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Title: **Studying Authoritarian Networks – An Interscalar Approach**

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Title: **Authoritarian Attitudes and Media Populism**

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Title: **Authoritarian Connectivity: Chinese Business Elites and Internet Control in Africa**

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Title: **Disrupting from Within: Russian-Backed Networks and the Erosion of Democracy in Moldova**

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Title: **The Geo-politics of Artificial Intelligence: Race, Autocracy, Neoliberalism, and Techno-Optimism**

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Title: **Representing the (Il)liberal Future? Transnational Advocacy Networks and the Political Mobilization of Youth in the European Union**

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Title: **How Autocrats Rule: Network Configurations and Elite Integration Across Regime Types**

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Title: **Anti-democratic Narratives in Online Spaces**

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Title: **Private foundations: Transnational actors in autocratization?**

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Title: **The complex interplay of social media, network structures, and authoritarian actors**

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Title: **Breaking Down Emotional Barriers: The AfD's Semiotic Strategies for Normalizing Authoritarian Discourse Online**

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Title: **Substitution and Disruption in Authoritarian Networks: Explaining CSTO Under-Signalling**

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Title: **The Epistemic Role of Strong Ties in Authoritarian Networks**

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Title: **The Fifth Wave of Far-Right Politics since 1945: Government, New Issues, and Extraparliamentary Activism**

Contributions

Authors: Licia Cianetti & Johannes Gerschewski

Title: Studying Authoritarian Networks – An Interscalar Approach

Abstract: In our contribution to the workshop, we propose an interscalar approach for studying authoritarian networks. We contend that we are currently experiencing an authoritarian momentum in which even long-established liberal democracies are under threat. Scholars have responded to this by developing a rich stream of work on autocratisation, democratic backsliding and democratic resilience (Croissant and Tomini 2024; Bunce et al. 2025, Riedl et al. 2025). While we have gained enormous insights into the inner workings of authoritarian regimes, we argue that we should overcome the dominant perspective that is still regime-bound and country-specific. With Glasius (2018, 523) we put forward that we need to go “below, above, and beyond the state.” In this light, we propose that we should understand authoritarianism as a fundamentally interscalar phenomenon. That is, authoritarian ideas, practices and technologies are shaped and spread through the interaction and mutual influence of local, national, and transnational networks of actors. We lay out the main ideas of interscalarity, a concept that we borrow from human and urban geography, and apply it to the study of authoritarian networks.

Author: Sven Engeßer

Title: Authoritarian Attitudes and Media Populism

Abstract: This presentation investigates the role of authoritarian attitudes as a cultural opportunity structure fostering populist communication in the news media. Drawing on theories of authoritarianism and discursive opportunity structures, I argue that authoritarian dispositions—characterized by conformity, obedience to authority, and outgroup hostility—create a favorable cultural climate for populist narratives. Although authoritarianism and populism may appear ideologically inconsistent, I demonstrate their compatibility through shared emphasis on strong leadership, in-group unity, and resistance to perceived elite betrayal. The hypothesis that higher levels of authoritarian attitudes correlate with greater prevalence of populist key messages in media coverage is tested through a cross-national content analysis of over 9,000 news articles from ten Western democracies. Findings reveal a strong positive correlation ($r = .78$, $p < .05$) between macro-level authoritarianism and populist communication in national press coverage. This supports the argument that journalists, responding to audience predispositions, are more likely to include populist messages in societies where authoritarian attitudes are widespread.

Author: Tina Freyburg

Title: Authoritarian Connectivity: Chinese Business Elites and Internet Control in Africa

Abstract: This paper investigates how Chinese business elites influence internet governance across African autocracies through transnational corporate networks, despite little direct investment in the continent's telecommunications infrastructure. Our study shows that elite influence operates less through direct influence based on holding shares in internet service providers (ISPs) and more through embedded, relational power structures. Using original matched datasets from TOSCO and BoardEx, we map the indirect ties between 59 African ISPs and 872 Chinese elites, identifying elite integration via board interlocks, career hubs, and policy-planning organizations. These links are particularly strong among firms involved in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which we find to be key conduits for influence. We propose a difference-in-differences analysis using the V-Dem dataset to assess how these elite networks shape patterns of online repression. Overall, our network analysis reveals how ISPs embedded in Chinese elite networks are more likely to align with host-country incumbents in deploying digital tools for political control—through censorship, surveillance, and shutdowns. Our findings highlight how China's hybrid state-capitalist model and elite-driven internationalization facilitate authoritarian diffusion. This research underscores the critical role of transnational business elites in authoritarian connectivity and digital control infrastructures.

