for instance, to foreign multinational corporations and the European Union".[65]

As Hungary transitioned to a market economy and democracy, many segments of society felt marginalized by the reforms, particularly in rural areas where unemployment and social discontent were rampant. Hence, the economic restructuring and the liberalization of the political system led to a vacuum that far-right groups such as the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIÉP) and Jobbik capitalized on, tapping into anti-communist, nationalist, and Euroskeptic sentiments. The re-ascension of Viktor Orbán and his party, Fidesz, to power in the 2010s marked a shift towards an "illiberal democracy". Indeed, Orbán's government, which initially began with a more moderate stance in 1998, increasingly embraced authoritarian and nationalist positions in the 2000s. His rhetoric and policies, including his opposition to migration and EU influence, paralleled the sentiments expressed by the radical right, and his embrace of "illiberal democracy" solidified Hungary's position within the broader illiberal trend seen in other post-communist countries, such as Poland, thus reshaping Hungary's political landscape.

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[65] Virág Molnár, "Civil Society and the Right-wing Radicalization of the Public Shere in Hungary", from "The Rise of Populist Nationalism", *Central European University Press* (2019): 223.

3.2.1 Historical Context and Evolution of RWE in Hungary

Before going into the forms of post-socialist right-wing extremism, xenophobia, and racism, it is essential to outline Hungary's history and geopolitical position.

Hungary was a nation occupied by the Turkish and Habsburg Empires from the middle of the 1500s to 1918[66], then ruled by Nazi Germany after World War I, only to fall victim to Soviet occupation after World War II. As a result, the past 500 years or so have been more devoted to the attainment of independence from other nations rather than to democratic civilian development. In other words, the long period of foreign domination meant that Hungary's political culture was shaped by resistance, survival, and adaptation rather than by sustained democratic governance. To expand a brief historical parenthesis, during the Ottoman era, from 1541 to 1699, much of Hungary's territory was directly ruled by the Turks, while the remaining lands fell under Habsburg control, deepening the fragmentation of the Hungarian state. The expulsion of the Ottomans did not bring full sovereignty but rather a transition into the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, where Hungary was granted partial autonomy but remained subordinate to Vienna. The 19th century saw repeated nationalist uprisings, including the 1848 Revolution against Habsburg rule, which, despite its failure, solidified the idea of Hungary as a nation seeking self-determination. However, the Treaty of Trianon in 1920 drastically reduced its territory – leaving the country with only about one-third of its prior territory - hence transforming it into a smaller and more ethnically homogeneous nation. This territorial loss fueled nationalist grievances and shaped Hungary's foreign policy for much of the 20th century, contributing to its alignment with Nazi Germany during World War II in hopes of territorial revision. In the interwar period, Hungary was led by Miklós Horthy, who ruled as Regent of the Kingdom of Hungary from 1920 to 1944. Under his leadership, Hungary pursued an increasingly authoritarian political system while maintaining nationalist policies aimed at reversing Trianon. Horthy's regime aligned with Nazi Germany to regain lost territories, participating in the occupation of southern Slovakia, northern Transylvania, and parts of Yugoslavia. By 1944, however, Hungary found itself under direct German occupation when Horthy attempted to negotiate an armistice with the Allies[67]. The Arrow Cross Party, a fascist movement backed by Nazi Germany, took power, leading to intensified persecution of Jews and political dissidents[68].

Following World War II, Hungary, as the last satellite of Nazi Germany, found itself among the defeated. Like other small East Central European states, it adopted a Soviet style planned economy, which remained in place until the political transformations of 1989. The Soviet occupation of Hungary

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66 Paul A. Hanebrink, "In Defense of Christian Hungary: Religion, Nationalism, and Antisemitism, 1890-1944*", Cornell University Press* (2006): 10-47.

67 György Ránki, "The Road to German Occupation", *Institute of History, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences* (1985): 309-318.

68 György Ránki, "The German Occupation of Hungary", *Institute of History, Research Centre for the Humanities, Hungarian Academy of Sciences* (1965): 261-283.

began in 1944, when the Red Army entered Hungarian territory. By April 1945, Soviet forces had completely expelled German troops, effectively bringing Hungary under Soviet control. Soviet victory meant the definite end to a war in which hundreds of thousands of Hungarian soldiers had died fighting on the side of the German Reich. It also meant that civilians could begin to rebuild from the devastation caused by the fighting on Hungarian soil[69]. But occupying Soviet troops pillaged and looted indiscriminately, taking their own measure of revenge on a country that had been an enemy combatant until April 1945[70]. The occupation lasted until 1989, when Soviet influence waned due to the collapse of communist regimes across Eastern Europe. The last Soviet troops officially left Hungary on June 19, 1991. Thus, Hungarian political culture evolved with an emphasis on sovereignty and national survival rather than on democratic consolidation.

However, with the 1980s sweeping political changes, Hungary had the opportunity to establish a multiparty democracy, build a market economy based on private property, and to law down the foundations of social, religious, and ideological pluralism, whose first pillar was the introduction of a free press. But the new social order was not an obvious success story for all; indeed, there were many losers of the reforms, long-established social security was replaced by unemployment, and comfortable soft dictatorship was exchanged for the pluralism of values and the freedom of speech. The transition process was ultimately completed with Hungary's accession to the EU. This brought economic, cultural, and political opportunities but also imposed a series of obligations that many have struggled to accept. Indeed, instead of seeing EU membership to strengthen cultural and political ties with neighboring countries, some regard European enlargement as a modern form of colonization[71]. In other words, this historical legacy influenced Hungary's post-communist trajectory, where the transition to democracy and EU integration was not universally perceived as a natural or entirely positive process but often viewed through the lens of national sovereignty and resistance to external influence.

After establishing this historical foundation, which highlights Hungary's complex relationship with sovereignty, resistance, and national identity, it is essential to examine how these legacies have shaped the development of post-socialist right-wing extremism, xenophobia, and racism. The transition from communism in 1989 left to a deep socio-economic divide[72] , fostering widespread disillusionment and creating fertile ground for nationalist and extremist ideologies. In the political vacuum left by the collapse of the socialist system, far-right movements capitalized on historical grievances – particularly

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[69] Paul A. Hanebrink, "In Defense of Christian Hungary: Religion, Nationalism, and Antisemitism, 1890-1944*", Cornell University Press* (2006): 222-223.
[70] *Ibid.,* 223.
[71] György Ligeti, and Tamás Nyeste, "Right-Wing Extremism in Hungary", from "Prevention of Right-Wing Extremism, Xenophobia and Racism in European Perspective", *Arbeitsstelle Rechtsextremismus und Fremdenfeindlichkeit* (2006): 96-113.
[72] This transition process was treated in Chapter III, Section 3.0 "The Crisis of Communism and the Post-1989 Transition", where the point of view of the historian István Rév was brought to light by extracts from his work "Retroactive Juctice: Prehistory of Post-Communism" (2005).

those linked to the Treaty of Trianon and perceptions of foreign domination – to gain traction. Hence, the hopefulness that accompanied the establishment of the Republic of Hungary in 1989 was soon tempered by divided politics that seemed unable to address systemic economic woes facing the nation[73].

During the 1990s, Hungary faced severe economic restructuring, high unemployment, and growing public disillusionment with democratic governance. The abrupt shift from a planned economy to a market-driven system created significant social inequalities, fueling nostalgia for authoritarian stability among certain segments of the population. Political parties like the Hungarian Justice and Life Party (MIÉP), founded in 1993 - by former Hungarian Democratic Forum MP István Csurka - capitalized on these sentiments, promoting an ultranationalist and antisemitic discourse. MIÉP's rhetoric, often laced with conspiracy theories about Western influence and perceived threats to Hungarian identity, laid the groundwork for the more organized far-right movements that would emerge in the 2000s. At the same time, the 1990s saw the increasing visibility of far-right subcultures, particularly through nationalist rock music, paramilitary groups, and youth organizations that sought to revive Hungary's "lost greatness". These years saw the rise of revisionist cultural movements that glorified Hungary's interwar period and the legacy of Miklós Horthy.

By the late 1990s, as mainstream political parties struggled to address the challenges of post-communist transformation, nationalist rhetoric increasingly found its way into public debate, setting the stage for the more institutionalized forms of right-wing extremism that would take hold in the early 2000s. Indeed, various nationalist organizations, such as the Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement (Hatvannégy Vármegye Ifjúsági Mozgalom, HVIM), founded in 2001 but ideologically rooted in the revisionist activism of the 1990s, sought to mobilize youth around the idea of a "Greater Hungary". More specifically, HVIM promoted a militant for of nationalism, advocating for territorial revision and opposing Hungary's integration into Western institutions like NATO and the European Union.

During this period, also anti-Roma violence became a recurring issue, with radical groups blaming the Roma community for economic and social problems. In rural areas, especially in northeastern Hungary, far-right extremists increasingly framed the Roma as a scapegoat for crime and unemployment, a narrative that would later be fully exploited by more organized paramilitary groups in the 2000s[74].

At the turn of the millennium, as Hungary moved closer to EU accession, these far-right elements – both within and outside the political system – became more structured, paving the way for the emergence of Jobbik and its affiliated paramilitary wing, the Hungarian Guard (Magyár Gárda). Most importantly, this period also marked the political ascent of Viktor Orbán, who had first entered office as Prime Minister in 1998 as the leader of Fidesz (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége*,* Alliance of Young

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[73] Karl Benziger, "The Strong State and Embedded Dissonance: History Education and Populist Politics in Hungary", *Yesterday&Today, No.18.* (2017): 64-65.
[74] Enyedi Zsolt, Fábián Zoltán, and Sik Endre, "Is Prejudice Growing in Hungary?", *TÁRKI Social Report Reprint Series No 21. (2005)*: 21-24.

Democrats), a Hungarian right-wing political party initially founded in 1988 as a liberal, anti-communist youth movement that shifted toward conservative and nationalist positions in the 1990s. During Orbán's first government, from 1998 to 2002, MIÉP and other far-right groups pushed for more radical positions. By the early 2002s, as Orbán sought to reclaim power following his 2002 electoral defeat, Fidesz began adopting an increasingly nationalist tone, incorporating elements of right-wing populism that blurred the lines between mainstream conservatism and radical nationalism. This shift contributed to the normalization of far-right discourse in Hungarian politics, facilitating the rise of movements like Jobbik.

The early 2000s thus marked the transition to more coordinated far-right movements that combined political activism with street-level mobilization, further embedding radical right-wing ideology into Hungary's social and political fabric.

However, having written in the precedent paragraphs about the seeds of illiberalism since 1989 in Poland, I would like to put the focus also on Hungary, which may be categorized as an illiberal democracy as well. Indeed, illiberalism is present both in "how" and "what" is being done: just as much the style, format and procedure of legislation as its substance[75]. Orbán first used the term *illiberal* democracy as a model for Hungary, arguing that the country should be based on "national interests" rather than Western liberal values. He cited Russia, Turkey, and China as examples of successful illiberal states and positioned Hungary as an alternative to the liberal democratic framework promoted by the EU[76]. At this proposal, András L. Pap asserted:

> "Another term and concept that is corollary to understanding Orbán's Hungary is self-proclaimed illiberalism and the identification of his regime as an illiberal democracy. […] I will argue that Hungarian illiberal democracy manifests itself in the SNC – a vaguely defined, yet even normatively presented political construct in which majority rule may operate unbounded by the rule of law, separation of powers and other constraints of liberal democracies."[77]

Therefore, parallels may be drawn between the development of illiberalism in Hungary and Poland after 1989, from the moment that the seeds of illiberalism can be traced back to 1989 for both. However, the full expression of illiberalism in Hungary emerged later, especially with the rise of Viktor Orbán. He was initially part of the opposition to Hungary's communist regime, but later his political career shaped Hungary's current illiberal direction. In Poland, as mentioned in the previous sections, illiberalism also

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[75] András L. Pap, "Democratic Decline in Hungary: Law and Society in an Illiberal Democracy", *Routledge* (2018): 11-15.
[76] Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp. The speech is accessible through this link: https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp.
[77] András L. Pap, "Democratic Decline in Hungary: Law and Society in an Illiberal Democracy", *Routledge* (2018): 55-56.

began to emerge after 1989, but it was more gradual and less openly articulated in the early years. The PiS under Kaczyński began to take a more assertive approach to undermining democratic institutions in the 2010s, with a similar rhetoric around traditional values and national sovereignty. However, unlike Orban's Hungary, Poland's approach has sometimes been more focused on preserving democratic structures while at the same time eroding their liberal content.

To conclude, the historical backdrop provided fertile ground for the rise of nationalist and far-right movements in the 1990s and early 2000s, culminating in the political re-ascent of Viktor Orbán to power in 2010 - his first government, as mentioned before, was from 1998 to 2002 - and the shift towards *illiberal* democracy.

3.2.2 Key Right-Wing Extremist Groups and Movements – Hungary

Thus far, the emergence of right-wing extremist groups must be understood within the broader context of the country's political and socio-economic transformations after the collapse of communism in 1989.

One of the most significant actors in this landscape was the Jobbik party (Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom, Movement for a Better Hungary, Jobbik), founded in 2003 as a response to perceived threats to Hungary's national identity, including globalization, EU integration, and minority rights, particularly regarding the Roma community[78]. Regarding EU integration, with the exception of Hungary, the post-communist general public had shown only moderate skepticism towards the EU[79]. As stated in the precedent paragraph, the party emerged in an era of political disillusionment, when Hungary was grappling with the consequences of its transition from communism to a liberal democracy and market economy. This transition, while initially hailed as a success, brought widespread social and economic discontent, particularly in rural areas and among the working class, who felt marginalize by the neoliberal policies of successive governments. From its inception, Jobbik adopted a hardline nationalist and Euroskeptic stance, presenting itself as an alternative to both the post-communist Socialist Party (MSZP) and the center-right Fidesz. The party drew inspiration from Hungary's historical nationalist movements, frequently invoking symbols and rhetoric associated with the interwar Horthy era, when Hungary pursued revisionist policies aimed at reversing the territorial losses imposed by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon. Jobbik's rejection of Trianon played a central role in its platform, appealing to Hungarian irredentists and fostering support in ethnic Hungarian communities across neighboring countries, particularly in Slovakia,

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[78] Jeffrey Stevenson Murer, "The Rise of Jobbik, Populism, and the Symbolic Politics of Illiberalism in Contemporary Hungary", *PISM Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych* (2015): 79-102.

