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Dark Mirror:

Transnational Populist Networks
and the Construction of a Parallel
International Order

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Summary

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Right-wing populist and illiberal actors are constructing a transnational ecosystem of international conferences, hybrid educational institutions, think tanks and media platforms designed to mirror—and ultimately displace—the architecture of the Euro-Atlantic order. Many of these initiatives are backed by governments, but are designed to outlast electoral cycles. A growing convergence with Trump-aligned networks in the US is adding transatlantic depth. Despite policy differences, these networks share a strategic objective: to rewire international cooperation around nationalist principles and weaken the EU. The primary political target of this ecosystem is the centre-right. Populists are appropriating the vocabulary of ‘conservatism’ and ‘Christian Democracy’ and portraying the European People’s Party (EPP) as technocratic and part of the ‘liberal elite’. Their goal is not merely to achieve electoral gains, but to redefine conservatism—detaching it from the rule of law, European integration and transatlantic partnership. Thus, transnational populist cooperation must be tackled head on. First, the EPP must proactively reclaim the language of conservatism and Christian Democracy. European integration must also be articulated as a values-based project, including conservative principles, not merely a technocratic one. Stronger partnerships with universities and deeper engagement with debates on identity, culture and European heritage are essential. Second, the EPP family must be more strategic in engaging with populist actors, as avoiding confrontation leaves them uncontested in the transnational space. Where divisions are evident—for example on Ukraine—the EPP should expose them. Communication must also adapt. While the EPP will not want to imitate the populists by turning political events into spectacles, it must compete more effectively in the cultural and digital space, ensuring that its message resonates beyond institutional audiences. A dedicated internal capacity to map and scrutinise transnational populist networks—including funding structures—is also needed. The recent government change in Hungary, which under the leadership of Viktor Orbán had become a major centre of funding and support for transnational populist networks, provides the first opportunity to dismantle parts of this infrastructure, but it also points to deeper challenges and the need for more sophisticated action to counter them in a durable way.

Keywords Transnational populism – Illiberal networks – Conservatism
– Hybrid influence – Orbán



Introduction

Populist parties, especially of the right, are on the rise in Europe and around the world. One way that populists are influencing the international system is through the construction of sophisticated transnational networks of cooperation. Transnational cooperation on the far right is not new. Since the 1980s, as populist radical right parties have grown in power and number, contacts between them have increased, especially in the European Parliament. Traditionally European Parliament groups on the far right were fickle; today, however, they have stabilised into three groupings to the right of the European People's Party (EPP), covering a broad ideological range from the fringes of mainstream conservatism (some elements of which coexist with populist parties in the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group) to outright extremism.¹

But recent years have also seen right-wing populists, nationalists and illiberals deepening their transnational cooperation. This phenomenon is new in two ways. First, these forces have strong partners with significant resources and access to power outside the limits of Europe and the EU. The rise of Trumpism in the US has been the catalyst for cooperation that is not only transnational but transcontinental, with European populists participating in networks that include (and are often dominated by) actors from the US and other countries on the American continent, as well as Israel, India and Russia, among others.

Second, and more significantly, transnational networking is taking on new forms. Right-wing populists and illiberal nationalists are fostering cross-border contacts not only among parties but among a broader variety of entities, including research institutes, educational institutions and high-profile conferences. What is especially new is that these actors are not using the existing institutions and networks of the liberal international order to facilitate their cooperation. They are constructing elements of a wholesale new order, blatantly emulating the equivalent transatlantic institutions and networks.

Similar to the institutions of the transatlantic order, what we can call (to paraphrase the alt-right) the new alt-order can now draw on significant public funding thanks to populists' access to official power. Particularly important was the role of the Hungarian government under Viktor Orbán, who invested substantially in various

¹ D. McDonnell and A. Werner, *International Populism: The Radical Right in the European Parliament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).



transnational forms of cooperation with the aim of promoting a specific ideological vision and enhancing his influence on the international stage. Of even bigger significance, however, is the patronage of Donald Trump, whose administration has shown a penchant for supporting like-minded forces in other countries. This intersection of ideological and geopolitical goals is an important dimension in how these networks operate.

This development is consequential and worrying for two reasons. First, as far as the established international order goes, its institutions are facing growing competition from hostile actors who are emulating the forms of these mainstream institutions in the public and intellectual space but with opposing goals. Second, these activities matter to the centre–right. A key objective of right-wing populists' transnational cooperation is to hijack the concepts of conservatism and Christian Democracy, thus rebranding themselves as the 'real' right fighting against the 'liberal elites'. By taking this fight to the international sphere, populists pose a unique challenge to the centre–right, while also indicating their ambition to become the new hegemonic power of the right. As suspicion, if not outright hatred, of the EU is a key ideological glue of these otherwise quite heterogeneous networks, studying them shows how, in today's world, the geopolitical and ideological tools of influence work in parallel.

The new forms of transnational populist cooperation

Populists no longer cooperate in loose associations of like-minded parties and personalities or through unstable groups in the European Parliament. In recent years the forms of transnational cooperation among right-wing populists, nationalists and illiberals have proliferated, increasingly resembling the repertoire and resources of transnational cooperation that the mainstream political forces have at their disposal. We can identify three novel forms of transnational populist cooperation—conferences, educational institutions and think tanks—although these are only schematic descriptions. In practice, these forms of populist cooperation are highly hybrid, often blending or performing functions different from those suggested by their labels (i.e. research, education, public advocacy).

Conferences have long been part of political parties' activities, but in recent decades they have become increasingly internationalised, as mainstream forces such as the EPP, the socialists and the liberals have organised their international



meetings in the form of party conferences. For the transnational populist right, which does not always have programmatic cohesion or stable structures, international conferences such as National Conservatism (NatCon) and the Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC) are very important, not so much as spaces for policy dialogue as for promoting its visibility in the form of a mediatised political spectacle. Another recent development is the investment by populists in international educational institutions with avowed ‘contrarian’, ‘heterodox’ or ‘conservative’ outlooks. Although the record of many of these quasi-universities, such as Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) and the Collegium Intermarium is decidedly mixed in Europe—contrary to conservative universities, such as Hillsdale College, and academic research centres, such as the Claremont Institute, in the US—the populist right continues to invest in them, none more so than MCC, which was lavishly supported by the Hungarian government of Viktor Orbán. Finally, multiple far-right populist and illiberal policy institutes and think tanks act as hubs for cross-border cooperation and the dissemination of ideas, and provide a stream of ‘experts’ with which to populate illiberal educational institutions and conferences, creating a self-referential circle of status and knowledge production that is projected to the broader public sphere.

These new forms of transnational cooperation follow a concerted strategy of ‘mirroring’ established institutions of the liberal international order, in form and sometimes even in name. Populists create the impression of status by replicating forms of transnational cooperation that up until now have only been available to mainstream political forces. While most of the illiberal mirror institutions fail to live up to their ambition to supplant their established equivalents, international cooperation is still an important resource for populist and illiberal parties in terms of establishing contacts, projecting respectability and disseminating ideas. The ultimate goals are to ‘repurpose the soft-power tools’² that once constructed the Euro-Atlantic order and to rewire the ideological purpose of international institutionalism by infusing it with new values and priorities.