Author: Stephen Hall

Title: **Disrupting from Within: Russian-Backed Networks and the Erosion of Democracy in Moldova**

Abstract: This paper examines how Russia employs authoritarian networks to undermine democracy in Moldova, with particular focus on the role of Ilan Shor and his associated political organisations. Shor, a convicted oligarch and leader of the Shor Party, has emerged as a key node in Russia's strategy to destabilize Moldova's democratic institutions. Drawing on financial, political, and media resources, Shor's network operates as a conduit for Russian influence, mobilizing anti-European sentiment, spreading disinformation, and orchestrating protests aimed at delegitimizing the pro-Western government. The paper situates Shor's activities in the broader theoretical framework of authoritarian networking. In line with the logic of authoritarian networks operating in democracies, the Moldovan case demonstrates how external authoritarian actors (Russia) cultivate local intermediaries to erode institutional trust, polarize society, and weaken state resilience. At the same time, the case highlights how the digital sphere has amplified Shor's capacity to disseminate pro-Russian narratives and coordinate disruptive activities across multiple spatial levels, from local mobilization to transnational linkages with Moscow. By tracing the mechanisms and strategies underpinning Shor's network, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how Russia weaponizes informal and formal connections to export authoritarian practices beyond its borders. It argues that Moldova exemplifies the ways in which authoritarian networks adapt to democratic contexts: rather than reinforcing regime stability, they seek to destabilize, delegitimize, and discredit democratic governance.

Author: Orit Halpern

Title: **The Geo-politics of Artificial Intelligence: Race, Autocracy, Neoliberalism, and Techno-Optimism**

Abstract: This paper will trace the historical genealogy of contemporary discourses of race, technology, freedom, and economy that are currently undermining plural liberal democracy and supporting an emerging tech-oligarchism and autocracy around the world. As scholars have noted, neoliberalism has long supported authoritarian, and anti-democratic governments through combining anti-civil rights, eugenic and neo-Malthusian racist and sexist discourses with the economic logic of neo-libertarianism to argue against government and the rule of law, and to justify financialization and market de-regulation; resulting in what Anne Applebaum has labelled Autocracy, inc. What has only now gained attention has been the relationship between these movements and an emerging tech-oligarchy of the digital economy. This paper will trace the relationship between economics, computer science, and such ideologies as those of 'the Network State', transhumanism and the singularity, and Techno-Optimism to examine the rise of a new ideology of Social Darwinism, engineering, and 'freedom' no longer attached to liberal ideals, but to socio-biological ideas of nature and computational models of decision making and intelligence. These ideologies of technology are fundamentally antagonistic to ideas of liberalism, agency and rights, law, and scientific inquiry that support contemporary democracies and are currently shaping machine architectures.

Author: **Anna Holzscheiter, Ph.D.** (+ co-authors, TBC)

Title: **Representing the (Il)liberal Future? Transnational Advocacy Networks and the Political Mobilization of Youth in the European Union**

Abstract: In this research note, we will sketch an interdisciplinary research agenda that places transnational advocacy networks by and with young people center stage in explaining disruptions to democracy in the European Union. Focusing on youth and the liberal and illiberal networks their advocacy and activism is embedded in is an important extension of scholarship on the rise of authoritarianism and democratic backsliding in international institutions. Studying transnational advocacy networks by and with youth, we seek to understand how intra- and intergenerational interests and ideas work to define social problems and the political struggles surrounding them (Elliott, 2022). This agenda builds on three pertinent strands of Social Science scholarship crossing disciplinary boundaries between Political Science and Sociology: first, the literature on political representation in international institutions (Ciplet, 2019; Colás, 2003; Comberti, Thornton, Korodimou, Shea, & Riamit, 2019); secondly, scholarship on transnational advocacy coalitions, networks & social movements (Carpenter, 2007; Khagram, Riker, & Sikkink, 2002; Krook & True, 2012); and thirdly, salient debates on the contestation of liberal values, theories on the growing polarization of European societies and on the causes and effects of diversification and pluralization of international institutions (Alter & Zürn, 2020; Goetz, 2020; Schopmans & Cupac, 2021).