[79] Andrea L.P. Pirro, "The Populist Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe: Ideology, impact, and electoral performance", *Routledge Studies in Extremism and Democracy* (2015): 183-184.

Romania, and Serbia. Furthermore, Jobbik positioned itself as a party that represented "true" Hungarian interests, in contrast to what it portrayed as a self-serving and globalist political elite. Its breakthrough came in the 2009 European Parliament elections, where it won 14.8% of the vote securing three seats. This result demonstrated the growing appeal of far-right nationalism in Hungary and set the stage for Jobbik's success in the 2010 parliamentary elections, where it became the third-largest party in the National Assembly, securing 16.7% of the vote and 47 seats[80]. Consequently, this electoral success signified the radical right becoming an institutionalized force in national politics.

In the aftermath of 2010, Jobbik sought to expand its influence, adopting a more professional and disciplined image to attract a broader electorate. Under the leadership of Gábor Vona, the party attempted to balance its extremist roots with a strategy of gradual normalization. This shift intensified after Fidesz, under Viktor Orbán, began co-opting elements of Jobbik's nationalist rhetoric and policies, particularly after 2015, when the European migrant crisis became a dominant political issue in Hungary. With Orbán's government taking a hard stance against migration and building border fences to stop the influx of refugees, Jobbik found itself increasingly outflanked on issues of nationalism and security. By the late 2010s, Jobbik underwent a notable ideological transformation, seeking to rebrand itself as a more mainstream conservative force rather an openly radical party. This latter move alienated some of its most extreme supporters, leading to splits and defections that resulted in the formation of even more radical far-right movements, such as Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk Mozgalom), founded in 2018 by former Jobbik hardliners. Overall, the party can be deemed responsible for a considerable renewal of the Hungarian populist radical right; though certainly drawing on some of the issues advocated by the MIÉP, Jobbik has been able to frame old-fashioned themes in a modern way and deliver the through new communication channels, i.e., on November 2013, the party had over 140,000 followers on its Hungarian Facebook page (as compared to the almost 74,000 of the ruling party Fidesz), reasonably earning the reputation of 'far-right party for the Facebook generation'[81].

However, the transformation of Hungary's right-wing political landscape cannot be fully understood without analyzing the role of Fidesz, the dominant party in Hungarian politics since the early 2010s. Unlike Jobbik, which emerged as a radical nationalist force, Fidesz underwent a profound ideological shift, evolving from a liberal, youth-oriented party in the late 1980s to an increasingly authoritarian, nationalist, and illiberal force under the leadership of Viktor Orbán. It was founded in 1988 as the Alliance of Young Democrats, originally established as a liberal, anti-communist youth movement opposing the ruling Socialist government. In 1994, Fidesz rebranded itself as Hungarian Civic Party, signaling a gradual ideological shift towards conservative nationalism. The real turning point came in the

[80] Hungarian National Election Office (NVI) – Official election results for the 2009 European Parliament elections and 2010 parliamentary elections in Hungary. www.valasztas.hu

[81] Andrea L.P. Pirro, "The Populist Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe: Ideology, impact, and electoral performance", *Routledge Studies in Extremism and Democracy* (2015): 67-71.

1998 parliamentary elections, when Fidesz, under Orbán's leadership, secured victory and formed a government in coalition with conservative parties. However, Fidesz lost the 2002 elections to the Socialist Party (MSZP), an even that deeply influenced Orbán's subsequent political strategy. Following the 2002 defeat, Fidesz gradually abandoned its moderate and conservative position, embracing a strong nationalist and anti-liberal discourse. Since returning to power in 2010, Orbán has systematically transformed Hungary's political system into what he describes as an "illiberal democracy". Fidesz's dominance has pushed Hungary's political spectrum further to the right, leading to the marginalization of Jobbik. In the meanwhile, Fidesz has increasingly aligned itself with other right-wing populist leaders in Europe, including Poland's PiS, Italy's Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini, and France's Marine Le Pen. This has reinforced Hungary's image as a bastion of nationalist and Euroskeptic politics within the EU[82].

Beyond Jobbik and Fidesz, several extremist movements have emerged in Hungary, further contributing to the radicalization of the political landscape. These groups, often operating on the fringes of mainstream politics, have played a crucial role in shaping nationalist and ultra-conservative narratives, particularly in response to issues such as immigration, EU integration, and minority rights. One of the most notorious far-right paramilitary organizations in Hungary, the Hungarian Guard was founded in 2007 as an offshoot of Jobbik. It was initially presented as a civic organization dedicated to "defending Hungarian culture and values". However, its militaristic structure, uniforms reminiscent of the Arrow Cross Party – Hungary's fascist movement during World War II – and its openly anti-Roma rhetoric quickly made it a symbol of the country's resurgent far-right extremism.

Also, the Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement (HVIM) is an irredentist and ultranationalist organization founded in 2001 by László Taroczkai, a key figure in Hungary's nationalist movement. The group takes its name from the 64 counties of pre-Trianon Hungary, symbolizing its goal of reversing the 1920 Treaty of Trianon and reuniting all ethnic Hungarians under a Greater Hungary. HVIM has gained notoriety for its extreme nationalist rhetoric, paramilitary activities, and strong anti-EU, anti-globalist, anti-minority positions, particularly against Roma and Jewish communities[83].

In summary, the rise of right-wing extremist groups in Hungary must be viewed as part of a broader political shift that has unfolded in the post-communist era. Although Jobbik played a pivotal role in institutionalizing far-right nationalism, its ideological evolution and eventual moderation created room for even more radical movements to emerge. Fidesz's embrace of nationalist and illiberal politics further reshaped Hungary's political landscape, pushing the country towards a more authoritarian and Euroskeptic trajectory. Meanwhile, paramilitary organizations like the Hungarian Guard and ultranationalist groups such as the Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement have contributed to the

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[82] Cas Mudde, "The far right today", *Cambridge University Press* (2019): 362-366.
[83] Katherine Kondor, and Mark Littler, "Invented Nostalgia: The Search for Identity Among the Hungarian Far-Right", from "Nostalgia and Hope: Intersections between Politics of Culture, Welfare, and Migration in Europe", *Springer* (2020): 119-135.

radicalization of public discourse, reinforcing a climate of exclusionary nationalism. Together, these developments illustrate how Hungary's far-right ecosystem has evolved, demonstrating both the adaptability and persistence of radical right-wing ideologies in the country's contemporary politics.

3.2.3 Recent Incidents and Trends – Hungary

In recent years, Hungary has seen a resurgence of right-wing extremist activity, fueled by nationalist rhetoric, anti-migrant sentiment, and historical revisionism. Political analysts as well as academic commentators have repeatedly pointed to the existence of a weak civil society – a legacy of nearly half-a-century of communist rule – as an important reason for the continuing democracy deficit of post-socialist countries[84]. Consequently, a weak civil society can make a country more vulnerable to extremism, including right-wing radicalism. Indeed, Hungary's civil society is weaker than in many Western European democracies – also generally weaker than Poland's one, since its civil society has shown stronger resistance compared to Hungary's - and it has faced increasing pressure, especially under Viktor Orbán's government. Hungary, initially probably the most staunchly liberal of all the post-socialist transition countries, has come to spearhead a right-wing populist backlash. And the lack of civil society activism is perhaps the ultimate cause behind the nationalist-populist turn. Civil society has been quite vibrant in the post-1989 period. However, rather than working exclusively toward strengthening and complementing liberal political institutions, radicalism and xenophobia. Consequently, Virág Molnár claimed that "civil society organizations have been instrumental in turning right-wing radicalism into a significant political force"[85].

By the mid 2000s, Jobbik was increasingly influential and used aggressive nationalist rhetoric against Roma, Jews, and immigrants. The ensuing street riots in the fall of 2006, besides representing the all-time nadir of post-1989 politics, proved to be crucial in facilitating the rise of the radical right[86]. Moreover, the riots brought together a few disconnected radical civic groups that were hitherto largely unaware of each other's existence. The shared themes – such as the mythical nationalism, the anti-Roma motives, etc., - among them are essential because they connect these organizations into a larger and cohesive network while offering anchors of commonality that strengthen the cultural bond among members. The relevance of mythical nationalism is also emphasized in the case of other Central and Eastern European countries, especially in Poland.

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[84] Virág Molnár, "Civil Society and the Right-wing Radicalization of the Public Shere in Hungary", from "The Rise of Populist Nationalism", *Central European University Press* (2019): 209.
[85] *Ibid.*, 210.
[86] *Ibid.*, 220.

In 2007, Jobbik established the Magyar Gárda (Hungarian Guard), a paramilitary-style uniformed groups inspired by interwar fascist movements like Miklós Horthy's regime and the Arrow Cross Party – the Hungary's Nazi collaborators during World War II, as seen in the above-paragraph. This Guard held public marches, especially in Roma-majority areas, intimidating communities and reinforcing the idea of "Gypsy crime" (cigánybűnözés) demanding the racial segregation of the Roma, a demand heavily promoted by far-right extremists. The Guard engaged in openly discriminatory activities that eventually caused its demise, pushing it into illegality. The activities of the Guard were in sharp conflict with its stated goals and founding deed; they aimed at invoking fear and inciting hatred against ethnic and racial minorities. Jobbik appealed the decision at the European Court of Justice arguing that it violated the basic right to freedom of assembly and association, but the case was rejected, and the ban was upheld in 2013. However, though officially banned in 2009, the group continued to operate under different names and inspired other nationalist movements. Indeed, shortly after the Guard was disbanded by court order, the association was reestablished as "The New Hungarian Guard"[87]. Hence, the trend I would like to stress here is the practice of banned extremist or nationalist groups re-forming under different names to circumvent legal restrictions. This strategy is often seen in far-right groups globally and will be further deepened in the next chapter. To introduce, when legally dissolved, they rebrand under a new name while maintaining their original ideology, decentralize into smaller, loosely connected factions to evade direct band, and use online networks to continue recruitment and organization. Yet, the New Hungarian Guard has been involved in several notable incidents, always targeting the Roma community, like in the Tatárszentygyörgy March (2009), or the Gyöngyöspata Vigilnate Activitities (2011), when its members conducted patrols and marches, thus creating a climate of fear and tension, aimed at intimidating the local Roma population.

Concerning Mi Hazánk Mozgalom (Our Homeland Movement), this nationalist party includes former members of the banned Jobbik paramilitary wing, the Hungarian Guard. In 2024, party leader László Toroczkai stated that if Ukraine were to lose its statehood due to ongoing conflicts, the party would lay claim to Ukraine's Zakarpattia region, which has a significant ethnic Hungarian population. These affirmations underscore the movement's commitment to nationalist ideologies, which refer back to the previously mentioned territorial claims, so often claimed by these movements.

Overall, Hungary's recent rise in right-wing extremism can be attributed to a combination of factors, including a weak civil society, which has struggled to counter the growing influence of nationalist and populist movements. The state's historical context, marked by decades of communist rule, has contributed to its vulnerability. Moreover, the emergence and persistence of groups like Jobbik and of its offshoots, including the Magyar Gárda and the New Hungarian Guard, have highlighted the dangers of

[87] Virág Molnár, "Civil Society and the Right-wing Radicalization of the Public Shere in Hungary", from "The Rise of Populist Nationalism", *Central European University Press* (2019): 231.

banned extremist factions rebranding and continuing to spread radical ideologies. These movements have capitalized on anti-migrant and anti-Roma sentiments, with particular focus on myths of nationalism and racial segregation. Ultimately, the actions and rhetoric of such groups, along with political figures like László Toroczkai, underscore the continued threat of right-wing radicalism in Hungary, posing significant challenges to both national security and democratic stability.

3.3 Overview of Right-Wing Extremism in Serbia

Right-wing extremism in Serbia has been shaped by a complex interplay of historical, political, and social factors, with deep roots extending back to the 19th century. The rise of Serbian nationalism, which has been central to the country's identity and political development, played a crucial role in the emergence of right-wing extremist ideologies. During the 1990s, as Yugoslavia disintegrated, this nationalism took an increasingly radical turn, propelled by the political rhetoric of Slobodan Milošević and other Serbian leaders who framed the wars of the 1990s as a struggle to protect Serb minorities and defend the territorial integrity of Serbia. This narrative of ethnic defense laid the groundwork for the growth of far-right movements, with anti-liberal, anti-Western, and ethnocentric ideologies gaining prominence.

Furthermore, the wars of 1990s, and Serbia's central involvement in these conflicts, were critical in shaping the political climate that allowed right-wing extremism to flourish. Indeed, these wars – marked by widespread ethnic violence, genocide, as Norman Naimark pointed out in his *Genocide: A World History*, and the brutal reorganization of the region's borers, reinforced nationalist narratives and entrenched grievances. The role of the Serbian State under Slobodan Milošević in promoting and justifying these actions further deepened the connection within nationalism and violent extremism. Additionally, the international isolation Serbia faced during the 1990s, including sanctions and the NATO bombing campaign, also contributed to the rise of anti-Western sentiment.

Following the overthrow of Milošević in 2000, Serbia underwent a period of political and economic transition, but the legacies of the 1990s wars and the associated nationalist rhetoric persisted. Far-right groups, initially organized as paramilitary formations, transitioned into more formalized political movements and organizations, which continues to espouse nationalist, militaristic, and anti-liberal views, while often referring to a "Greater Serbia".

Today, the manipulation of historical memory and the appeal to ethnic unity remain crucial tools in the justification of policies that undermine democratic norms, limit political freedoms, and support autocratic governance. As such, the recurrent nostalgia for Yugoslavia and the reinforcement of nationalist sentiments perpetuates Serbia's illiberal trajectory, in a context in which nationalism has

facilitated the rise and normalization of right-wing extremism which, in turn, has contributed to the strengthening of autocratic governance in Serbia.