The second goal concerns the political interests of right-wing populists: they want to displace the mainstream centre–right as the hegemonic force of the right by appropriating and redefining the meaning of terms such as ‘conservatism’ and ‘Christian Democracy’. Their educational institutions and ‘universities’ are propagating a specific understanding of conservatism and traditional values, their international conferences are rebranding ‘conservatism’ and their policy

² K. Mathiesen et al., ‘The MAGA-Friendly European Think Tanks Trump Wants to Fund’, *Politico*, 13 February 2026, accessed at <https://www.politico.eu/article/maga-friendly-european-think-tanks-donald-trump-funding/> on 3 March 2026.



institutes are articulating an agenda that opposes the ‘liberal elites’ to which the mainstream centre–right allegedly belongs. By carving out a new space on the right in intellectual debates, and by flooding public discourse with their experts and spectacles, populists want to deprive the centre–right of its ideological oxygen.

Taken together, these two goals of transnational populist networks are part of a larger challenge to the transatlantic order. With many of these networks sponsored either directly or indirectly by populists in power, chiefly in Washington or, formerly, in Budapest, they underpin not only an ideological but also a distinctly geopolitical agenda aimed at undoing both the values and the institutional setup of transatlantic cooperation, and none more so than that of the EU itself. Recognising these networks and pushing back against their influence is crucial in the effort to safeguard European integration.

Mirroring the establishment and building a counter-hegemony

Populists have invested significant effort and resources in establishing an international apparatus of institutions under their control that both replicates equivalent institutions of the Euro-Atlantic order and allows them to influence the public sphere, spreading and legitimising their ideas. Characteristic of this strategy is investment in new international educational establishments, often touted as alternative elite breeding grounds and ‘anti-universities’, which have the goal of challenging the prestige and expertise of established universities.

The most comprehensive and best endowed of these efforts is the Hungarian-based MCC, founded in 1996 but growing massively in recent years as a provider of educational and scholarship programmes, a publisher through various outlets, and the hub for an expansive network of businesses and think tanks in Hungary and abroad. It presents itself as ‘the leading talent promotion institution in the Carpathian Basin’ and ‘offers public and free talent development programs . . . from primary school to adult age’.³ Its programmes do not replace state and higher education, but are complementary to it. Young people, of school age, are invited to join its activities and seminars, many of which do not always have a clear ideological character.

³ See MCC, ‘The MCC Teaching and Educational Strategy Is Now Available Online!’, 13 May 2022, accessed at <https://mcc.hu/en/article/the-mcc-teaching-and-educational-strategy-is-now-available-online> on 3 March 2026.



MCC has grown because of its close links with the Orbán government. Notably, Balázs Orbán is both chairman of the MCC's board of trustees and was political director for Viktor Orbán until he lost power in 2026. According to the Friedrich Naumann Foundation, in 2020 the Hungarian parliament granted MCC a 10% ownership stake in MOL, a Hungarian oil and gas company, as well as a share in Richter, a pharmaceutical company. Additionally, MCC received 94.5 billion forint (€242,150,535) directly from the state, supplemented by a substantial sum from the Economy Protection Fund. Furthermore, MCC has acquired numerous properties, with a presence today in 25 locations in the Carpathian Basin and Brussels. The overall financial support provided to MCC was reportedly 'higher than the amount the state had spent on higher education in the whole year'.⁴

MCC organises the yearly MCC Feszt, a youth festival that combines cultural activities and entertainment with intellectual and educational debates. It invites prominent speakers from around the world who are experts in various fields, and who often have little idea of or attachment to MCC's ideological motives.⁵ The 2025 Feszt featured speakers list included Austrian ex-chancellor Sebastian Kurz, Boris Johnson's pro-Brexit adviser Dominic Cummings, public intellectual Ayaan Hirsi Ali, British conservative intellectual Douglas Murray, German–American tech billionaire and sponsor of various Republican politicians and 'new right' activists Peter Thiel, and US conservative academic Patrick Deneen, a regular guest at Orbán-linked events.⁶

MCC's dense programme of events enabled it to act as an extension of the electoral machine of Fidesz—Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz—Magyar Polgári Szövetség, hereafter Fidesz), especially in reaching out to the youth—a crucial but challenging demographic for the party.⁷ It also helped the party to influence public opinion and incubate new political talent and friendly 'experts', who would comment on international developments for Fidesz-aligned media. Close to Hungary, MCC's main transnational focus is to sustain pro-Fidesz opinion and mobilisation

⁴ M. Hajba, 'Hearts and Minds: The Rise of the Mathias Corvinus Collegium in Hungary and Abroad', *Friedrich Naumann Foundation*, 9 February 2023, accessed at <https://www.freiheit.org/central-europe-and-baltic-states/hearts-and-minds> on 3 March 2026.

⁵ Z. Strimpel, 'Inside Viktor Orbán's Ideas Factory', *The New Statesman*, 10 August 2023, accessed at <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/2023/08/inside-viktor-orbans-ideas-factory> on 3 March 2026.

⁶ The 2025 MCC Feszt programme is available at MCC Feszt, 'Programtáblázat', accessed at <https://mcc-feszt.hu/programok> on 20 January 2026.

⁷ Author's interview with a Hungarian academic, 8 October 2025.



in Transylvania and other centres that are home to Hungarian minorities, who have been a crucial voter group for Fidesz.⁸

In 2022 MCC opened a sizable Brussels branch. MCC Brussels has over 20 staff and is directed by the Hungarian–Canadian Frank Fűredi, a UK-based academic who had a long career in radical leftist politics before starting to move steadily to the right in the 1990s.⁹ MCC Brussels’s massive number of events and publications promote nationalist and EU-critical views. Increasingly it aims to engage in practical politics, for example, by attempting to forge a connection between farmers’ recent protests against the EU Green Deal and national conservative criticisms of EU centralism.¹⁰ According to a *Politico* report, in September 2025 it was disclosed that MCC Brussels had received funding of €6 million from the Hungarian MCC.¹¹

One year after Brussels, MCC acquired a presence in Vienna by purchasing 90% of the private Modul University in Kahlenberg, near the Austrian capital. As a result of the purchase, the European Commission froze Modul’s participation in EU education and research funding schemes, on the basis of the 2022 EU ban on Erasmus funding to 21 Hungarian educational institutions controlled by government-run foundations such as MCC. Modul operates with a deficit of around €3 million, which according to Austrian newspaper *Die Presse* provides the leverage which enables MCC to enact changes to the university’s governance and curriculum.¹²

⁸ Author’s interview with a Hungary-based academic, 16 September 2025. On the importance of Hungarian diasporas for elections in Hungary, see L. Rutai, ‘A Tale Of Two Diasporas: The Battle For Hungarian Voters Abroad’, *Radio Free Europe*, 21 February 2022, accessed at <https://www.rferl.org/a/hungary-election-diaspora-orban-marki-zay/31712662.html> on 12 March 2026.

⁹ G. Volpicelli, ‘From Trotsky to Brexit to Orbán’s Attack Dog: The Man Leading Hungary’s Fightback Against the EU’, *Politico*, 9 May 2023, accessed at <https://www.politico.eu/article/trotsky-brexit-viktor-orban-attack-dog-frank-furedi-hungary-fightback-eu/> on 3 March 2026.