3.3.1 Historical Context and Evolution of RWE in Serbia

From a historical perspective, the wars of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia were pivotal in redefining the political order of the region and played a significant role in the rise of right-wing extremism in Serbia. Given their foundational impact on this topic, it is essential to mention the Yugoslav Wars not only as the root of contemporary right-wing extremism but also as a conflict often underrepresented in Western discourse, particularly in comparison to other major 20th century conflicts such as World War II and the Cold War. The Yugoslav wars involved the violent destruction of a society of 23 million people that was simultaneously undergoing the consequences of the collapse of Yugoslav socialism. Between 1991 and 1999, the wars in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo caused the death of approximately 140,000 people, of which 100,000 in Bosnia and Herzegovina[88].

Nevertheless, the ideological roots of right-wing extremism stretch back to earlier nationalist movements and historical narratives. In the 19th century, Serbian nationalism was closely tied to the struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire, with figures such as Ilija Garašanin and his *Načertanije* (1844) laying the groundwork for expansionist ideas of a Greater Serbia[89]. During World War II, Serbian nationalist extremism found expression in the Chetnik movement, led by Draža Mihailović, who, while initially resisting Axis occupation, later engaged in ethnic violence and collaborated with fascist forces against the communist Partisans[90]. Chetnik ideology, rooted in the glorification of Serbdom and a vision of ethnically homogeneous Serbian state, persisted in collective memory and re-emerged in the 1990s wars, influencing paramilitary groups such as Arkan's Tigers and the White Eagles. In a similar way, interwar Yugoslavia saw the rise of Serbian nationalist authoritarianism under the royal dictatorship of King Alexander I, who suppressed multiethnic federalism in favor of Serbian hegemony. Therefore, these historical precedents do illustrate how nationalist extremism continued to resurface throughout Serbian political history, providing a framework for the radical nationalist rhetoric of the 1990s and beyond.

In the 1980s, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (SKJ)'s socio-economic promises hollowed out, Yugoslavia's ideological foundations were challenged, and individual nations' nationalisms

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[88] Catherine Baker, "The Yugoslav War of the 1990s", *Palgrave* (2015): 1-2.
[89] Edislav Manetovic, "Ilija Garašanin: Načertanije and Nationalism", *Historical Review* (2008): 137-173.
[90] Tea Sindbæk, "The Fall and Rise of a National Hero: Interpretations of Draža Mihailović and the Chetniks in Yugoslavia and Serbia since 1945", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* (2009): 47-59.

became ever more prominent. Perhaps pre-1980 Yugoslavia was already destined for collapse, or its crises were so poorly managed that disintegration became inevitable. The symbolic rupture of Tito's death therefore did not mean the Yugoslav crisis began then; in fact, its underlying economic causes had already developed. Another possibility is that its destruction was deliberate, aligning with the notion of a "joint criminal enterprise", the charge later brought against the Serbian Slobodan Milošević by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). What we can guess today is that the 1990s wars would not have happened if Yugoslavia had reformed its way out of the crisis of Communism, or if it had disintegrated in the same peaceful ways as Czechoslovakia and parts of the USSR. However, no figure in the Yugoslav wars receives more scholarly attention than Milošević, leading to pose questions like: "Did Milošević consciously scheme to destroy the federation and create a homogeneous Serbian state by persecuting non-Serbs?" or "Was Milošević a nationalist, or an opportunist who took advantage of nationalism?".[91] However, what is sure is that the death of Yugoslav communist boss Marshall Josip Broz Tito, in 1980, set off the spiral of events that ended up destroying the Yugoslav state[92].

Among the republics emerging from Yugoslavia's disintegration, Serbia played a central role in both the conflicts and the broader political shifts that followed. In the past three decades, Serbia has changed its legal status four times; it went from being a federal unit of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (until 1992) and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY, 1992-2003), to a member of a state union with Montenegro (2003-2006), and finally an independent state (since 2006). It was involved, directly or indirectly, in four wars: the Slovenian (1991), Croatian (1991-1995), Bosnian (1992-1995), and Kosovar (1996-1999). In the post-war period, it was confronted with the secession of its southern province of Kosovo (2008), whose independence still disputes, Serbia is thus still struggling with the legacies of the wars, but also of the international isolation of the 1990s and the late democratic and economic transition, which started in the 2000s after the fall of then-president of FRY Slobodan Milošević.[93]

Under Milošević leadership, Serbian nationalism became the driving force behind the wars, with narratives of protecting Serb minorities in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, thus justifying military aggression and ethnic violence. The multinational state disintegrated at the beginning of the 1990s with genocidal consequences. In his work *Genocide: A World History*, Norman Naimark discusses the Yugoslav Wars and how ethnic violence was used as a political tool, providing valuable insights into how the Serbian leader's policies contributed to ethnic cleansing and violence in the Balkans[94]. He wrote:

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[91] Catherine Baker, "The Yugoslav War of the 1990s", *Palgrave* (2015): 24-25.
[92] Norman M. Naimark, "Genocide: A World History", *Oxford University Press* (2017): 123-124.
[93] Věra Stojarová, "Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective", *Routledge* (2023): 16-17.
[94] Norman M. Naimark, "Genocide: A World History", *Oxford University Press* (2017): 123-130.

> "The failure of communist ideology and the socialist state to meet the complex challenges of running a multinational country with a stalled economy led in the 1980s to the explosive growth of nationalist ideologies among the component republic of the Yugoslav federation, each of which felt abused in its own way by the central government in Belgrade. Even Serb politicians increasingly complained that their national cause had been undermined by communist rule, turning to Serbian nationalism as the answer."[95]

This led to conflict. Naimark added that although the initial signs of serious conflict came from Slovenia in June of 1991, it was the war between Serbia and Croatia that broke out soon thereafter that continued the first portents of genocide. Behind the Serbian lines, Milošević proceeded with his plans to absorb Croatian territories into a newly constituted, Serb-dominated Yugoslavia. The taking of Vukovar, in the eastern part of Croatia, and the occupation of eastern Slovenia introduced the element of genocide into campaigns of ethnic cleansing. Naimark thus proceeded:

> "The events in Slovenia and Croatia affected the other peoples of the Yugoslav Federation, as well. The Macedonians, Montenegrins, Kosovar Albanians, and most fatefully, the Bosnians, looked to advance their programs of independence[96], as the Serbs tried to hold together a Belgrade-dominated "Greater Serbia" within the crumbling borders of Yugoslavia."[97]

In Bosnia, the idea was to instill terror in the local Muslim population and induce them to run for their lives. Ethnic cleansing is much about punishment as it is about expulsion. The ethnic cleansing included rape, often on the spot, sometimes in transit, and sometimes in specially designed rape camps, to torment the Bosnian Muslims. The situation changed at Srebrenica, when the U.N. had designated the region a "safe area" in April 1993. However, despite its designation as a U.N. "safe area", Srebrenica fell to Bosnian Serb forces in July 1995, leading to the so-known massacre of Srebrenica. This latter was the worst atrocity on European soil since World War II. The fall of Srebrenica intensified NATO's involvement, leading to airstrikes against Bosnian Serbs positions and ultimately contributing to the Dayton Agreement in 1995, which ended the Bosnian War.

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[95] Norman M. Naimark, "Genocide: A World History", *Oxford University Press* (2017): 124.
[96] In the 1992 referendum on independence, 63,4% voters voted for "Are you for a sovereign and independent Bosnia and Herzegovina, a state of equal citizens, the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina Muslims, Serbs, Croats, and members of other nations living in it?". The Serbs boycotted the referendum. (Source: lessons from Věra Stojarová at Masarykova Univerzita in Brno, year 2023-2024).
[97] Norman M. Naimark, "Genocide: A World History", *Oxford University Press* (2017): 126.

Building on this historical background, I would now stress that the wars of the 1990s did not merely reshape the territorial and political landscape of the Balkans, but rather they served as a catalyst for the rise of Serbian right-wing extremism. As a matter of fact, the nationalist rhetoric employed by Slobodan Milošević and other Serbian leaders to justify military aggression and ethnic violence created an enduring political climate in which nationalism, ethnocentrism, and historical grievances became entrenched in Serbian political discourse. After the Dayton Agreement and NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999, Serbian nationalist narratives increasingly framed Serbia as a victim of Western aggression, reinforcing a siege mentality that persists in some right-wing circles today. The portrayal of the ICTY as an anti-Serb institution – due to the indictments and convictions of Serbian leader for war crimes – further radicalized segments of the Serbian political sphere, fueling resentment toward international institutions and neighboring states. Serbia is thus dealing with various manifestations of the socially embedded 'culture of extremism', present primarily as a consequence of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia and the ensuing events.

Hence, far-right groups have been active in Serbia since the late 1980s, coinciding with the onset of democratization and the liberalization of the former Yugoslavia's political and economic system. However, the wars of the 1990s served as catalyst in shaping the Serbian far-right, as they brought extreme nationalism to the forefront of the political agenda and contributed to its social acceptance. Another key factor in the normalization of the far-right was Serbia's international standing during this period. The country's isolation due to sanctions, which culminated in the NATO bombing in 1999 and the eventual secession of Kosovo, fueled xenophobia and reinforced a strong anti-Western and anti-globalist sentiment among the Serbian population. As a result, many Serbians perceived Western policies as hypocritical and unjust. This, combined with the country's economic struggles, deepened national frustration and further strengthened far-right nationalism.[98]

In the 1990s, far-right extremists operated primarily as paramilitary formations, orbiting mostly around the Serbian Radical Party, the most important promoter of the far right in Serbia. Once the democratic transition in Serbia began in 2000, they transformed themselves into various associations and movements. Following a short period of optimism after Milošević's fall the political and economic transition – marked by issues such as corruption and unemployment – fostered an environment of social and national frustration. This discontent was particularly pronounced among those who came of age during the 1990s, making them more vulnerable to the influence of radical right and far-right groups such as SNP 1389, SNP Naši, Sveri, Zavetnici, Obraz, Nacionalni stroj, Krv i čast, or Srbska akcija. These groups were formally registered as political parties or as non-governmental and non-profit civil

[98] Nemanja Džuverović, and Věra Stojarová, "Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective", *Routledge* (2023): 18.

organizations, though some operated without official registration. Their core ideology revolved around ethno-nationalism, intolerance toward minorities (whether ethnic, religious, or sexual), anti-liberalism, and anti-communism. They also exhibited strong hostility toward the West, embraced militarism, and glorified wartime leaders – including convicted war criminals – as national heroes. Additionally, their rhetoric frequently invoked Orthodox Christianity and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), promoted Islamophobia, and advocated for the unification – whether cultural or territorial – of so-called 'Serbian territories'.[99]

3.3.2 Key Right-Wing Extremist Groups and Movements – Serbia

Yet, the far right in Serbia, as well as in other post-socialist societies, came out into the open after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The wars between the Yugoslav successor states (1991-1995) acted as catalysts in the shaping of the far right, since they brought mainstream nationalism onto the agenda and hence rendered extreme nationalist, as un underlying tenet of the far right, socially acceptable[100]. Nonetheless, the origins of far-right nationalism can be traced back to the formation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia after World War I. During this time, extreme nationalist and irredentist ideas began to take shape, particularly through groups such as the Chetniks, a monarchist and nationalist movement that advocated for the protection of Serb populations across the Balkans. Their ideology, which mixed nationalism with a sense of territorial entitlement, foreshadowed many of the later themes of the far right in Serbia. For instance, they harbored deeply anti-Muslim sentiments, particularly towards Bosnian Muslims and Albanians. Their legacy has been appropriated and reinterpreted by contemporary nationalist and far-right groups in Serbia.

During the 1990s, the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) emerged as the primary, if not the sole, vehicle for far-right mobilization in Serbia. Under the leadership of the charismatic Vojislav Šešelj, the SRS attracted significant popular support despite the ostensibly unsophisticated nature of its ideological positions. Šešelj and other figures within the SRS promoted a vision of Greater Serbia, which involved the use of military force to support the Serbian populations in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. This ideology gained significant traction during the wars, fueling the rise of paramilitary groups. The regime of Slobodan Milošević, however, managed to restrain this burgeoning support though stringent control over the mass media, the strategic placement of secret service agents within the SRS, and ultimately, through the incarceration of Šešelj. For instance, during the 1992 elections for the Federal Parliament of the Federal

[99] Věra Stojarová, "Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective", *Routledge* (2023): 18-19.
[100] Jovo Bakic, "Right-Wing Extremism in Serbia", *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung* (2013): 1-2.

Republic of Yugoslavia – conducted amid intense regional conflicts and while the SRS maintained a cooperative relationship with the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) – the SRS secured approximately 30 percent of the vote in Serbia. Yet, within just eighteen months and following a conflict with the SPS, its electoral support had sharply declined to 13.8 percent. However, from 1990 until its split in 2008, the SRS served as a central hub around which various far-right groups – ranging from well-organized factions to more loosely affiliated satellites – coalesced. Indeed, radical right and far-right organizations in Serbia have emerged at various junctures since the 1990s, reflecting both historical legacies and evolving contours of nationalist mobilization.

During the early 2000s, the political landscape in Serbia underwent significant transformation. Evidence from Serbia during the Milošević era highlights several significant opposition protest movements, including those in 1991, 1992, 1996-1997, 1999, and 2000, which collectively contributed to the overthrow of the regime.[101] The collapse of Milošević's regime not only disrupted the established order but also paved the way for a reconfiguration of far-right politics. Firstly, although established in the 1990s, Obraz was a clerical movement that gained significant prominence during the 2000s. Known for its ultra-nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric, the group became a symbol of militant nationalism, ultimately leading to its banning in 2012 due to incitement to hatred and violence. Secondly, the group Dveri, initially emerging as a cultural organization, transitioned into a political party with a strong nationalist and socially conservative agenda. Over time, its rhetoric and policies have been classified by many as far-right, contributing to the broader discourse on nationalism in Serbia. In the late 2000s, youth-oriented formations such as SNP 1389 and SNP Naši appeared, harnessing generational discontent to galvanize nationalist sentiment among younger demographics. Thirdly, Sveri emerged around the same period, contributing to a network of groups that sought to capitalize on post-Milošević socio-political uncertainty. Its nationalist messaging was characterized by a rejection of Western influence and an emphasis on Serbian identity. Additionally, Naciolnalni Stroj (National Movmement) is a neo-fascist group that emerged in the mid-2000s. It is known for its admiration of Nazi ideology and has been involved in violent attacks against ethnic minorities, particularly Bosniaks and Albanians. The group has a reputation for engaging in street violence and anti-government protests, drawing inspiration from Serbian historical figures associated with war crimes during the 1990s wars. It was banned in 2011 by the Serbian authorities. Finally, I would mention Zavetnici (the Oathkeepers), a newer far-right group since 2014. The group has gained traction in response to dissatisfaction with Serbia's direction toward EU integration and its policies concerning Kosovo. Zavetnici's pro-Russian stance and anti-Western rhetoric

[101] Nebojša Vladisavljević, "Competitive authoritarianism and popular protest: Evidence from Serbia under Milošević", *International Political Science Review* (2016): 36-50.

align it with other nationalist factions in the region. It has managed to attract a following through its strong emphasis on traditional Serbian values, Orthodox Christianity, and national pride.

However, far-right organizations were not attracting much attention from the state or public since they were institutionally marginal, except for a few violent incidents that led to the prohibition of two such organizations – Obraz and Nacionalni stroj – by the Constitutional Court (which refused to prohibit SNP 1389 and SNP Naši) in 2011 and 2012. Most researchers of the far-right in Serbia agree that its international action potential is relatively weak and mostly dependent on the power of the related parties and movements in the EU and Russia, this latter being the case of Zavetnici. In fact, the group advocates for closer ties with Russia, seeing Moscow as an alternative to the European Union. This position is aligned with the broader Russian policy of discouraging EU expansion into the Balkans and promoting Russian influence in the region. By rejecting EU accession, Zavetnici positions itself against the Western geopolitical bloc and in favor of Russia's influence in the Balkans. Also, Russia has consistently supported Serbia's stance on Kosovo, vetoing any UN resolution that would recognize Kosovo as an independent state. Consequently, Zavetnici sees Russia as a key partner in resisting the recognition of Kosovo and combating what it sees as Western imperialism in the Balkans. However, Serbia today pursues a multi-vector foreign policy, balancing between Russia, the EU, China, and the US[102].

Far-right organizations in Serbia, despite their relatively weak international action potential and institutional marginalization, remain significant for several reasons, primarily due to their historical legacy and their role in shaping national political discourse. These groups are not merely important because of their direct impact at the moment but because of the long-term influence they have exerted on Serbian politics and society, especially in terms of nationalism and identity. Their historical legacy, rooted in the 1990s and early 2000s, is essential for understanding the trajectory of nationalist sentiment and the persistence of certain ideological positions within the country.

Having come to this point, I would like to point out a reflection that came to my mind, originating from the insights made so far for Poland, Hungary, and now Serbia. In Hungary and Poland, far-right ideas have been largely institutionalized within ruling parties: the Law and Justice (PiS) for Poland, and the Fidesz Party under Viktor Orbán for Hungary. In Serbia, however, far-right organizations remain institutionally weak and largely marginalized, despite their historical influence. Thus, unlike in Hungary and Poland, where nationalist forces are at the hearth of the government, Serbia's far-right operates mostly on the fringes, influencing discourse but lacking direct governmental power. Serbia's far-right groups, such as Obraz, Zavetnici, and SNP 1389, lack the organizational strength and electoral legitimacy to challenge mainstream political parties. In contrast, PiS and Fidesz successfully embedded far-right

[102] Andrew Konitzer, "Serbia between East and West", *Russian History* (2011): 103-124.

policies into national governance through strong party structures and electoral victories. Yet, despite their institutional weaknesses, Serbia's far-right organizations remain significant due to their historical legacy. Even though they have not achieved the same level of formal political power as their counterparts in Hungary and Poland, their ideological influence persists, particularly in narratives surrounding national identity, historical revisionism, and foreign policy orientations.

3.3.3 Recent Incidents and Trends – Serbia

Nowadays, the trends in Serbia are quite worrying; indeed, the 2020 parliamentary elections resulted in a significant shift, with pro-EU opposition parties – such as the Democratic Party (DS), the Party of Freedom and Justice (SSPP), the Movement of Free Citizens (PSG), or United Democratic Serbia (UDS) failing to secure seats in the legislature. This absence has been linked to the increasing influence of right-wing ideologies, which have gained momentum through nationalist rhetoric, Euroscepticism, and state-controlled media narratives. Consequently, the decline of the pro-EU allowed far-right groups and nationalist parties to strengthen their foothold. This shift has been accompanied by a rise in anti-Western sentiment, with narratives portraying the EU as an unreliable partner and emphasizing Serbia's traditional alliances with Russia, and China[103]. Moreover, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) – founded in 2008 by former members of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and led by Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić – and its allies have consolidated power by marginalizing dissenting voices and weakening independent institutions, further limiting the space for pro-European political forces.

Beyond the institutional sphere, right-wing extremism has become more visible in Serbian society, pushed by historical revisionism, and state tolerance – or even complicity – with extremist elements. Key actors in this phenomenon include ultra-nationalist groups, far-right movements, foreign actors like Russia, and even football hooligan firms. These latter, as a Serbian guy told me when I used to be in Erasmus in Czech Republic, have long been a breeding ground for nationalist extremism and violent political activism. The most influential groups include Delije (Red Star Belgrade supporters), historically linked to Arkan's paramilitary forces during the Yugoslav wars, then Grobari (Partizan Belgrade supporters), and ultras from smaller clubs; for instance, groups like Rad Belgrade's United Force are openly neo-Nazi and have engaged in racist, anti-LGBTQ+, and anti-migrant violence. These firms are

[103] Strategic partnership relations between the Republic of Serbia and the People's Republic of China were established in 2009, further deepened during 2013, and then raised to the level of a comprehensive strategic partnership in June 2016. The Republic of Serbia gives great significance to cooperation with People's Republic of China within the mechanism of cooperation between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe through the Belt and Road Initiative. The People's Republic of China is the most important trade partner of the Republic of Serbia in Asia. Information taken from the Official Site of the Republic of Serbia – Ministry of Foreign Affairs. https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/foreign-policy/bilateral-cooperation/china

not just football fanatics, rather they act as enforcers for political elites, engaging in organized crimes. The government response, in turn, tolerates their actions or co-opts them to maintain political control.

For what concerns far-right organizations advocating for ethno-nationalism, Greater Serbia ideology, and social conservatism, I would refer to Srbska Akcija (Serbian Action), a neo-fascist movement promoting Orthodox fundamentalism and anti-Western conspiracies, Levijatan (Leviathan Movement), initially an animal rights group that later evolved into an ultra-nationalist vigilante organization, and finally Obraz and 1389 Movement, that even though they were banned, their ideologies currently persist. Regarding incidents, Levijatan has been involved in numerous activities targeting migrants and other marginalized groups. They have conducted street patrols aimed at intimidating migrant and have been associated with anti-immigrant rhetoric. Obraz has a history of organizing violent attacks; notably, the organization played a central role in the violent riots during the 2010 Belgrade Pride event, which resulted in numerous injuries and arrests. Members of the 1389 Moveent have been involved in violent protests and attacks as well, including an incident in 2008 where participants of a Queer festival were assaulted, leading to arrest of movement members[104].

This normalization of extremism, combined with a lack of institutional countermeasures, not only endangers Serbia's democratic stability, but also strengthens its alignment with illiberal and authoritarian models, distancing it further from European integration and reinforcing a climate where radical ideologies can thrive unchecked[105]. Like Poland and Hungary, there has been a notable rise in illiberalism and challenges to democratic norms. Over the past decade, Serbia has seen a growing trend of political leaders consolidating power, weakening democratic institutions, and undermining judicial independence, much like in Hungary under Viktor Orbán or Poland under the Law and Justice Party. Indeed, Serbia's government, led by President Aleksandar Vučić, has been accused of stifling opposition voices, restricting media freedom, and fostering a political environment that undermines democratic processes. These actions align with the characteristics of *illiberal* democracy, where elections occur, but they are accompanied by the erosion of democratic checks and balances.

Moreover, the nostalgia for the former Yugoslavia is tied to a vision of a strong, unified Serbia that played a central role in a multi-ethnic state. This historical image appeals to many Serbs who view the breakup of Yugoslavia as a loss of both political power and ethnic unity. The Serbian government taps into these sentiments to justify its policies and rhetoric, especially in relation to Kosovo and other neighboring regions where ethnic Serbs live. This emphasis on nationalism and ethnic solidarity aligns with the values of far-right ideologies, which often prioritize national identity, territorial integrity, and

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[104] Suzana Grubješić, "Right-Wing Extremism in Serbia", from "Right Wing Extremism: South-East Europe in Focus", *Sofia Security Forum* (2022): 71-93.
[105] Milada Anna Vachudova, "Democratization in Postcommunist Europe: Illiberal Regimes and the Leverage of International Actors", *Center for European Studies Working Paper Series 139* (2006): 1-36.

resistance to perceived external threats, such as Western powers or international institutions. What I would like to stress now is that the nostalgia for Yugoslavia, and the government's embrace of nationalist rhetoric, plays into illiberalism. The nostalgia for the Yugoslav era, particularly among certain sectors of the population, is thus often manipulated by nationalist politicians to foster a sense of shared identity and purpose. This can serve to legitimize their illiberal policies, which may involve rejecting democratic norms, curtailing political freedoms, and cracking down on dissent. But this is not new for Serbia. The year 1989 marked the end of the Yugoslav communist period, and the start of a striking anti-liberal period under the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević, that culminated in the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and finally Kosovo. In this period the regime, coming out of the communist period, had only formally proclaimed a separation of powers and new democratic mechanisms that would control the government, while in reality this illiberal system remained under the complete control of one party, moreover its president, Slobodan Milošević[106]. However, the illiberal tendencies that took roots during this era continue to manifest in Serbia's political landscape today; it is not only a product of its past, but also a strategic maneuver in contemporary geopolitics.

In conclusion, the nostalgia for Yugoslavia and the strategic embrace of nationalism continue to fuel the trend of illiberalism in Serbia today, with significant implications for the country's democratic future and its relationship with both regional and international actors. As such, the manipulation of historical memory and the rhetoric of ethnic solidarity remain potent tools for justifying policies that undermine democratic principles and promote autocratic governance. Finally, nationalism enabled the appearance and later facilitated the legitimization of the Serbian right-wing extremism[107].

[106] Irena Ristić, "Illiberal Tendencies in Serbia: The Role of the EU", *IPSA congress 2023/Buenos Aires*: 1-7.
[107] Isidora Stakić, "Serbian Nationalism and Right-Wing Extremism", from "Violent Extremism in the Western Balkans", *Republic of Austria – Federal Ministry of Defence and Sports* (2016): 133.

3.4 Overview of Right-Wing Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The historical context of right-wing extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina is deeply rooted in the breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent Bosnian War, which dramatically reshaped the country's political, social, and ethnic landscape. Before the war, BiH was a multiethnic republic within Yugoslavia, with a significant Muslim majority and sizable Serb and Croat minorities. However, the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the rise of nationalist movements in the early 1990s sparked the Bosnian War, characterized by ethnic cleansing and territorial disputes, as Naimark attentively observed in his *Genocide: A World History*.

The war led to the creation of two main entities within BiH: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), which is mainly Bosniak and Croat, and Republika Srpska (RS), dominated and still claimed by Serbs, kind of like Kosovo. The 1995 Dayton Agreement ended the war but entrenched ethnic divisions in the political structure, with power-sharing mechanisms that intensified divisions instead of promoting unity, which was rather fostered by the "brotherhood and unity" slogan under Tito's Yugoslavia.

The post-war period saw the rise of nationalist rhetoric and right-wing extremism across all ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Republika Srpska, Serbian ultranationalist groups capitalized on the "Greater Serbia" ideology and historical narratives that justified the territorial expansion, whether Bosniak and Croat nationalist movements focused on their own respective victimhood narratives and the legitimacy of their claims to Bosnia, leading to a competition for "victim status" and further entrenching divisions. These movements fostered a climate of xenophobia, Islamophobia, often linked to revisionist interpretations of history that justified ethnic cleansing and territorial claims.

Hence, the difference of RWE in Bosnia, compared to other countries in the region, is that it is marked by fragmentation, with each ethnic groups maintaining its own nationalist ideologies. Unlike the well-established right-wing traditions in Poland, Hungary, and Serbia, this fragmentation in Bosnia has hindered the emergence of a unified far-right movement. Indeed, the multiethnic and decentralized political system, established by the Dayton Agreement, limits any single nationalist faction from dominating. However, despite the lack of unity, these extremist ideologies persist, often supported by nationalist political leaders who exploit ethnic divisions for political gain. This perpetuates a cycle of hostility and mistrust, and the persistence of RWE underscores the enduring consequences of ethnic nationalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina, making true reconciliation and stability in this post-conflict society a difficult and ongoing challenge, especially on the basis that, according to Misha Glenny: "Unless great care is taken, the delicate fabric of regional security could be torn, particularly since Serbia hovers

like a wraith in the background, threatening to ignite a Balkan war which it can do overnight if it so decides."[108]

3.4.1 Historical Context and Evolution of Right-Wing Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

It is almost impossible to communicate in a few pages the absurdities and complexities revolving around Bosnia and Herzegovina. Before going more specific with this nation that is now the subject of our study, I would like to point out what Griffiths reminded in his work *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict* regarding to nationalism in the Balkans states, since it fully reflects the Bosnian conflict:

> "Nationalist questions have been the scourge of stability in the Balkans region for generations. Nationalism is manifested in a variety of ways and is not a discrete problem. Not only do nationalist rivalries lead to international tensions in their own right, but they also tend to spawn ethnic and territorial disputes which are highly detrimental to regional peace and security. Furthermore, nationalist rivalries have been and are used internally within all Balkan states as a legitimizing and propaganda tool in the face of internal unrest and unpopularity".[109]

Before the collapse of communism in the early 1990s, Bosnia and Herzegovina[110] was one of the six republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), governed by the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) under Josip Broz Tito, along with Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, and Macedonia. The country was characterized by its multiethnic composition, the inhabitants of Bosnia-Herzegovina were in the largest part Muslims (43 percent), but there were also substantial minorities of Serbs (31 percent) and of Croats (17 percent)[111], coexisting under the banner of socialist "brotherhood and unity". Tito's policies suppressed nationalist sentiments and emphasized a Yugoslav identity, effectively keeping ethnic tensions under control through a centralized, one-party system. Moreover, while Bosnia remained among the least developed regions of Yugoslavia, socialist governments invested

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[108] Misha Glenny, "The Balkans: Nationalism, War, and the Great Powers, 1804-1999", *Viking* (2000): 180-181.
[109] Stephen Iwan Griffiths, "Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict: Threats to European Security", *Oxford University Press* (1993): 34-35.
[110] The Ottomans conquered both Bosnia and Herzegovina but ruled them as one province *(*Eyalet of Bosnia*),* although Herzegovina was sometimes administratively separate. The name Bosnia and Herzegovina became official when Austria-Hungary occupied the territory in 1878 and formally annexed it in 1908.
[111] Norman M. Naimark, "Genocide: A World History", *Oxford University Press* (2017): 126.

heavily in industrialization and in the modernization of infrastructure, and Bosnian citizens enjoyed relatively good standards of living. The fall of Yugoslavia and the war changed this[112].