¹⁰ M. Kasztelan, C. Carlile and J. Grostern, ‘Orbán-Backed Think Tank Courts Farmers Linked to Far Right Ahead of EU Poll’, *DeSmog*, 2 May 2024, accessed at <https://www.desmog.com/2024/05/02/orban-backed-think-tank-courts-farmers-linked-to-far-right-ahead-of-eu-poll/> on 3 March 2026. See also MCC Brussels, ‘MCC Brussels Supports Europe’s Farmers’, 19 January 2024, accessed at <https://brussels.mcc.hu/news/mcc-brussels-supports-europes-farmers> on 3 March 2026.

¹¹ G. Gavin, ‘Orbán’s Favorite Brussels Think Tank Received Millions From Budapest, New Figures Reveal’, *Politico*, 4 September 2025, accessed at <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-brussels-budapest-eu-hard-right-funds-hungary/> on 3 March 2026.

¹² M. Stottmeyer, ‘Orbán’s unterschätzte Doppeldenk-Schmiede MCC und ihre Mission in Österreich’, *Die Presse*, 26 July 2024, accessed at <https://www.diepresse.com/18705239/orbans-unterschaetzte-doppeldenk-schmiede-mcc-und-ihre-mission-in-oesterreich> on 3 March 2026. T. Anders, ‘EU streicht Wiener Modul-Uni wegen Orbán-Connections Geld aus Erasmus-Programm’, *Der Standard*, 21 January 2025, accessed at <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000253657/eu-streicht-wiener-modul-uni-wegen-orban-connections-geld-aus-erasmus-programm?ref=rss> on 3 March 2026.



More than a typical educational provider, MCC is a hybrid institution performing multiple functions in Hungary, in nearby countries and in Brussels. MCC at once undertakes elite formation, political education and socialisation in the ideas of illiberal conservatism, electoral outreach through ‘soft’ tools such as youth activities and festivals, active propaganda and the deployment of ‘sharp power’, cultural networking and the mobilisation of Hungarian minorities, transnational networking and conference organisation, and political research and think-tank activity, all while undermining the alleged monopoly of ‘liberal’ educational institutions.

There has been an attempt to replicate the success of MCC in Poland with the Collegium Intermarium, which was founded in 2021 to mirror the Soros-funded Central European University that had been based in Budapest until Viktor Orbán expelled it. The founders of the Collegium Intermarium explicitly pitched it as the breeding ground for a new conservative and Christian elite in Central and Eastern Europe, in contradistinction to the ethos of the Central European University. The name of the new university evokes the strategic vision of the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) government to forge a new independent regional identity in Central and Eastern Europe, resurrecting the inter-war geopolitical concept of the *intermarium*.¹³

The Collegium Intermarium received support from the PiS government, with its launch in 2021 attended by two PiS ministers as well as the ex-president of Czechia, Václav Klaus, and Judit Varga, then Hungarian justice minister. However, the Collegium was never an official state educational institution but rather an initiative of Ordo Iuris, a private non-governmental organisation that was particularly active under the PiS government and promoted ultra-conservative social positions.¹⁴ Despite its initial ambitions, the Collegium Intermarium foundered. According to media reports, in the years 2022–3 the college received over 4.6 million zloty in funding from the education ministry, despite the fact that it enrolled only 15 full-time students in its first two academic years. With PiS’s defeat in 2023, this

¹³ *New Eastern Europe*, ‘Intermarium in the 21st Century’, 5 July 2017, accessed at <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2017/07/05/intermarium-in-the-21st-century/> on 3 March 2026.

¹⁴ *Notes From Poland*, ‘Conservative Group Launches University in Poland to “Forge Elites for the Entire Region”’, 11 May 2021, accessed at <https://notesfrompoland.com/2021/05/11/conservative-group-launches-university-in-poland-to-forge-elites-for-the-entire-region/> on 3 March 2026. On Ordo Iuris more generally and its links with US, Russian and Brazilian social-conservative organisations, see C. Ciobanu, ‘Ordo Iuris: The Ultra-Conservative Organisation Transforming Poland’, *Balkan Insight*, 22 June 2021, accessed at <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/06/22/ordo-iuris-the-ultra-conservative-organisation-transforming-poland/> on 3 March 2026.



funding dried up and, as a result, in recent academic years its student numbers have shrunk to barely more than zero. The college today is moribund.¹⁵

Another attempt at establishing an ‘anti-university’ is the Institute for Social, Economic and Political Sciences (ISSEP), founded in Lyon by French far-right Member of the European Parliament Marion Maréchal Le Pen in 2018. It offers degrees in political science and modules in political campaigning. However, the French state does not recognise these qualifications, so the school receives no public funding. Maréchal served as the school’s director until 2022. MCC is an official partner of the ISSEP, which has also opened a campus in Madrid, where several teaching staff belong to the far-right Vox party. The ISSEP ‘leans heavily into the idea of being an anti-Sciences Po’.¹⁶ These networks have both direct and indirect ties to the US far right, primarily through Maréchal, the French far-right politician who has embraced and invested the most in transnational cooperation.¹⁷

Of course, creating an alternative illiberal conservative educational ecosystem like the one that exists in the US is a much more difficult task in Europe. But ambitions go beyond the field of education, as shown by the establishment of MCC Brussels, which was Orbán’s most prominent hybrid tool of transnational influence and operates simultaneously as an educational institution, a think tank and an advocacy organisation. In this way, mirroring established liberal institutions serves a counter-hegemonic purpose: to flood the marketplace of ideas with wannabe ‘universities’ as well as think tanks, research institutes and foundations, not necessarily to supplant their mainstream counterparts but at the very least to undermine their monopoly of authority and expertise.¹⁸

This ecosystem of think tanks, research institutes and foundations, often with overlapping memberships, personalities and events, aims to populate the public

¹⁵ *Notes From Poland*, ‘No Students Enrol at Conservative Polish University Established Under PiS Government to “Forge Elites”’, 31 October 2024, accessed at <https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/10/31/no-students-enroll-at-conservative-polish-university-established-under-pis-government-to-forge-elites/> on 3 March 2026.

¹⁶ E. Nilsson-Julien, ‘What Is the Story Behind the Growing Network of French Far Right-Funded Schools and Universities?’, *Euronews*, 18 October 2024, accessed at <https://www.euronews.com/2024/10/18/what-is-the-story-behind-the-growing-network-of-french-far-right-funded-schools-and-univer> on 3 March 2026.

¹⁷ M. Maréchal, speech on the current state of education in France, MCC, Budapest, 21 September 2021, accessed at <https://mcc.hu/en/article/marion-marechal-addressed-at-mcc-the-current-the-state-of-education-in-france> on 3 March 2026.

¹⁸ This is essentially a transnational projection of the long-standing counter-hegemonic Gramscian strategy within Hungary, as epitomised by Fidesz’s ‘Civic Circles’ experiment after its 2002 electoral defeat. See B. Greskovits, ‘Rebuilding the Hungarian Right Through Conquering Civil Society: The Civic Circles Movement’, *East European Politics* 36/2 (2020), 247–66.



sphere with a new crop of ‘experts’ and speakers pushing their ideas. Again, thanks to generous public funding under Fidesz, Hungarian think tanks have been particularly prominent, both in numbers and resources. But the web of think tanks extends to other countries as well.