As Slovenia and Croatia declared independence in 1991, Bosnia and Herzegovina faced pressure to decide its own future. In March 1992, a referendum on independence was held, with 99% of voters supporting independence. However, the Serb population, which made up about a third of Bosnia's population, largely boycotted the vote. The Bosnian Serb leadership, backed by the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) and later by Serbia under Slobodan Milošević, opposed independence and aimed to create a "Greater Serbia" by annexing Bosnian Serb majority areas. Bosnian Serb leaders, backed by Belgrade and the JNA, declared the creation of the Republika Srpska and began preparing for war. The Bosnian War started in April 1992 and ended in December 1995. During this time, about 100,000 people died, and about half of the country's population became displaced. The city of Sarajevo suffered the longest siege in the history of modern warfare, which claimed the lives of about 10,000 of its citizens. Daniela Lai, in her work *Socieconomic Justice*, wrote:

> "Throughout Bosnia, civilians were deliberately targeted by armed forces whose intent was to 'ethnically cleanse' those areas from people belonging to different ethno-religious groups. The conflict involved Bosnian Muslims (or Bosniak) forces opposing Bosnian Serb and Serbian paramilitary units, and parallel conflicts between Bosnian Croat forces and bot Serbs and Bosniaks. Alongside interethnic fighting, however, the story of the war was also characterized by economic clashes, destruction, and exchange among opposing factions, ultimately at the expense of the majority of Bosnian civilians – without regard for ethnicity".[113]

The fundamental idea was to drive the Muslims – men, women, and children – from their homes in territory that the Serbs claimed as their own. The means of ethnic cleansing varied depending on the size and the location of the Muslim population. Some Serb perpetrators thought of rape as a way to restore the good "Serb blood" that had been tainted by the long Ottoman occupation – since then the Muslim religion.[114]

The Bosnian War ended with the signing of the Dayton Agreement in December 1995. As Georg Simmel wrote, "the ending of conflict is a specific enterprise. It belongs neither to war nor to peace, just as a bridge is different from either bank it connects".[115] The peace deal, brokered by the United States

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[112] Daniela Lai, "Socioeconomic Justice: International Intervention and Transition in Post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina", *Cambridge University Press* (2020): 45.
[113] *Ibid.,* 50.
[114] Norman M. Naimark, "Genocide: A World History", *Oxford University Press* (2017): 128.
[115] Georg Simmel, "The Web of Group-Affiliations", The Free Press (1964): 74-81.

and signed in Dayton, Ohio, halted the conflict but entrenched ethnic divisions in the country's political system. Bosnia and Herzegovina were recognized as a sovereign state, yet it was divided into two highly autonomous entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), largely composed of Bosniaks and Croats, and Republika Srpska (RS), dominated by Serbs. This fragile power-sharing structure, while ensuring peace, reinforced wartime ethnic identities, making political cooperation difficult and deepening nationalist sentiments. Indeed, the peace agreement at Dayton predestined post-war BiH to be a complicated political system, reflecting ethnic divisions and pressing the once-warring parties into compromises, making any development nearly impossible[116]. Therefore, rather than fostering reconciliation, the post-Dayton era saw the rise of nationalist rhetoric and right-wing extremism, particularly in Republika Srpska. At the same time, right-wing extremism in BiH was not confined to Serb nationalism. As a matter of fact, within the Bosniak and Croat communities, similar nationalist narratives emerged, often portraying their respective groups as the true victims of the war and fueling anti-Serb sentiments.

At this point, I would like to make a reflection reminding of Georg Simmel's theories, from the moment that the fragmentation of Bosnian society in the post-war might be better understood through Simmel's concept of the "stranger", this latter introduced in his work *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*. He describes the stranger as someone who is both near and far, inside and outside a society – someone who belongs to a community in some respects but remains distant in others. Strangers are not complete outsiders like enemies, but they are never fully integrated either[117]. Applying his theories to the Bosnian War, the Bosnian society became fragmented after the war, along ethno-national lines with each group emphasizing its own victimhood[118] and often perceiving others as existential threats. From neighbors – during the communist era, the ruling Communist Party promoted "brotherhood and unity" (bratstvo i jedinstvo) as an official ideology - Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs became "strangers", and memories of war and ethnic cleansing made coexistence fragile.

Even after the Dayton Agreement, members of different ethnic communities lived in the same country but in separate political and social realities, thus reinforcing their status as "strangers" within the same state. This way, nationalist and extremist groups redefined former neighbors as "outsiders", even though they had lived together for decades. From the Serb nationalist point of view, groups or movements such as the Serbian Radical Party, the Ravna Gora, or the Serb Honor, all engaged in anti-Bosniak and anti-Western rhetoric, pushing the idea that Republika Srpska must remain separate from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Instead, Bosniak nationalist groups like the Bosnian Patriotic Party, often portray Bosniaks as the only legitimate people of Bosnia. The Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and

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[116] Věra Stojarová, "Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective", *Routledge* (2023): 31-32.
[117] Georg Simmel, "The Web of Group-Affiliations", *The Free Press (*1964): 604-605.
[118] Goran Basic, "Constructing "Ideal Victim" Stories of Bosnian War Survivors", *Social Inclusion,* edited by Professor Ulf R. Hedetoft from the University of Copenhagen (2015): 25-34.

Herzegovina, at its own turn, advocates for a third entity in Bosnia, a Croat-majority region separate from both Republika Srpska and the Federation, reinforcing ethnic segregation. Moreover, there is a sort of competition for victimhood from each side. After the war, each claimed a "victim" status.[119]

Hence, the persistence of these nationalist narratives has directly influenced the evolution of right-wing extremism. In the post-war period, each ethnic group's claim to exclusive victimhood was not only a mechanism for processing trauma but also a political tool used by nationalist parties and extremist movements to maintain division. The competition for the status of a victim of the wars is today so strong that populism is becoming the most represented "worldview" and a programme of xenophobic acts towards others.[120] Right-wing extremist groups capitalized on this dynamic, framing their respective communities as the rightful heirs of Bosnia while portraying the others as existential threats. This further reinforced the "stranger" dynamic described by Simmel, where neighbors, despite living within the same borders, remained permanently alien to one another, their coexistence defined by mutual suspicion rather than reconciliation. These groups ensure that Bosnia remains trapped in a cycle of mutual distrust. In this way, the "stranger" dynamic persists; rather than fostering integration, each community perceives the others as perpetual outsiders, justifying ongoing segregation and nationalist policies that prevent the country from achieving genuine political stability. Indeed, nationalist political parties continue to dominate the political scene, exploiting the fear of the "other" to maintain power.

In conclusion, the historical trajectory of Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrated how the fragmentation of Yugoslavia and the Bosnian War profoundly transformed the country's political and social structures, while also creating the conditions for the persistence of nationalist and right-wing extremist ideologies. The dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia dismantled the unifying framework of "brotherhood and unity", giving way to the rise of ethno-nationalist rhetoric, which was solidified through both wartime violence and the post-war institutional organization established by the Dayton Agreement. Even though the agreement successfully halted the armed conflict, it also entrenched ethnic divisions, embedding a system of governance that reinforced rather than reconciled historical grievances, thus enabling right-wing extremism to thrive, while highlighting the enduring consequences of ethno-nationalist mobilization in the wake of war.

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[119] *Ibidem*.

[120] Goran Basic, Zlatan Delić, and Halima Sofradzija, "Ideology of neo-fascism, education, and culture of peace: the Empirical Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina", *Critical Education* (2019): 1-20.

3.4.2 Key Right-Wing Extremist Groups and Movements – Bosnia and Herzegovina

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended in November 1995, but its legacies still impact BiH citizens. Indeed, they are especially vulnerable to ethnic nationalism, political radicalization and ideological extremism. Right-wing ideological spectrum is mostly divided by ethnicity and includes ultranationalist, neo-fascist, and neo-Nazi movements. The most prevalent narratives of these groups are related to religious nationalism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and historical revisionism. However, they are not politically active and their alleged connections to nationalist political parties have not been proven.[121]

In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, far-right groups are primarily associated with Bosniak and Croat nationalist narratives, often centered on historical revisionism, anti-Serbian rhetoric, and religious nationalism. Even though their influence is largely ideological, certain ultranationalist movements – such as the Young Muslims or the Bosnian Movement of National Pride (BPNP) for the Bosniak nationalist groups, and the Croatian Pure Party of Rights (HČSP) for the Croat ones - have gained traction through cultural and veterans' associations.

In Republika Srpska, right-wing extremism is predominantly linked to Serbian ultranationalist groups, which draw inspiration from historical figures and narratives associated with Serbian radical nationalism and neo-Chetnik ideology. About this latter, an institutionally organized "Chetnik movement" has continued into the 21st century, persisting after the socialist Yugoslavia, with the blessing and support of the Serbian Orthodox Church and a part of Serbian politics. Masked under the Great Serbian ideology, this movement is a current modern phenomenon and can be linked to neo-fascism.[122] Basic, Delić, and Sofradzija agreed that:

> "The Great Serbian ideology symbolically survives with the help of the political instrumentalization of the myth about the Battle of Kosovo from 1389 as a destructive "Chetnik" policy and practice that does not want to see the borders of the Republic of Serbia end at the Drina River but considers Bosnia and Herzegovina to be Serbian land that belongs to Serbians, not Bosnians and Herzegovinians."[123]

These movements often promote revisionist interpretations of war, anti-Bosniak sentiment, and ties to broader Serbian nationalist networks. Moreover, the linguistic conflation of *srpski* (Serb) and *srbijanski*

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[121] Mirza Buljubašić, "Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE", *Radicalisation Awareness Network* (2022): 6-7.
[122] Goran Basic, Zlatan Delić, and Halima Sofradzija, "Ideology of neo-fascism, education, and culture of peace: the Empirical Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina", *Critical Education* (2019): 5-6.
[123] *Ibidem.*

(Serbian) in Bosnian Herzegovinian media has significant political and ideological implications, as it blurs the distinction between ethnic identity and statehood. While the first pertains to the Serb people regardless of their country of residence, the second specifically refers to Serbia as a political entity. By consistently using *srpski* to describe matters related to Serbia, media discourse reinforces a narrative tat aligns Bosnian Serbs with the Serbian state, subtly legitimizing nationalist claims that BiH – or parts of it – are inherently Serbian rather than a distinct multiethnic state. This rhetorical strategy has historical roots in Great Serbian ideology, which seeks to expand Serbian national identity beyond Serbia's borders, often at the expense of Bosnia and Herzegovina's sovereignty. Consequently, such linguistic manipulation not only distorts public perception but also fuels separatist sentiments.[124] Moreover, some RWE organizations operate as formally registered non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Republika Srpska, exhibiting anti-governmental tendencies while advocating for national unity and ethnic purity, such as the Chetnik movement. All closely cooperate with their equivalents from Montenegro, Serbia, and beyond, and they have close ties with the Serbian Orthodox Church, war veterans' organizations, and various other RWE organizations and individuals.[125]

The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC, or Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva) plays a crucial role in shaping nationalist narratives in Republika Srpska, and its connection to right-wing extremism cannot be overlooked. Indeed, in post-war, certain factions within the SOC have aligned themselves with Serbian nationalist politics, reinforcing ultranationalist ideologies and providing ideological and moral justification for right-wing extremist movements. Furthermore, elements within the SPC have directly or indirectly supported the neo-Chetnik movement, thus rooting in Serbian ultra-nationalism and historical revisionism.

These groups and movements are often in ideological conflict with one another, reflecting the broader ethnic and nationalist divisions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The point is that while the Bosniak and Croat nationalist movements focus on their own distinct historical grievances and aspirations, Serbian ultranationalist groups maintain a vision of a unified Serbian state that includes Bosnia and Herzegovina. These tensions are often exacerbated by political actors who seek to exploit the divisions for their own gain, further entrenching the ideological rifts that have long plagued the country. For instance, in the years following the war, political leaders such as Milorad Dodik, the leader of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) in Republika Srpska, have capitalized on Serbian nationalist sentiments to consolidate power. Similarly, Croatian political leaders have, at times, exploited nationalist sentiments within the Croat community to fain favor and further their own political agendas. During the 2018 presidential election, Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović used nationalist rhetoric during her

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[124] *Ibid.*, 16-17.

[125] Mirza Buljubašić, "Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE", *Radicalisation Awareness Network* (2022): 7.

campaign to appeal the Croat electorate. At the same time, Bosniak political figures have, on occasion, sought to exploit ethnic nationalism to bolster their political standing within the Bosniak community. However, the exploitation of these ethnic divisions by political actors does not simply serve to secure votes but also perpetuates a cycle of hostility and mistrust between the communities of BiH.

Still, these tensions are not merely political or cultural. In fact, they also serve as fertile ground for the growth of right-wing extremist ideologies. The political exploitation of ethnic divisions by leaders such as Milorad Dodik, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, and others, has not only entrenched nationalist agendas but has also provided legitimacy to the far-right, ultranationalist, and neo-fascist movements.[126]

Nonetheless, Bosnian right-wing extremism is a more recent and less pronounced phenomenon compared to the well-established far-right movements in Poland, Hungary, and Serbia, this latter albeit to a lesser but more violent extent than the first two. Poland and Hungary have deep-rooted right-wing traditions that date back to the interwar period, reinforced by nationalist opposition to communism during the Cold War. At its turn, Serbia's right-wing extremism has a long-standing presence, largely tied to the legacy of Great Serbian nationalism, Chetnik ideology, and post-Yugoslav war narratives. On the other hand, in Bosnia nationalism remained more suppressed and fragmented, as the republic was the most ethnically diverse and lacked a dominant majority group. Unlike in Serbia, where nationalist groups rally around a unique ethno-nationalist vision, Bosnia's right-wing extremism is split into Bosniak, Croat, and Serb factions, each with competing historical grievances and political goals. This internal competition prevented the emergence on a national level. Additionally, Bosnia's multiethnic and decentralized political system, since the Dayton Agreement in 1995, limits the ability of any one nationalist group to dominate the entire country.

In conclusion, the fragmentation written so far contrasts with Poland, Hungary, or Serbia, where right-wing extremism is often fueled by a dominant nationalist ideology tied to state-building narratives. Consequently, while RWE exists in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it remains weaker and more localized, lacking the broader organizational strength seen in other post-communist states.

[126] Heather A. Conley, and Matthew Melino, "Blinking Red Lights: A Resurgence of Ethno-Nationalism and Its Implications for the Future Integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina", *CSIS* (2019): 1-6.

3.4.3 Recent incidents and Trends – Bosnia and Herzegovina

As can be deduced from what has been drawn so far, Bosnia and Herzegovina's history of right-wing extremism is deeply connected to the aftermath of the Bosnian War, since 1992 to 1995, and the rise of ethnic nationalism during the conflict. Scholars have explained the persistence of nationalism in post-conflict by emphasizing symbolic factors.

During the war, extreme nationalist factions emerged within the different ethnic groups. The Bosnian Serb forces, under Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, adopted genocidal tactics against Bosniaks and Croats. The far-right ideology promoted by the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) fueled the conflict, leading to atrocities like the Srebrenic massacre in 1995, where over 8,000 Bosniask were murdered. This event is a focal point for understanding the roots of right-wing extremism in Bosnia. Right-wing extremist groups in Bosnia and Serbia often used the siege as a symbol of their struggle for ethnic purity and territorial control. In 1997, in Republika Srpska, more specifically in Banja Luka, groups of Bosnian Serbs engaged in violent protests against the presence of international peacekeepers and efforts to promote reconciliation. The rioters were motivated by a desire to reject the post-war political system and push for greater ethnic dominance in the region.

Right-wing extremism among Bosniaks and Croats is less frequently discussed compared to the Serbian variant, but it has nonetheless manifested. However, there have been smaller-scale nationalist incidents where Bosniak nationalist rhetoric flared up. Some Bosniak nationalist groups have engaged in symbolic actions such as celebrating figures from the wartime Bosnian Army and their resistance against Serbian forces. For instance, in 2013, a Bosniak nationalist rally in Sarajevo commemorated the Bosnian Army, with individuals waving flags and carrying symbols that come critics saw as fueling ethnic divisions. Even though these actions were not violent, they contributed to a rise in ethnic polarization. The most significant and controversial events related to Croatian right-wing extremism in Bosnia involve the glorification of the Ustaša regime, which ruled Croatia during World War II.[127] In 2008, a group of Croat extremists in the town of Mostar, a flashpoint for ethnic tensions, held an event celebrating the Ustaša regime. Participants waved the Ustaša flag and displayed the "Za Dom Spredni", which means "For the Home Ready" slogan.[128] These actions were condemned by many in Bosnia, especially by Bosniaks, as they were seen as an attempt to revive dangerous nationalist sentiments from the past. In the 2018 elections, members of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and other Croat nationalist factions campaigned heavily on the idea of "Croat sovereignty" in Bosnia, which has occasionally led to protests and heated political rhetoric.

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[127] Lovro Kralj, "Populism, memory politics and the Ustaša movement 1945-2020", Routledge (2021): 1-20.
[128] Vjeran Pavlaković, "Flirting with Fascism: The Ustaša Legacy and Croatian Politics in the 1990s", *Center for History, Democracy and Reconciliation* (2008): 1-23.

To conclude, the right-wing extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina is characterized by a distinctive blend of incidents and trends, influenced by the country's multiethnic divisions and the lasting impact of the Bosnian War. Indeed, unlike the more straightforward nationalist movements in countries like Poland, Hungary, and Serbia, Bosnia's right-wing extremism is influenced by the complex interplay of different ethnic groups, each with its own history of conflict and resistance. Incidents of violence and nationalist demonstrations have emerged among Serbs, Bosniaks, and Croats, and are reflective of broader, more persistent trends of ethnic polarization and division. The ongoing trend of ethnic nationalism in Bosnia makes it clear that right-wing extremism in the country is not merely a relic of the past, but a contemporary challenge that is deeply embedded in its post-war context. Post-conflict nationalism remains a major obstacle to institutional reforms, stalling the country's progress in the European integration process.[129]

[129] Denisa Kostovicova, and Vesna Bojicic-Dzelilovic, "Ethnicity Pays: The Political Economy of Postconflict Nationalism in Bosnia-Herzegovina", from "After Civil War: Division, Reconstruction, and Reconciliation in Contemporary Europe", *University of Pennsylavnia Press* (2015): 187-189.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Comparative Analysis on Right-Wing Extremism: Global Patterns, Eastern Europe, and the Balkans

> There are no distant places any longer: the world is small, and the world is one.
>
> Wendell Lewis Willkie

4.1 Transnational Influences and Global Patterns

The radical right's influence on right-wing extremism is not confined to national borders but is deeply shaped by transnational networks and global ideological currents. Moreover, the rise of extreme right parties is also a consequence of a broader trend: the mounting crisis of confidence in democratic and representative institutions. Their perceived inefficacy, failure to implement adequate policies, and detachment from ordinary citizens have fueled disillusionment, providing fertile ground for radical movements worldwide, spanning regions such as Europe, North America, Latin America, and parts of Asia.[1]

Over the past decades, radical right movements have developed cross-border networks, drawing inspirations from both past models and contemporary political trends. Indeed, while nationalist and far-right groups often claim to defend their respective national identities, their rhetoric, strategies, and organizational structures frequently mirror those found in other countries, although they preserve key differences. These differences emerge primarily in their historical narratives, targeted "enemies", relationship with religion, political strategies, and foreign alliances. For instance, Polish right-wing extremism is deeply rooted in anti-communism and Catholic nationalism, while in Serbia, it is more closely tied to ethno-nationalist narratives shaped by the Yugoslav Wars. Similarly, while Western European far-right movements often focus on anti-immigration rhetoric, in Eastern Europe and the Balkans extremist discourse is frequently directed at ethnic minorities, e.g., the Roma one, or directed at supranational organizations like the EU and NATO. Additionally, the role of religion varies, with movements like the Polish radical right strongly integrating religious identity into their ideology, whereas others, such as the French far right, maintain a more secular or even anti-clerical stance. Political strategies also differ; while parties like France's Rassemblement National or Italy's Lega seek electoral legitimacy,

[1] Piero Ignazi, "Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe", *Oxford University Press* (2003): 203-205.

some radical right factions in the Balkans maintain ties with paramilitary groups or authoritarian-leaning governments. For instance, in Serbia elements of the radical right have maintained strong connections with Russia, aligning with pro-Kremlin initiatives that promote Euroscepticism, historical revisionism, and ultranationalist rhetoric. These ties have been reinforced through political alliances, disinformation campaigns, and even cooperation with Russian-backed extremist networks. Finally, foreign influences shape these movements differently – some look toward Western populist models such as the American alt-right or German identitarian movements, whereas others align more closely with Russian geopolitical narratives, particularly in regions like Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This external influence interacts with local historical legacies and post-1989 transformations, as noted by Mudde[23] and Pirro[4]. These movements not only adapt to their national contexts but also respond to broader transnational ideological currents. While Mudde highlights their pan-European similarities, Pirro emphasizes their specific regional dynamics, arguing that radical right parties in Central and Eastern Europe react to post-1989 transformations by drawing on historical narratives. As he noted, their radical and illiberal stance does not necessarily make them anti-system, yet their relationship with democratic principles remains elusive. This is further complicated by their transnational connections as introduced so far, as some align with Western populist models while others are influenced by Russian geopolitical strategies, reinforcing different forms of illiberalism across the region. Moreover, even though Latin America is less commonly seen as a direct influence on Eastern Europe and Balkan radical right movements and then on right wing extremism, there are some interesting connections one could refer to. To mention one, during the Cold War, Latin America right-wing regimes – such as those in Argentina, Chile, and Brazil – developed models of authoritarian governance, anti-communism, and nationalist rhetoric that resonate with contemporary far-right movements in Eastern Europe. Leaders like Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia have embraced a strongman narrative that mirrors Latin America authoritarian traditions, combining nationalism, securitization, and opposition to leftist or liberal forces. Still, figures like Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil[5] and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador have used tough-on-crime, anti-leftist, and nationalist populist rhetoric[6] that has found echoes in Poland with PiS, in Hungary with Fidesz, and even in Serbia.

Regarding closer Western populist models, the Rassemblement National (until 2018 National Front, or FN) is one of France's most prominent far-right parties that exemplifies the radical right's

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[2] Cas Mudde, "Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe Redux", *Political Studies Review*, 7 (3) (2009): 330-337.
[3] See Chapter I, Sec. 1.3, "Core Ideologies of the Radical Right".
[4] Andrea L.P. Pirro, "The Populist Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe: Ideology, impact, and electoral performance", *Routledge Studies in Extremism and Democracy* (2015): 194-195.
[5] José Antonio Sanahuja, Diego Hernández Nilson, and Camilo López Burian, "The far right, populism, and the contestation of regionalism in South America: Bolsonaro and Milei", *Bristol University Press* (2024): 502-522.
[6] José Antonio Sanahuja, and Camilo López Burian, "Latin America's Neopatriots", *NACLA Report on the Americas* (2024): 28-34.

transnational reach. Founded by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1972, the party has been a key player in shaping the European far right's political strategies, especially regarding nationalism, anti-immigration rhetoric, and Euroscepticism. Indeed, at an ideological level, "the FN combines political anti-liberalism, in the guise of an exclusionary or 'ethnocentric' authoritarianism, with economic anti-liberalism, in the form of protectionism and 'welfare chauvinism' […] As such, it represents the latest incarnation of an extreme right-wing tradition that first appeared in France at the end of the nineteenth century and ten re-emerged during the inter-war period. […] At a socio-logical level, the FN has enlisted its principal support among those strata most threatened by the processes of economic and social modernization".[7] Consequently, the FN's transnational influence has been particularly evident in its alliances with other far-right parties across Europe, thus solidifying its place as a leading force within the broader European radical right movement.

Germany's far-right networks have been influential, particularly in the 1990s and 2000s, contributing to ideological exchanges and transnational activism. For a long time, post-war Germany was perceived as an exceptional case in the study of radical right politics because these parties were not represented in parliament. This picture changed dramatically in 2017 when the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, or AfD), a far-right and right-wing populist political party in Germany founded in 2013, passed the electoral threshold for the first time and became the third largest party in the German Bundestag, i.e., the national parliament of the Federal Republic of Germany whose seat is the Reichstag Building in Berlin. Yet, this does not mean that the radical right in Germany did not play an important role in German politics before 2017.[8] Indeed, in the 1990s, neo-Nazi groups such as the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) established informal links with Polish extremists through subcultures and nationalist gatherings, despite historical tensions between the two countries.[9] In the early 2000s, far-right organizations like Germany's Free German Workers' Party (FAP) and later the Identitarian Movement began influencing Hungarian radical right circles, particularly Jobbik, by promoting ethno-nationalist and anti-globalist narratives. After 2015, the migration crisis provided new common ground, with the above-mentioned AfD and elements within Fidesz aligning on anti-immigration rhetoric and Euroscepticism. Moreover, German far-right activists participated in transnational demonstrations, such as PEGIDA-linked protests, and used digital platforms to amplify their message across Eastern Europe.

Still, Austria's Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, or FPÖ) stands out as a critical transnational actor, fostering strong ties with radical right parties in Central and Eastern Europe. The

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[7] Gabriel Gooliffe, "Globalization, Class Crisis and the Extreme Right in France in the New Century", from "Varieties of Right-Wing Extremism in Europe", *Routledge* (2013): 85-89.
[8] Malisa Zobel, and Micheal Minkenberg, "From the Margins, But Not Marginal: Putting the German Radical Right's Influence on Immigration", from "Do They Make a Difference? The Policy Influence of Radical Right Populist Parties in Western Europe", *Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd.* (2019): 13.
[9] Rafal Pankowski, "Right-Wing Extremism in Poland", *Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung* (2012): 3-9.

FPÖ's collaboration with Hungary's Jobbik and Serbia's Radical Party (SRS) has reinforced narratives of ethno-nationalist solidarity rooted in Christian heritage, opposition to multiculturalism, and historical revisionism World War II. Additionally, Austrian far-right thinkers, such as those connected to the Identitarian Movement (e.g., Martin Seller, Götz Kubitschek, and Alexander Markovics), have exerted ideological influence over nationalist youth movements in the Balkans, particularly in Croatia and Serbia.

Furthermore, Italy's radical right has left an imprint, especially through post-fascist parties like the Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI) and its successor, the National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale). These parties maintained informal contacts with Balkan nationalist factions in the 1990s, particularly during the Yugoslav Wars, when Italian far-right militants engaged in solidarity efforts with Serbian paramilitary groups. In more recent years, Matteo Salvini's Lega has fostered alliances with parties like Hungary's Fidesz and Poland's Law and Justice (PiS), reinforcing narratives of sovereignty, cultural conservatism, and opposition to Brussels.[10]

For what concerns the British radical right, while traditionally less influential in continental Europe, it has also played a role, especially through figures associated with the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and later the Brexit movement. The emphasis on reclaiming national sovereignty and resisting EU centralization resonated strongly with right-wing populists in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, particularly in their critiques of Western liberal interventionism.