In Hungary, the Batthyány Lajos Foundation (BLA) received large state subsidies that it used to support Orbán-friendly publications (e.g. *The Hungarian Conservative* and *The European Conservative*), organisations (the Danube Institute and the Centre for Fundamental Rights) and news outlets (ReMixNews).¹⁹ Funded by the BLA, the Danube Institute is a Budapest-based conservative think tank established in 2013. Its president is John O’Sullivan, a former collaborator of Margaret Thatcher and a well-connected fixture on the English-speaking conservative scene for many decades.²⁰ The Institute hosts high-profile lectures and partners with a number of prominent conservative organisations, including the American conservative think tank Heritage Foundation, with which it co-organises the Geopolitical Summit. Also founded in 2013, the Centre for Fundamental Rights (Alapjogokért Központ) presents itself as ‘a legal research and analysis institute’ aiming to preserve ‘national identity, sovereignty and Christian social traditions’. Since 2022 its flagship initiative has been the yearly CPAC Hungary conference.²¹

Outside Hungary, another think tank with a strong transnational presence is the Fundacion Disenso, the official think tank of Vox, presided over by party leader Santiago Abascal. With the objective of influencing the ‘Iberosphere’, in 2020 Fundacion Disenso initiated the Foro Madrid as a network of right-wing politicians and intellectuals across Spain and Latin America. Since 2022 the Foro has organised an annual meeting: venues so far have included Colombia, Peru, Argentina and Paraguay.²² Its founding document is the ‘Madrid Charter’ of 2020, which was signed by the most prominent right-wing politicians in Latin

¹⁹ L. Rutai, ‘Hungary’s Government Is Funding European Publications. But Have They Had Much Success?’, *Euronews*, 15 September 2023, accessed at <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/09/16/hungarys-government-is-funding-european-publications-to-little-success> on 3 March 2026.

²⁰ O’Sullivan is one of the most central and frequent speakers at international events of the populist right, serving as one of the main connectors between various networks and event series. Other similar actors are Miklós Szánthó, head of the Centre for Fundamental Rights, and Francesco Giubilei, head of the Italian Nazione Futura, whose events include many Hungarian and pro-Orbán personalities. See Global Project Against Hate and Extremism, *Mapping the Far Right* (2025), accessed at <https://globalextrémism.org/reports/mapping-the-far-right-the-movements-conferences-illuminate-its-growing-transnational-networks/> on 3 March 2026.

²¹ MCC Feszt, ‘Center for Fundamental Rights’, accessed at <https://mccfeszt.hu/en/edu-program/alapjogokert-kozpont> on 3 March 2026.

²² Foro Madrid, ‘IV Encuentro Regional de Foro Madrid – Asunción 2025’, accessed at <https://foromadrid.org/encuentros-reg/iv-encuentro-regional-de-foro-madrid-asuncion-2025/> on 3 March 2026.



America, but significantly also by European politicians including Giorgia Meloni, Marion Maréchal and Andre Ventura of Enough (Chega).²³

It becomes evident that populists have invested substantial time, effort and resources into setting up a dense network of educational and research institutions, often with overlapping membership, activities and funding. The practical outputs of this network may appear underwhelming in terms of its expressed ambition to produce research, knowledge and education to rival their liberal counterparts. But they must be judged more in terms of their political function to crowd the public sphere and undermine the monopoly of status and authority held by the mainstream institutions of the Euro-Atlantic order. In this respect, even nomenclature matters. Mathias Corvinus Collegium, founded in 1996 without links to the Orbán system but later taken over by it, has a similar name to the Corvinus University of Budapest, one of Hungary's oldest and most respectable universities. Similarly, the name of the Danube Institute in Budapest bears a resemblance to the Vienna-based and Austrian-government-funded Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe. And the Hungarian Centre for Fundamental Rights shares its name with a research centre of the prestigious Hertie School in Berlin.²⁴ Coincidental or not, these similarities speak to how illiberals can create confusion around established institutions within an increasingly noisy public sphere.

A key question is what becomes of these educational institutions and think tanks if the populists who finance and support them lose power, as Orbán has in 2026. The experience of the Collegium Intermarium in Poland, which folded immediately after PiS lost power in 2023, would indicate that the loss of government support can be terminal for them. The new prime minister of Hungary, Peter Magyar, has unequivocally stated that the state will end its financing of MCC and other ideological institutions of the Orbán regime. But while MCC officials have acknowledged that this will pose an immediate challenge,²⁵ the transnational spread and complex ownership structure of the Hungarian network means that it may yet be able to survive in a reconstituted and perhaps diminished form.

²³ ECR Group, 'Carta de Madrid: In Defense of Freedom and Democracy in the Iberosphere', 26 October 2020, accessed at <https://ecrgroup.eu/files/CartaDeMadrid-EN.pdf> on 3 March 2026. It is important to note that the Charter was written and signed in 2020, when Vox was still a member of the ECR and before it moved to the Patriots.

²⁴ See Hertie School of Government, 'Centre for Fundamental Rights', accessed at <https://www.hertie-school.org/en/fundamental-rights> on 3 March 2026.

²⁵ B. Quinn, 'Orbán's Defeat Threatens to Halt Hungarian Support of Populist Right', *Guardian*, 16 April 2026, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2026/apr/16/viktor-orban-defeat-halt-hungarian-support-populist-right> on 17 April 2026.



Redefining conservatism

The transnational networking of the populist and illiberal right also points to another goal: to usurp the vocabulary and values of the centre–right and brand itself as the true ‘conservative’ force. This lumps the centre–right with the dreaded ‘liberal elites’, as it has allegedly abandoned ‘traditional values’ and Christian ideals. Rather than ‘normalising’ or ‘mainstreaming’ itself, as the political science literature argues,²⁶ the populist right aims to usurp the mantle of ‘true’ conservatism, hijacking a concept that, up until recently, many in the far right had shunned.

Two centres of power push this process. The first was, until April 2026, Viktor Orbán, who is a former member of the EPP and in the past identified as a conservative and Christian Democrat. The second is actors in and around the US Republican Party, who continue to use ‘conservatism’ as a semantic label but infuse it with increasingly radical, populist and illiberal meanings, especially since the rise of Donald Trump and the Make America Great Again movement. With Budapest and Washington as its centres, a transnational network of conferences and actors has emerged that is propagating a new understanding of ‘conservative’ and ‘Christian Democrat’, distorting the meaning of these terms as they have existed since the Second World War.

A gathering that has grown rapidly in importance for this mission of rebranding conservatism is NatCon. It is organised by the Edmund Burke Foundation and its chairman, Yoram Hazony, who is also chairman of the conference.²⁷ The groundwork for NatCon was laid by Hazony’s book *The Virtue of Nationalism* (2018) and the development of an ideology of ‘national conservatism’.²⁸ National conservatism differs from traditional conservatism in that it emphasises nationalism and scepticism of globalism and free-market orthodoxy.²⁹

²⁶ For a critical discussion of the use of both ‘normalisation’ and ‘mainstreaming’ in political science, see A.-S. Heinze and G. Off, ‘Mainstreaming vs. Normalisation: Towards More Conceptual Clarity on How Mainstream Parties Legitimise the Far Right’, *European Journal of Political Research* (2026), 1–17, doi:10.1017/S1475676526100887

²⁷ National Conservatism, ‘Edmund Burke Foundation People’, accessed at <https://nationalconservatism.org/people/> on 3 March 2026.