Beyond Western European influences, Russia has played a pivotal role in shaping radical right-wing movements in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. One of the primary mechanisms of Russian influence is the promotion of historical revisionism and ultranationalist rhetoric, particularly in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Hungary. Russian-backed organizations and media outlets, such as Russia Today and Sputnik, have actively disseminated narratives portraying the EU and NATO as threats to national sovereignty while glorifying figures from nationalist past. In Serbia, the ties between the radical right and Russia are particularly strong, with parties like the SRS and Dveri aligning with Russian geopolitical interests. However, Russian influence on radical right movements in Eastern Europe and the Balkans differs from that of Western European models in its more overt geopolitical dimension. While parties like the above-mentioned FPÖ or Lega engage with Eastern European allies primarily through ideological exchange and political networking, Russian-backed groups often unction as instruments of state influence, intertwining nationalist extremism with broader strategic objectives aimed at destabilizing European unity.[11]

In conclusion, the rise of radical right-wing extremism is intricately linked to both global and transnational influences, which shape movements across regions in distinctive yet interconnected ways.

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[10] Mario Caciagli, "The Movimento Social Italiano-Destra Nazionale and Neo-Fascism in Italy", from "Right-wing Extremism in Western Europe", *Routledge* (1988): 19-34.

[11] Arlinda Rrustemi, "Far-Right Trends in South Eastern Europe: The Influences of Russia, Croatia, Serbia and Albania", *Hague Centre for Strategic Studies* (2020): 1-25.

Indeed, the spread of these ideologies is facilitated by cross-border networks that borrow from historical and contemporary models, adapting them to local contexts. Influences from Western Europe, Russia, and even Latin America have contributed to the development of these movements, blending local grievances with other nationalistic and authoritarian regimes. As a result, their transnational character strengthens, further complicating efforts to understand and counteract its impact on democratic institutions worldwide. In this regard, right-wing extremism has certainly had several detrimental effects on the liberal-democratic apparatus of countries – including those analyzed in chapter three - from the moment that this cross-pollination of ideas has led to the emergence of potent, illiberal transnational network.

4.2 The Role of Globalization

"The years '90s witnessed several pathbreaking developments. First, the move towards globalization."[12] The aim of this section is to highlight that globalization has played a paradoxical role in the rise and influence of the radical right within right-wing extremism, enabling transnational networks while fueling nationalist backlash. Indeed, there is compelling evidence that globalization shocks, often working through culture and identity, have played an important role in driving up support for populist movements, particularly of the right-wing kind.[13] However, radical right-wing parties and movements propose themselves as alternative to the traditional forces, filling a void created by the erosion and collapse of the established structures. In recent here, these developments have been primarily associated with globalization and 'postmodernization'.[14]

I would like to point out here that, while globalization is often considered a contemporary phenomenon, its roots extend much further back. For instance, the Soviet economic demise took place in the context of rapid *globalization*, an information revolution and protoindustrialization. This added to Soviet problems yet does not necessarily explain the Soviet collapse.[15] However, the focus of this paragraph is on the more recent wave of globalization, particularly its paradoxical role in the rise and influence of the radical right within right-wing extremism. Indeed, the role of globalization in the rise of the radical right is *paradoxical* because, while radical right movements often present themselves as staunchly nationalist, anti-globalist, and protective of sovereignty, in practice they actively leverage the

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[12] Özlen Hiç Birol, "Globalization in Historical Perspective", *International Journal of Business and Social Science* (2012): 94.
[13] Dani Rodrik, "Why Does Globalization Fuels Populism? Economics, Culture, and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism", *Annual Review of Economics* (2021): 133.
[14] Peter H. Merkl, and Leonard Weinberg, "Right-Wing Extremism in the Twenty-First Century", *Taylor & Francis* (2005), 81-82.
[15] Vladislav M. Zubok, "The Collapse of the Soviet Union", from "The Cambridge History of Communism", VOLUME III, Cambridge University Press (2017): 253-254.

very mechanisms of globalization – such as digital communication, transnational alliances[16], and international funding – to expand their influence.

To a certain extent, one can speak of globalization referring to the various dimensions of the process: the economic, the cultural, and the political.[17] Concerning the latter, political actors regard globalization as one of the most pivotal forces shaping European politics in the twenty-first century. From Cas Mudde point of view[18], globalization and the rise of the populist radical right are interconnected in two fundamental ways: first, globalization is often cited as a key driver behind the recent electoral success of populist radical right parties across Europe; second, these parties position themselves as some of the fiercest critics of globalization, framing it as a threat to national sovereignty, economic security, and cultural identity. Consequently, political parties, most notably of the populist radical right, are challenging various aspects of globalization. Indeed, the political process of globalization has generated the most extreme reactions.

Most European parties, without going into much detail, oppose in quite general terms the dogmas of globalization and international unification. In other words, the contemporary radical right defines itself primarily as a social movement for the protection of national identity in a world which it sees as fundamentally hostile to Western values culture.[19] As Cas Mudde reported, "globaphobia" – referring to the fear, hostility, or strong opposition to globalization, often based on concerns about its economic, cultural, and political consequences - is an essential feature of the populist radical right, ever since globalization threatens the independence and purity of the nation-state. Therefore, in political discourse, *globaphobia* is often linked to protectionist policies, nationalist rhetoric, and conspiracy theories about a global elite imposing an international order at the expense of local communities. In this regard, globalization is mainly seen as a process of Americanization:

> "With regard to economic globalization, populist radical right parties particularly oppose neoliberal economics and mass immigration. Cultural globalization is rejected because it is believed to annihilate the cultural diversities of nations and create the wrong culture, i.e., the American culture of materialism and nihilism. Political globalization, finally, have given rise to the most bizarre and extreme conspiracy theories within the populist radical right, all linked to US domination."[20]

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[16] See the precedent paragraph "Transnational Influences and Global Patterns".
[17] Peter Ludwig Berger, and Samuel Phillips Huntington, "Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World", *Oxford University Press* (2002).
[18] Cas Mudde, "Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe", *Cambridge University Press* (2009): 184-186.
[19] Peter H. Merkl, and Leonard Weinberg, "Right-Wing Extremism in the Twenty-First Century", *Taylor & Francis* (2005), 81-84.
[20] *Ibid*., 196-197.

This perception of globalization as a vehicle of Americanization and a threat to national identity has fueled the populist radical right's opposition to supranational institutions such as the European Union, NATO, and the United Nations. This is why, for instance, economic growth is claimed as a success of the government's economic policies, while an economic downturn is externalized because of "globalization" and international institutions like the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).[21] Therefore, the relationship between globalization and national sovereignty has been a contentious and polarizing topic in recent decades, touching on economic growth, cultural diversity, political power, and human rights.[22] Many of right-wing parties view such organizations as instruments of a globalist elite that undermines national sovereignty and imposes liberal democratic values that conflict with their nationalist minds. This sentiment is particularly evident in Hungary and Poland, where leaders such as Viktor Orbán and the ruling PiS have framed the EU as an intrusive force eroding national traditions and imposing liberal policies and judicial independence. In the Balkans, similar narratives resonate in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Indeed, Serbian radical right groups and nationalist politicians have long framed globalization as a Western mechanism to weaken Serbia, particularly in the context of NATO's 1999 intervention and the push for Kosovo's independence. Meanwhile, in Bosnia, the radical right exploits nationalist divisions, portraying globalization as a threat to ethnic identity and sovereignty, particularly within Republika Srpska. It is like if the elites have promised to shield the population from the perils of change and impertinence brought about by globalization. Therefore, *globaphobia* is not only rooted in a fear of the perceived erosion of national identity but also tied to the broader anxieties over economic and cultural shifts brought about by globalization.

Nonetheless, the perception of globalization as a foreign imposition also taps into the populist rhetoric of elites as disconnected form the everyday struggles of the common people. In this view, the elites are seen as complicit in the globalist agenda, betraying their own people by promising them protection from the perceived dangers of globalization while actively participating in the process that promote it. Therefore, blending nationalism and populism, the populists attacked neoliberal "globalization" and the national elites who had implemented policies. This view is central to right-wing extremism, where globalization is not merely an external phenomenon but a deliberate strategy that erodes national sovereignty and cultural identity.

Furthermore, despite their strong opposition to globalization, radical right movements actively engage in transnational cooperation, using the very global networks they criticize. Transnational alliances – whether between political parties or ideological movements - are a form of globalization; they represent a key aspect of globalization, as they involve cross-border cooperation, the exchange of ideas, and

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[21] Cas Mudde, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Populism: A Very Short Introduction", *Oxford University Press* (2017): 101 (E-Pub version).
[22] Mohammed Saaida, "The Controversial Relation between Globalization and National Sovereignty", European Journal of Science, Innovation and Technology (2023): 94-105.

coordinated efforts on an international scale. Orbán's Fidesz has strengthened alliances with other European far-right parties, while Poland's Law and Justice Party has formed strategic partnerships with nationalist forces in Italy and France to push back against EU directives. Likewise, nationalist factions in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have cultivated ideological and political ties with Russian actors, capitalizing on global media platforms to amplify nationalist discourse and bolster anti-Western narratives. I would come here to the reflection that these groups often criticize globalization and its associated effects (i.e., the erosion of national sovereignty and the threat posed by immigration); in the meanwhile, as they seek to expand their influence, they engage in transnational networks to promote their shared interests, thus demonstrating the *global* nature of the far-right. To confirm this, authors like our Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser[23], in their writings on populism and the radical right, analyze how radical right-wing movements, even though opposing globalist forces, strategically form alliances and use modern communication tools, including the internet, to coordinate across borders.

In summary, globalization has played an ambivalent role in shaping the radical right within right-wing extremism, fostering transnational networks while simultaneously provoking nationalist resistance.[24] Although radical right movements portray themselves as fiercely anti-globalist, they actively utilize global mechanisms, such as digital communication and transnational alliances, to strengthen their influence. The concept of "globaphobia" remains central to their rhetoric, portraying globalization as an existential threat to national sovereignty, economic security, and cultural identity, often framing it as a form of Americanization[25]. However, despite their opposition to globalist forces, these movements strategically engage in transnational cooperation, demonstrating the inherent contradictions in their stance. Finally, the radical right's relationship with globalization is not one of outright rejection but of selective adaptation, using global structures to further nationalist and populist agendas.

4.3 Security Issues: Which Threats and Measures?

The political landscape of Eastern Europe and the Balkans has undergone significant transformations since the collapse of communism in 1989. One of the most consequential developments has been the rise of the radical right and its influence on right-wing extremism. Consequently, the rise of right-wing extremism in the regions has prompted diverse political responses, with significant implications for democracy, governance, and regional stability. Political responses to these developments have been

[23] Cas Mudde, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Populism: A Very Short Introduction", *Oxford University Press* (2017).
[24] Emma Dunlop, "Globalization and sovereignty: global threats and international security", from the "Research Handbook on Global Administrative Law", *Edward Elgar Publishing* (2016): 458-482.
[25] Khamroev Sanjar Samievich, "Globalization as a Threat to National State Sovereignty", *Transnational Journal of Science and Humanities* (2021): 3-11.

diverse, encompassing both reactive actions by national governments and proactive initiatives by international organizations. These responses have wide-reaching consequences, influencing not only the stability and durability of democratic institutions but also altering the political dialogue on nationalism, sovereignty, and regional collaboration, thus highlighting significant security concerns. As overseen so far, the increasing influence of RWE movements has put democratic systems to the test, challenging their ability to address populist forces while navigating complex ethnic and cultural divides, thereby raising critical questions about the future direction of democracy and political stability in the region.

The rise of right-wing extremism poses a direct threat to national security, often manifesting in violence, radicalization, and increasing tensions along ethnic and cultural lines. Undoubtedly, in the current situation of profound change, uncertainty and instability the contemporary radical right represents a growing political and cultural threat. Peter H. Merkl and Leonard Weinberg underlined:

> "The threat is not that the radical right might undermine the democratic rule of the game. Rather, it stems from the fact that the radical right promotes values that are fundamentally opposed to the values that form the basis of postwar liberal democracies in Western Europe and elsewhere. The danger is that the growing appeal of radical right-wing policies and ideas will lead to a further erosion of openness, solidarity and historical sensitivity, while encouraging prejudice, intolerant, self-righteousness and blatant egoism."[26]

They then concluded:

> "Unfortunately, there are few reasons to believe that the advanced capitalist societies are currently in a position and ready to adopt a decisive and militant stance in defence of liberal democracy".[27]

The author's assertions about the radical right promoting values fundamentally opposed to the core principles of postwar liberal democracies is especially poignant. As they pointed out, it is not only the potential for these movements to disrupt democratic governance, but their very nature – rooted in exclusionary nationalism, intolerance, and egoism – that undermines the foundational values of openness, solidarity, and historical sensitivity. This shift towards exclusionary ideologies threatens to erode the very fabric of democratic societies by reinforcing division, rather than fostering unity. Exclusionary ideologies, often rooted in nationalism, racism, or ethnocentrism, tend to emphasize "us versus them" mentalities,

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[26] Peter H. Merkl, and Leonard Weinberg, "Right-Wing Extremism in the Twenty-First Century", *Taylor & Francis* (2005), 81-84.
[27] *Ibidem.*

which can create a profound sense of alienation among different social, ethnic, and political groups. In the context Eastern Europe and the Balkans, these ideologies can exacerbate existing tensions, especially in regions with diverse ethnic and religious populations. Instead of promoting cohesion and cooperation, these ideologies can reinforce historical divisions, fueling distrust and animosity between communities that may already have a complicated relationship due to past conflicts or discrimination. This is particularly concerning in the Balkans, where ethnic divisions, as observed along this work, have historically played a destabilizing role.