²⁸ Y. Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (New York: Basic, 2018).

²⁹ A. Chrysogelos, ‘National Conservatism Is the New Paradigm of Conservative Politics’, *LSE Politics and Policy*, 17 May 2024, accessed at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/national-conservatism-is-the-new-paradigm-of-conservative-politics-80766-2/> on 3 March 2026. For a challenge to the view that conservatism is incompatible with support for European integration, see F. Reho, *Conservative Europeanism: A Forgotten Tradition*, Martens Centre (Brussels, 2025).



Previous NatCon conferences have been held in London (2019, 2023), Washington (2019, 2024, 2025), Rome (2020), Orlando (2021), Miami (2022) and Brussels (2022, 2024), always in partnership with a local organisation. The partner for the 2024 Brussels conference was MCC Brussels, which undertook almost all organisational duties. Sponsors of other events have included the Danube Institute, Nazione Futura, *The American Conservative* and Hillsdale College Graduate School of Government.³⁰ According to *Vanity Fair*, financing for NatCon has been facilitated by Thiel.³¹

Speakers at NatCon have included thinkers Roger Scruton, Daniel Hannan, John O’Sullivan, Tucker Carlson and Ryszard Legutko; political leaders Viktor Orbán, Giorgia Meloni, Marion Maréchal, Janez Janša and Mateusz Morawiecki; activist Stephen Bannon; and Trump administration officials Tulsi Gabbard and JD Vance (in 2024, before he became US vice-president). NatCon conferences often generate news. The 2023 conference in London was interrupted by protests.³² The 2024 conference in Brussels made the news due to an ill-advised effort by the mayor of the Brussels district of Saint-Josse to shut it down, which allowed speakers including Orbán and Nigel Farage to claim that the ‘establishment’ was after them.³³

While NatCon promotes a new coherent ideology of the right, its broad array of speakers reveals considerable ideological heterogeneity on the economy, foreign policy and the US’s role in the world. At the latest NatCon conference in Washington there was a chasm between the supporters of a nationalist, US-centric perspective (as promoted by figures including Bannon) and a civilisational–Western perspective on US–Israel relations.³⁴ In Europe the same divide exists between right-wing populists supporting a multipolarist anti-Western perspective (e.g. Orbán) and an illiberal–Atlanticist one (e.g. Farage). But NatCon tolerates and to some extent welcomes these differences as it views them as part of a broad coalition against liberalism. It also means that its actual role is more to act as a space for meetings, networking, promotion and influencing of the public sphere

³⁰ Information about each event is publicly available at National Conservatism, Homepage, accessed at <https://nationalconservatism.org/> on 3 March 2026.

³¹ J. Pogue, ‘Inside the New Right, Where Peter Thiel Is Placing His Biggest Bets’, *Vanity Fair*, 20 April 2022, accessed at <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/04/inside-the-new-right-where-peter-thiel-is-placing-his-biggest-bets> on 3 March 2026.

³² F. Brown, ‘Braverman’s Immigration Speech Disrupted by Protesters After Rees-Mogg Interrupted on Stage’, *Sky News*, 15 May 2023, accessed at <https://news.sky.com/story/jacob-rees-mogg-protester-storms-stage-during-speech-to-warn-of-fascism-12881437> on 3 March 2026.

³³ L. O’Carroll and B. Quinn, ‘NatCon Conference Resumes After Brussels Court Overturns Closure Order’, *The Guardian*, 17 April 2024, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/17/natcon-conference-resume-brussels-court-overturns-closure-order> on 3 March 2026.

³⁴ Author’s interview with NatCon 2025 attendee, 10 September 2025.



by creating the impression of a unified front against ‘global liberal elites’, than to crystallise a distinct positive policy agenda.³⁵

With an aim similar to that of its educational institutions and think tanks, Viktor Orbán’s Hungary was a major player in the international illiberal conservative conference circuit. This was most evident with CPAC Hungary. CPAC is the main gathering of US conservatives and a key event for determining the intellectual direction of the Republican Party, having grown exponentially since its founding in 1974. Since Donald Trump’s election to the presidency, CPAC has adopted an international strategy, organising branded conferences around the world.³⁶ The first such conference was held in Japan in 2017 (where it has become an annual event since),³⁷ while other CPAC conferences have been held in Mexico, Australia, Brazil, South Korea and Argentina.

CPAC’s European offshoot is CPAC Hungary, which was supported by Viktor Orbán and organised by the Fidesz-aligned Centre for Fundamental Rights (see above). The first CPAC Hungary conference was held in 2022, with the theme ‘God, Homeland, Family’. The latest iteration was held in May 2025 on the theme ‘The Age of Patriots Has Arrived’, a nod to the political group Patriots for Europe, to which Fidesz belongs.³⁸ The official conference was preceded a few days earlier by a smaller CPAC Poland meeting in the Polish city of Rzeszow. This served as a campaign event for PiS candidate Karol Nawrocki, who went on to win the Polish presidential election.³⁹ Speakers at CPAC Hungary since 2022 have included Geert Wilders, Santiago Abascal, Marine Le Pen, Liz Truss, Alice Weidel, Andrej Babiš, Mateusz Morawiecki and numerous American Trumpian politicians. Orbán serves as the keynote speaker. Trump has sent recorded messages. While Orbán’s departure from power may hamper CPAC Hungary’s future, CPAC still has plans to continue to operate in Europe, with a forthcoming (at the time of writing) CPAC conference in London in July 2026.

³⁵ S. Montlake, ‘Nationalist Conservatives From US, Europe Gather, Touting Different View of Democracy’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 September 2025, accessed at <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2025/0902/natcon-democracy-europe-trump> on 3 March 2026.

³⁶ On this process and, more generally, the central role of US actors and organisers in international conservative, populist and illiberal conferences in Europe, see Global Project Against Hate and Extremism, *Mapping the Far Right*.

³⁷ CPAC, ‘Standing for Freedom at CPAC Japan’, 11 December 2023, accessed at <https://www.cpac.org/post/standing-for-freedom-at-cpac-japan> on 3 March 2026.

³⁸ See CPAC Hungary, Homepage, accessed at <https://www.cpacungary.com/en/> on 8 October 2025.

³⁹ Z. Végh, ‘CPAC in Poland and Hungary—Giving European Grievances US Dollars’, *EU Observer*, 30 May 2025, accessed at <https://euobserver.com/eu-political/arf8e81737> on 3 March 2026.



Another Hungarian-based international conference is the Budapest Demographic Summit, which takes place every two years. It was initially led by Katalin Novak, then secretary of state for families, who also led the 2023 event as president of the Republic of Hungary (a position from which she later resigned due to a scandal). The first summit was held in 2015, making it one of the first tools of transnational influence used by the Hungarian government under Orbán.⁴⁰ The summit hosts conservative intellectuals and scientists concerned with demographics and family policy.⁴¹ It is also an opportunity to bring together like-minded political actors, especially from Central and Eastern Europe, where the demographic challenge is most acute. Attendees have included Orbán's allies, Presidents Vučić of Serbia and Dodik of the Bosnian Republika Srpska. In 2023 the most high-profile attendee was Giorgia Meloni,⁴² while in 2021 the summit hosted Eric Zemmour and former US vice-president Mike Pence.

Outside of Hungary and the US, the Make Europe Great Again (MEGA) conference⁴³ is a new addition to the transnational right-wing circuit, with the first meeting having been held in Bucharest in April 2024. This was organised by the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor, AUR) of pro-Russian candidate for the Romanian presidency, George Simion. Despite his pro-Russia position, in the European Parliament AUR and Simion are members of the ECR group, which harbours several Atlanticist parties. The second MEGA conference was held under the auspices of the ECR in January 2025.⁴⁴ The July 2025 conference took place in Chisinau, Moldova, and received minimal publicity until the Moldovan authorities blocked some foreign participants from entering the country and designated the conference a threat to Moldovan territorial integrity.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ ELFAC, 'ELFAC Participated in the 5th Demographic Summit in Budapest', 28 September 2023, accessed at <https://www.elfac.org/elfac-participated-in-the-5th-demographic-summit-in-budapest/> on 3 March 2026.

⁴¹ *About Hungary*, '5th Demographic Summit to Be Held in Budapest on September 14–15', 4 September 2023, accessed at <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/5th-demographic-summit-to-be-held-in-budapest-on-september-14-15> on 3 March 2026.

⁴² C. Szumski and F. Pascale, 'Meloni to Be Keynote Speaker at Budapest Demographic Summit', *Euractiv*, 30 August 2023, accessed at <https://www.euractiv.com/news/meloni-to-be-keynote-speaker-at-budapest-demographic-summit/> on 3 March 2026.

⁴³ MEGA, Homepage, accessed at <https://mega2025.eu/> on 3 March 2026.

⁴⁴ For the 2024 Bucharest MEGA conference, see The Gold Institute for International Strategy, "Making Europe Great Again", 27 April 2024, accessed at <https://www.goldiis.org/making-europe-great-again> on 3 March 2026; for the ECR press release about the January 2025 meeting in Brussels, see ECR Party, 'ECR Party to Host Conference on Fundamental Values and Europe's Future—29 January 2025', 27 January 2025, accessed at <https://ecrparty.eu/2025/01/27/ecr-party-to-host-conference-on-fundamental-values-and-europes-future-29-january-2025/> on 3 March 2026.

⁴⁵ D. Smith, 'MEGA in Moldova: A Made-for-MAGA Moment', *Moldova Matters*, 29 July 2025, accessed at <https://www.moldovamatters.md/p/mega-in-moldova-a-made-for-maga-moment> on 3 March 2026.



Another MEGA conference took place in Dubrovnik in October 2025, dedicated to the memory of American right-wing political activist and Internet personality Charlie Kirk. Participants included Simion, Mateusz Morawiecki and other AUR, PiS and ECR politicians, as well as speakers from Portugal's Enough (Patriots for Europe), Greece's Victory (Νίκη, non-inscrit) and the Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska Demokratska Stranka, EPP).⁴⁶

Simion is the prominent force behind MEGA, featured at all events as the keynote or main speaker. It is an open question as to whether this conference series is intended as an avenue to grow pro-Russian sentiment within the ECR as a result of the influence of Simion and other pro-Russian actors, including pro-Trumpian ones from the US, or whether it will be a catalyst for collaboration among parties currently distributed across four different European Parliament groupings. Perhaps more mundanely, it might simply be an effort to 'copyright' the MEGA brand, which became famous in far-right circles in Europe after Elon Musk used it in a post on X. Other claimants to the MEGA theme include the Patriots group, which, in February 2025, used the #MakeEuropeGreatAgain hashtag to brand its Madrid summit led by Vox.⁴⁷

In sum, populists have turned the format of the political conference into a full-blown international mediatised political spectacle. Transnational conferences such as CPAC Hungary, NatCon and Foro Madrid operate like travelling circuses or sports events, rotating between countries and geared towards producing images and soundbites that are shareable online. This creates the idea that a powerful international new 'conservative'—increasingly their self-designation of choice—movement is on the rise. Of course, the absence of programmatic contestation at these events hides the fact that many of these actors have intractable policy differences.

Beyond their strictly ideological goals, the rousing speeches, unorthodox opinions and unexpected events (such as the shutting down of the NatCon conference in Brussels in 2024) at these conferences allow populists to capture the headlines and make themselves look exciting by comparison to the disciplined and carefully choreographed meetings of mainstream political actors. As Zsuzsanna Végh puts it:

⁴⁶ MEGA, 'Make Europe Great Again (MEGA) International Conference – 6th Edition: A Tribute to Charlie Kirk', accessed at <https://mega2025.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Final-Agenda-MEGA-Dubrovnik.pdf> on 21 January 2026.

⁴⁷ *The European Conservative*, 'Patriots for Europe Launch "Grand Offensive" in Madrid', 7 February 2025, accessed at <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/patriots-for-europe-launch-grand-offensive-in-madrid/> on 3 March 2026.



The professionally produced, social-media-ready visuals and emotionally charged messages blend policy advocacy and entertainment, and help attending parties reach new voters. . . . Comparatively, the transatlantic mainstream has no answer of equal spectacle and scale. Democratic, centrist actors rely on high-level fora, such as the Munich Security Conference and other think tank conferences, for exchanges that do not resonate with broader electorates.⁴⁸

The intersection of ideological and geopolitical influence

An important factor in all this transnational activity is that it is underpinned by populist governments—therefore the goals and strategies of this activity cannot be understood without taking into consideration these governments' specific geopolitical interests. A central player here was Viktor Orbán who, between 2010 and 2026, invested a lot of public money and effort in creating a Hungary-centred network of international conferences, think tanks and educational institutions to promote his illiberal ideology.

This network was unique in its access to public funds. It made Hungary an attractive meeting point for intellectuals and political entrepreneurs from around the world who were looking for sponsors and access to official power. In this way, while Orbán's sponsorship appears to have been the sincere promotion of an ideological agenda, it was in fact a way to buy international influence, with many of these foreign intellectuals and guests (especially from the US) raving about Hungary as a model of conservative governance.

Orbán's network followed three overlapping regional strategies.⁴⁹ First, it aimed to consolidate his place as the de facto leader of Central and Eastern Europe on the basis of a conservative definition of its regional identity as opposed to the social progressivism of Western Europe. His patronage of family values and promotion of natalism allowed him to enlist the support of illiberal leaders from

⁴⁸ Végh, 'CPAC in Poland and Hungary'.

⁴⁹ I draw here on the analysis in Heinrich Böll Stiftung and Political Capital Institute, *The Building of Hungarian Political Influence: The Orbán Regime's Efforts to Export Illiberalism* (December 2022), accessed at https://cz.boell.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/pc_boell_the-building-of-hungarian-political-influence_en_1.pdf on 3 March 2026. This report also highlights the deliberate use of Hungarian public funds to support and buy influence among Orbán's international partners, for example, in France and the Western Balkans.



the region who were looking for international and ideological legitimisation. This allowed Orbán to punch above his weight as the self-appointed speaker for the entire region.