Consequently, there is a need to address country-specific and region-specific approaches to prevent and/or counter violent right-wing extremism. A report of RAN about the Western Balkans[28] highlights that VRWE is the spirit of the past that haunts the future. Transitional justice and peacebuilding projects should be adapted to prevent and counter violent rightwing extremism. For instance, a Western Balkan network of NGOs with extensive expertise – to name a few, the Atlantic Initiative in BiH, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia, Kosovar Center for Security Studies, etc. – should be established. Moreover, more in-depth empirical research in the Western Balkans and their local specific, regional and international connections are needed. Additionally, the non-violent activity of RWE results in seeking "grey" zones to operate, especially in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia. These activities should be carefully monitored and navigated by the authorities.[29]

However, one critical element in addressing the rise of right-wing extremism in the region is improving coordination between national governments, international organizations, and local NGOs. This collaborative approach would foster a multi-faceted strategy involving law enforcement, civil society, and educational initiatives to challenge radical ideologies at every level of society. Long-term solutions must include addressing these structural issues alongside counter-extremism policies to build a more inclusive and resilient democratic future, especially for the Balkans.

In conclusion, the rise of right-wing extremism in Eastern Europe and the Balkans represents a significant challenge to both regional security and the stability of democratic institutions. Although political responses have varied, it is essential to adopt a coordinated, multi-dimensional approach that involves local, national, and international efforts to prevent the further erosion of democratic values and to ensure sustained stability in the region. The rise of right-wing extremism in this context, then, is not just a political problem; it is a cultural and social one, as it perpetuates narratives that can obstruct the healing process, leaving society fragmented and vulnerable to further conflict. To prevent this, the region must focus not only on countering extremist ideologies through legal and political means but also on building bridges between divided communities, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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[28] Mirza Buljubašić, "Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans: An overview of country-specific challenges for P/CVE" *Radicalisation Awareness Network* (2022): 16-17.
[29] *Ibidem*.

CONCLUSION

The fall of communism was not merely the end of an era but the beginning of profound transformations whose repercussions are still unfolding today. In the case of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, many of the repercussions have been negative: post-communist societies have dealt with their past and continue to grapple with the present, and likely the future. The transition has been far more complex than a simply "victory of democracy over dictatorship", indeed the post-communist transition has been marked by economic instability, political fragmentation, and contentious battles over historical memory – so much so that, for some, such as for the Serbian (not by chance) Maja Maksimović, the past is now seen with nostalgia, as reflected in the phenomenon of Yugonostalgia, oriented toward "past fantasies", i.e., unfulfilled dreams, lost opportunities, and elusive ideals of the socialist Yugoslav past; toward all that was probable back then and seems so inaccessible today. Nonetheless, while some long for the past with nostalgia, others seek to erase or distort it to legitimize the present, as illustrated, throughout the course of this work, for Poland and Hungary. However, it is not our goal nor our place to pass judgement whether the fall of Soviet communism in Eastern Europe and the dissolution of Yugoslavia were ultimately beneficial or detrimental, especially since there might be space for both.

My goal has been to highlight how the collapse of communism and the subsequent transition to *illiberal* democracies – illiberalism being present both in "how" and "what" is being done – led to the rise of radical right parties and, consequently, to the influence of these latter on the growth and evolution of right-wing extremism. More specifically, the post-1989 period, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, was marked by a complex and often turbulent transition that paved the way for the emergence of far-right ideologies. In these regions, and particularly in our case studies of Poland, Hungary, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, key ideologies like ethno-nationalism, ultranationalism, authoritarian populism, anti-liberalism, anti-communism, intolerance toward minorities (whether ethnic, religious, or sexual), all gained significant ground. The rise of *illiberal* democracies in the wake of communism's fall fostered a fertile ground for these ideologies, as economic instability, cultural shifts, and political fragmentation provided openings for right-wing movements to take root. For instance, in Poland and Hungary, the legacy of communism and the quest for national sovereignty led to the rise of nationalist populist movements. In these countries, to open a brief but perhaps necessary parenthesis, the issue of national sovereignty is even more profound, rooted in histories of imperial domination, changing borders, and foreign domination, which have influenced their ongoing struggle for a secure and distinct national identity. Indeed, the historical experience of being part of larger empires, such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the case of Hungary, which lasted until its dissolution at the end of World War I by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, and the partitioning of Poland between Russia, Prussia, and Austria until 1918, has deeply influenced their modern sense of identity and independence. The post-communist era, especially

after 1989, further intensified this struggle, as Poland and Hungary sought to reassert their sovereignty after decades of Soviet control.

The fall of communism offered an opportunity to reclaim a sense of national pride. Consequently, the historical quest for sovereignty and the profound sense of loss and fragmentation resulting from imperial and communist legacies provided fertile ground for tight-wing extremism to flourish. In fact, the post-communist era offered Poland and Hungary an opportunity to reclaim national pride and, at the same time, gave rise to political movements that sought to reinforce an ethnonationalist vision of identity, often characterized by a rejection of pluralism and liberal democratic values. In Poland, for instance, the conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) has capitalized on nationalist sentiments, blending anti-communist rhetoric with opposition to liberal European values, while Hungary, under Viktor Orbán, has embraced a fully "illiberal" democracy – as he himself asserted – that rejects Western-style liberalism in favor of a more authoritarian and ethnonationalist approach to governance. These right-wing movements, initially positioned as defenders of national sovereignty and cultural identity, have increasingly become platforms for xenophobic, anti-immigrant, and anti-EU rhetoric, reinforcing exclusionary ideologies. In both countries, the historical anxieties about national survival and autonomy have been weaponized by these movements, contributing to the rise of right-wing extremism that seeks to maintain a homogeneous, ethnocentric vision of nation-state, often at the consequential expense, as one may imagine, of democratic principles, minority rights, and international cooperation.

The historical context in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina differed significantly from that of Poland and Hungary, even though both nations experienced the rise of right-wing extremism. In these countries, the legacy of communism was intertwined with the more complex and traumatic history of the breakup of Yugoslavia and the violent ethnic conflicts of the 1990s. Indeed, while Poland and Hungary experienced Soviet domination and suppression of national identity under communist rule, Bosnia and Herzegovina were influenced by the multi-ethnic, federal structure of Yugoslavia, which ultimately disintegrated in the midst of violent conflicts and escalating ethnic tensions. These latter were deeply rooted in the layered history of the region. Under the Yugoslav federation, Bosnia was home to three main ethnic groups: Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), Croats, and Serbs. Although Yugoslavia promoted a multi-ethnic identity and a sense of "brotherhood and unity", the rising nationalist movements in the late 20th century fueled divisions, as each group sought greater autonomy or control over their own territories. The tensions came to a head during the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, when the breakup led to the Bosnian War, from 1992 to 1995. The war was marked by brutal widespread atrocities, including ethnic cleansing, genocide – notably the Srebrenica massacre about which Norman M. Naimark wrote in its work *Genocide: A World History* – with Serb forces seeking to create a "Greater Serbia", while Croats and Bosniaks pursued their own territorial ambitions, thus deepening ethnic divisions. In Serbia, nationalist movements exploited the historical grievances stemming from the disintegration of

Yugoslavia, including the loss of Kosovo and the effects of the NATO bombings in 1999. These groups harnessed the trauma of war and a sense of victimization to garner support for the idea of the "Greater Serbia", often rejecting the liberal democratic principles of post-communist Europe. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the political landscape following the war was shaped by the Dayton Agreement of 1995, which institutionalized ethnic divisions and pave the way for the rise of nationalist right-wing movements among the three above-mentioned major ethnic groups. These movements, such as the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and the more moderate Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), used ethnic identity and narratives of victimhood – in reality, there is a sort of competition for victimhood from each side; after the war, each claimed a "victim" status - to justify exclusionary policies, often hindering efforts to build a unifies, multi-ethnic state. Similarly, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, nationalist movements like the Bosnian Serb Democratic Party (SDS) and the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) of Bosnia and Herzegovina exploited ethnic divisions, perpetuating narratives of victimization among their respective groups. To sum up, these movements contributed to a political climate where ethnic identity was prioritized over national unity, obstructing efforts to foster cooperation among the country's diverse groups and perpetuating the legacy of the post-war divide.

Consequently, right-wing extremism, particularly in the context of these countries, is deeply connected to the challenges of state-building and post-conflict reconstruction. The point I would like to stress here is that the fragile nature of democratic institutions, combined with unresolved tensions, means that extreme political ideologies often find a receptive audience. To support this, I provided the evidence of the increasing audience through reliable graphs, along the second chapter of this project. However, as these parties gain traction, they also shape the political landscape by mainstreaming xenophobic, authoritarian, and illiberal ideas that undermine the very foundations of democracy and liberalism, already, regreattably, precarious. The rise of right-wing extremism in this context, then, is not just a political problem; it is a cultural and social one, as it perpetuates narratives that can obstruct the healing process, leaving society fragmented and vulnerable to further conflict. Moreover, right-wing extremism can escalate into violent right-wing extremism (VRWE), which involves individuals or groups who engage in, incite, threaten with, justify, or endorse violence and hatred as a means to advance their political or ideological objectives. I have decided to give space to the most significant events, sometimes of violence, in the section "Recent Incidents and Trends" for each country taken into analysis.

Still, the rise of right-wing extremism in Eastern Europe and the Balkans has not only been molded by local historical contexts and national struggles yet has also been significantly influenced by the forces of globalization and transnational networks. Globalization has facilitated the flow of ideas, ideologies, and movements across borders, creating new spaces for far-right actors to collaborate and gain inspiration from one another. In the case of post-communist transition, the increasing interconnectedness of global economies, media, and political networks allowed for the diffusion of far-

right ideas that transcended national borders. This process became especially evident in the increasing visibility of populist, nationalist, and anti-immigrant rhetoric across both Western and Eastern Europe. In these regions, far-right movements began to gain traction by uniting around common themes, such as strong opposition to globalization (the so-named "globaphobia"), and the European Union (EU). These movements framed globalization as a force that undermines national sovereignty and local cultures, positioning themselves as defenders of national identity against what they saw as external threats. These far-right groups effectively capitalized on these issues, using them to rally support and create a sense of collective identity around their anti-globalization, anti-EU, and anti-immigrant stance. However, I highlighted along the last chapter that globalization has played a paradoxical role in the rise and influence of the radical right within right-wing extremism: i.e., despite their opposition to globalization, radical right movements actively engage in transnational cooperation, demonstrating the contradictions in their stance, since transnational alliances are a key feature of globalization itself. Therefore, the relationship between globalization and the radical right is not one of outright rejection, rather selective adaptation, using global structures to further nationalist and populist objectives.

Looking ahead, the future trajectory of Eastern Europe and the Balkans remains uncertain, crafted by the complex legacies of communism and the violent transitions that followed. The challenges of state-building, ethnic divisions, and historical trauma continue to affect the political and social fabric of these regions, presenting both risks and opportunities for the years to come. How these countries reckon with their past – whether through healing or further division – will determine the trajectory of political and social development. Ultimately, the interaction between local factors and broader global trends, such as globalization, transnational political movements, and external pressures, will dictate if these regions move toward greater stability, or whether they remain entrenched in cycles of political fragmentation.

To come to the end of this intricate journey, I would turn to the concept of "liminality". The transition from communism in Eastern Europe and the Balkans may be seen as a deeply liminal phase – drawing on the idea of the middle stage in a ritual passage, as originally outlined by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in 1909. This liminal phase was not merely marked by political and economic shifts, rather by intense ideological struggles and cultural reckonings too. As these countries confronted the legacies of their communist regimes, they found themselves at a crossroads, where the premise of democracy was often entangled with the rise of illiberal democracies and the emergence of far-right ideologies. The complexities of historical memory, national identity, and state-building further contributed to a fragile political landscape, one in which right-wing extremism gained traction. This liminality – marked by both instability and the potential for change – has influenced the trajectory of these regions, creating openings for both democratic progress and the entrenchment of exclusionary, I would say authoritarian movements. The future of these societies will depend on their ability to navigate

this liminal phase, addressing past divisions while embracing opportunities for unity, stability, and democratic development. Whether they move toward greater integration or continued fragmented will be determined by their capacity to evolve from this transitional moment into more cohesive, democratic future.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This dissertation explores the rise of the radical right in Eastern Europe and the Balkans following the collapse of communism and its influence on contemporary right-wing extremism. By conducting a comparative analysis on Poland, Hungary, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, it examines the political, socio-economic and particularly the historical factors that contributed to the emergence and consolidation of radical right movements in the post-communist era, whose transition has not followed a linear trajectory toward democracy; rather, it has been marked by economic instability, political fragmentation, and struggles over historical memory, thus leading to *illiberal* forms of democracies. Therefore, this elaborate undertakes to answer, among others, the subsequent questions: (i) "What historical and political conditions facilitated the rise of radical right movements in post-1989 Eastern Europe and the Balkans?"; (ii) "How do the cases of Poland, Hungary, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrate differences and similarities in the development of the right-wing extremism phenomenon, according to the historical processes which affected each one, before, after and during communism?"; or (iii) "How do transnational influences, globalization, and security challenges impact contemporary right-wing movements?". The aim was to respond to each question, in a progressive manner, over the course of the chapters of this work.

For what concerns the analysis of the countries, in Hungary and Poland radical right movements have effectively fused nationalist and Euroskeptic narratives with conservative social policies. In the first one, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz has mainstreamed radical right rhetoric, while in the second one, Poland's Law and Justice Party (PiS) as reinforced nationalist and anti-liberal discourse, fostering democratic backsliding. In Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the legacy of the Yugoslav Wars and deep-rooted ethno-political divisions have influenced radical right dynamics in these states. In Serbia, far-right parties and extremist groups have drawn on nationalist and revisionist histories, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, radical right forces have capitalized on ethnic tensions and political fragmentation, often exacerbated by external intervention. Indeed, radical right movements in Eastern Europe and the Balkans have received ideological and financial support from international networks, including European far-right organizations and external actors, such as Russia. The role of globalization has further complicated this picture, as far-right movements simultaneously reject and exploit transnational networks to advance their nationalist objectives.

The future trajectory of Eastern Europe and the Balkans remains uncertain, shaped by the enduring legacies of communism and the turbulent transitions that followed. Challenges related to state-building, ethnic divisions, and historical trauma continue to affect the political and social setting, posing both risks and opportunities in the years ahead.

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