Second, Orbán pursued pan-European ideological influence, especially via MCC Brussels, a heavily subsidised organisation that has adopted the form of an educational institution but also dabbles as a think tank, advocacy organisation and political propaganda hub. The aim was for Orbán to dominate the ideological space to the right of the EPP and to be the leader of an illiberal form of conservatism with a vague ideology that appeals to a broad audience—Hungarian-sponsored or co-organised events typically attracted politicians from all three European Parliament groups to the right of the EPP.

The third circle reached outside Europe, especially to the US but also to Israel, India and Latin America (as well as Russia, although this had become more difficult since the war in Ukraine). The various forms of transnational networks enabled the incorporation of actors from outside Europe, particularly from the Anglosphere, while Orbán himself has been a frequent speaker at events in the US. The global nature of these networks created extra-European leverage for Hungary to use in its often-fractious dealings with the EU.

For Orbán, this complex and multilayered network provided an advance ideological defence of his regime, exporting his influence and instability to other actors, as evidenced from MCC Brussels's support for the farmers' 2024 anti-EU protests. International influence and domestic stability were entwined goals for Orbán, which explains the often-duplicating, overlapping and opaque nature of the networks of his regime.⁵⁰ This raises a question about the fate of these networks now that Orbán and Fidesz have lost power in Hungary. The fact is, after a decade and a half in power, Orbán has used these transnational institutions as havens for the associates and resources of his party, and their funding (e.g. by public corporations run by Fidesz-aligned boards) is likely to be relatively insulated from the decisions of the new government, at least for a while.

While Orbán has been the most deliberate state player in sponsoring international networks, he is not the only one. The Trumpian movement in the US is equally important—more diffuse but even more endowed in terms of resources. Traditionally funded by private rather than state donations, the US-led network now more closely resembles the former Hungarian one, as with Trump in the White House there is a clear effort to use the US governmental resources that had previously fostered

⁵⁰ Author's interview with Hungarian expert, 2 October 2025.



transatlantic liberalism to support a new network of right-wing think tanks.⁵¹ It is telling that the transformation of the Republican Party since the mid-2010s has also resulted in the increasing transnational activism of many of its actors, including Trump himself, who has always fostered allegiances with like-minded leaders around the world. The exportability of the Trumpian project, assisted by new social media technologies, is ironic given its professed sovereigntism. It speaks, however, to the ambition to ideologically revamp US international influence and put it to the service of the new illiberal power bloc taking hold in Washington, DC.

In practical terms, the US-led network has multiple overlaps with the Orbán-led one, particularly in the two conferences of CPAC and NatCon. US intellectuals and political actors have participated in Hungarian-sponsored events and networks, just as Orbán has participated in US-led events, with the two sides jointly building up and exchanging legitimacy and influence. Despite important policy differences (especially on relations with Russia and China), both hubs of populist networking share the intention to rewire the purpose of international institutions and the meaning of ‘conservatism’ as the official ideology of this new international order. The overlaps between the two networks also raise the possibility that elements of the Orbán network may migrate or reconstitute themselves within the Trumpian one, continuing their transnational activities under different brands after Fidesz’s defeat in the 2026 elections.

More broadly, Orbán’s departure raises the question of how transnational networks that had long enjoyed governmental support will cope. It can be expected that Hungary will stop being a hub for meetings and conferences. But while the removal of this direct source of support will inevitably cause disruption, one should not expect a complete dissolution of this space. First, 16 years of investment by the Orbán government means that many of these actors will have some resources to continue operating, perhaps in a slimmed down form, for some time. Second, the increasing involvement of the Trumpian network in Europe shows that, in an era when populists win elections and participate in government in various countries, the loss of power in one capital may simply mean the regrouping of these networks in different hubs. In this case, rather than their disappearance, it is more important to ask what Orbán’s departure will mean for the rebalancing of influence between the various actors and priorities within the transnational illiberal space. If US-based actors grow in relative importance, then this is likely to change the character of rather than weaken the threat to Europe. Third and finally, the experience of transnational activities in the US, as well as in Spain, France and other countries,

⁵¹ Mathiesen et al., ‘The MAGA-Friendly European Think Tanks Trump Wants to Fund’.



shows that access to governmental power may be a multiplier of influence, but it is not a precondition for these networks to continue operating. The loss of access to government funds will simply mean turning towards private sources of funding, which has long been the case for the US Republican conferences and networks. Here as well, we see a change in the nature of the challenge rather than its elimination.

Policy recommendations

The immediate threat posed by the transnational activity of populists to international institutions and centre–right politics in the Euro-Atlantic area may not be readily apparent, given these networks’ diffuse nature, lack of policy coherence and occasional failure to live up to their lofty ambitions. Yet their impact is potentially more pernicious than might be implied by conventional measures of policy influence. What these networks do is create a parallel reality that mirrors and disrupts mainstream institutions, even if they never reach the latter’s level of sophistication and status. At the same time, they are transparently aiming to displace the centre–right from its ideological space and usurp its position as the ‘real’ conservatism. With significant backing from state actors with the clear geopolitical objective not simply of hijacking the Euro-Atlantic institutional edifice but of dismantling the EU, the transnational activity of populists and illiberals must be taken seriously. Taking note of the following recommendations will ensure that this is the case.

Do not abandon conservatism and Christian Democracy to the populists

Transnational populists and illiberals increasingly use ‘conservative/ism’ as their ideological self-identification (with Christian Democracy also used, although more sparingly). It is clear that populists see their transnational activity not only as a way to gain status and influence, but also as a way to anoint themselves as the ‘authentic’ right in place of the mainstream centre–right, which is presented as part of the liberal elite. If they are successful in this rebranding, it will have obvious dangers for democracy and European integration.

The centre–right must not allow this to happen. For far too long, the EPP family has projected a de-ideologised and managerialist image, leaving this space open to these actors. The EPP must respond by reasserting its ownership of ideological terms and symbols. A way to do this would be to rebrand some of its



activities, public meetings and affiliated organisations with more active use of the terms ‘conservative’ and ‘Christian Democratic’. It must also engage more in the ideological debates currently taking place in various circles about the meaning and purpose of conservatism, blocking efforts to use this term as ideological whitewashing for Euroscepticism, illiberalism and anti-Westernism. The EPP must become adept at defending European integration and liberal democracy not only in pragmatic and technocratic terms, but also in values-based ones. This will allow it to re-engage the traditional constituencies with which it has lost contact while also reaching out to new ones, such as young people looking for exciting new ideological propositions in order to enter politics.

Reimagine the purpose of the Euro-Atlantic order and European integration

Populists have been very active in associating ‘conservatism’ with excitement, effervescence and the fight against the ‘liberal elites’. This creates the danger of pushing the mainstream centre–right out of its ideological space, as well as steering Euro-Atlantic institutions away from their original mission. This will be even more the case if the EPP insists on a message of ‘conservatism’ that is literally understood as preservation of what exists, an unexciting stasis that has become, for many, too self-referential.

The EPP must formulate a new and more exciting mission both for itself and the EU as a whole. It must insist that the institutions it defends are not ends in their own right but an expression of higher values and ideals. It must also articulate a more uplifting and ambitious purpose for European integration, both within Europe and around the world. If the EPP does not actively present European integration as the expression of a transcendent ideal, especially at a time when this ideal is under assault both inside and outside Europe, then these values will be hijacked by populists and used to the opposite purpose: to undermine European integration and the unity of the West.

Rethink political education

Populists and illiberals have a dual approach to education. On the one hand, they aim to delegitimise established universities or even harm them (e.g. through defunding) as they are seen as bastions of progressivism and ‘woke’ ideology. On the other hand, they have invested time and resources in creating new university-like educational establishments, creating an alternative ecosystem of ‘conservative’ higher education that copies the tropes (and aspires to the legitimacy) of established



universities. For all the anti-intellectualism of some populist leaders, ideological education and university prestige are things they take seriously.

This is a wake-up call for the centre–right to invest in an area of civil society—education and universities—that it has long neglected. To be clear, the image of *all* higher education institutions as bastions of progressive and radical ideas is a stereotype peddled by populists. But it is also true that one would be hard-pressed to find established universities offering the kinds of political and ideological education that populists are trying to provide with their educational establishments: studies of the classics, philosophy, the history of Christian thought, the foundations of European culture, and the intellectual history of conservative and Christian Democratic ideas. The fact that populists supply this means that there is substantial demand for it.

The EPP family must rethink the notion of political education as well as its relative absence from the university space, given that the provision of such education was one of its foundational political missions. It must create deeper links with prestigious academic institutions, facilitate the development of new study programmes on topics close to the conservative and Christian Democratic identity, and link existing programmes of ideological and political education among the member parties to university offerings, thus making them more appealing to broader groups of young people interested in these topics.

Take the battle to the populists—strategically

Over time, populists have built a space of intellectual diffusion and transnational networking that operates almost unchallenged by dissenting voices and arguments, thus projecting to the outside world a picture of (illusory) unity and confidence. The EPP has historically struggled with the question of how to deal with the far right—whether to isolate or engage it. On the level of electoral strategy, this will remain an open debate. But on the level of intellectual interactions and debates, the verdict is clearer. Worries about ‘legitimising’ the far right are past time when the populist, illiberal and radical right now gets the vote of anywhere between a quarter and a third of the electorate and holds seats in most EU member states’ parliaments and the European Parliament. The question should rather be whether leaving the populists to propagate their ideas uninhibited is simply allowing them to grow unchallenged.

The EPP family must formulate a flexible strategy of engagement with transnational populist networks. Some actors, topics or venues will remain rightly off limits for EPP parties and other democratic forces. But in other cases, EPP actors must



be open and willing to take on the populists, particularly on issues where they are deeply divided and where their positions are out of step with the majority of European public opinion—for instance, the war in Ukraine and relations with Trump, which many of these actors cultivate despite the US president’s outright hostility to European interests. This can be done in the public sphere, at policy events and conferences (even those staged by populist organisations), but should also be pursued in the less visible spaces and networks of ideological and cultural debate, where populists have entrenched themselves.

Respond to the populists’ hybrid warfare in kind

The main feature of the transnational activities of populists is their ability to mesh the actions and goals of very different forms of actors—international conferences, educational institutions, think tanks, advocacy organisations and lobbyists—in order to pursue all of them in parallel and in the most disruptive way possible. This is a form of asymmetrical hybrid warfare that undermines the authority of established institutions and mainstream party families, while creating an opaque and complex network of operations across borders that is difficult to pin down. The EPP must understand that the fight against populists is not taking place solely on the party system level, and realise that its existing structures may have to be augmented with new tools and strategies to counter this threat.

To achieve this, the EPP must devote more resources to the tracking and ‘unpacking’ of populist networks, for example, by developing a dedicated taskforce within the EPP family and across its affiliates to study and map them. Applying ‘sharp’ tactics against populists is also necessary. The transnational activities of populists are not only political, but are entwined with interests that can and should be scrutinised more. Some important work on this has been done by investigative journalists, but more needs to be done to uncover the interests (financial and otherwise) hiding behind the seemingly ideological transnational initiatives, their funders and their governance structures. Perhaps more demanding but no less necessary, the EPP should consider copying some of the populists’ hybrid tactics and turning them back on them. The enmeshing of think tank activities and political education, or academic research and public opinion influencing, while historically conducted by mainstream political foundations, must acquire a sharper edge, directed against populist arguments and the legitimacy of their ‘experts’ and knowledge production.



Take the show ‘on the road’

Populists and illiberals understand that, today, politics generates more interest if political events are turned into spectacles. Moderates may not want to directly match this ‘circus’ dimension of transnational cooperation, not least because they would not look authentic relative to actors who have long utilised this kind of communication. But they must accept the need for more genuine and people-friendly communication of their own activities. In Végh’s words,

democratic players must . . . strengthen the cross-border infrastructure of democratically minded figures (not only politicians but also local reporters, fact-checkers, civic educators, entrepreneurs) and co-create a flagship stage to debate the future of a democratic transatlantic alliance. They need to compete on culture, not just policy, and explore the roll-out of podcasts, short-form videos, and townhall roadshows to explain—in national languages—how a strong transatlantic alliance [can] translate into security, jobs, and everyday convenience.⁵²

The fight starts at home

The announcement by new Hungarian Prime Minister Peter Magyar that he will cut public funding for MCC and other ideological entities funded by the Orbán government is a good example of how governments also have an important part to play in safeguarding democracy and the values of European integration from activities that often elude effective control by jumping across borders. Having said this, Magyar’s decision is an easy first step for a network that was publicly and unashamedly sponsored by a specific European government. This may very well mean, however, that these entities will seek new sponsors either outside the EU (e.g. the Trumpian political and donor class) or in the private sector, which is already involved in their funding. Therefore, more action is needed. The regulation of private political financing and vigilance against external influence certainly require supranational cooperation, but implementation and oversight must be robust at the national level for them to be effective. The resolve and persistence of pro-European governments in ensuring these networks abide by strict rules on the role of private money and foreign actors in European politics are essential, especially given these networks’ opaque and often convoluted nature.

⁵² Végh, ‘CPAC in Poland and Hungary’.



Conclusion

The emergence of transnational populist networks marks a qualitative shift in the political landscape with which the European centre–right is confronted. What began as fragmented national movements has evolved into a coordinated ecosystem of conferences, think tanks, educational institutions and media platforms that consciously mirrors the architecture of mainstream Euro-Atlantic cooperation while advancing a sovereigntist, illiberal agenda. In several cases, this infrastructure benefits from state backing, allowing it to cultivate elites and project influence well beyond borders. Its central ambition is not merely electoral disruption, but the redefinition of conservatism itself—detaching it from the rule of law, European integration and transatlantic partnership, and recasting it in illiberal terms. For the European centre–right this is a challenge that, if left unanswered, will narrow its ideological space and normalise Euroscepticism and populism under the banner of ‘authentic’ conservatism. The response must be to reclaim the intellectual foundations of Christian Democracy and European conservatism, reimagine elite formation and political education, sharpen communication and articulate European integration as a values-based project.



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Credits

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