In all three of the research areas the relevance of age is seriously undertheorized when it comes to addressing representational claims by young people vis-à-vis international institutions; the dynamics and effects of intragenerational (youth-specific) and intergenerational political alliances and movements; and the ways

in which youth actors form part of transnational illiberal alliances and networks (e.g. anti-diversity, anti-gender, climate-change denying, right-wing populist etc.). Children and youth have been identified as underresearched and undertheorized participants in social movements (Earl, Maher, & Elliott, 2017; Rodgers, 2020). A case in point is a recent overview of the vibrant interdisciplinary scholarship addressing the link between social movements, populism and polarization that is completely oblivious to questions of age (Hutter & Weisskircher, 2022). Our project thus extends scholarly debates on transnational political representation, advocacy networks and contentious politics/illiberal backlash by focusing on a) how transnational intra- and intergenerational movements and alliances are challenging institutionalized orders of age and b) the transformative effects that contestation of orders of age has on future-oriented policies. We define ‘orders of age’ as explicit or implicit social, political and legal hierarchies justified on the basis of age. Explicit orders of age are those that are enshrined in a political institution’s rules of access and interaction, while implicit orders of age are those that manifest themselves in discursive and other social practices. As our previous research on youth representation in global and national politics has exposed, orders of age are intimately intertwined with ideas on expertise/knowledge/competence, maturity, rationality, agency and affectedness (Holzscheiter, 2018; Holzscheiter & Pantzerhielm, forthcoming; Josefsson, forthcoming; Sandin & Josefsson, 2022; Sandin, Josefsson, Hanson, & Balagopalan, 2023). We thus expect to find that orders of age are justified and challenged with reference to these attributes.

We aim to show that youth representation in transnational networks enhances our knowledge on broader questions of democracy, pluralism and political representation in international relations. Thus, rather than simply ‘applying’ existing theories to yet another supposedly marginalized group, our project aspires to prove that an inquiry into the politics of youth representation adds to our overall understanding of the dynamics of pluralization and diversification in international institutions and to the effects of transnational advocacy on challenging orders of age. To expose these dynamics, we argue, is fundamental in understanding contemporary challenges and opportunities confronting institutions such as those belonging to the EU as regards legitimacy, trust and relevance across generations and their potential to garner the greatest possible support for future-oriented policy choices, especially those that come with strong (intergenerational) justice claims.

Author: Steffen Kailitz

Title: **How Autocrats Rule: Network Configurations and Elite Integration Across Regime Types**

Abstract: How do ruling elites structure internal networks across distinct autocratic regime types—and how do these configurations affect regime stability? This paper addresses these questions by examining variation in elite-centered power networks across military, one-party, ideocratic, monarchic, electoral, colonial, and occupation regimes, as classified in the *Varieties of Political Regimes* (Va-PoReg) dataset. Drawing on research on autocratic institutions and elite coordination (Svolik 2012; Magaloni 2008; Geddes 1999), the study compares how regimes differ in leadership configuration, institutional anchoring, and

mechanisms of elite integration. The analysis focuses on how access to decision-making is structured, which actors are embedded into ruling coalitions, and how control is maintained across different types of autocratic rule. Rather than treating autocracy as a homogeneous phenomenon, the study highlights systematic variation in how elites use institutional and informal networks to sustain nondemocratic governance. It contributes to a more differentiated understanding of autocratic resilience by linking regime type to distinct modes of elite structuring and internal cohesion.

Author: Karrie J. Koesel

Title: Anti-democratic Narratives in Online Spaces

Abstract: How does the authoritarian propagandist undermine democracy for international audiences? This paper compares the propaganda efforts of Russia and China—two large, influential, and ambitious authoritarian regimes—and how they use social media to advance authoritarian interests and disrupt democracies on a global scale. Drawing on computational social science approaches, the paper analyzes social media posts from Russian and Chinese state-run media and regime representatives across multiple platforms and over time, Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, and VK. This comparison sheds light on how Russia and China seek to challenge democratic values, rights, institutions, and processes in online spaces. It also demonstrates how social media is deployed to advance authoritarian interests, including ideological, economic, security, and strategic alliances. This paper contributes to ongoing theoretical debates about democracy prevention and authoritarian promotion, enriches our understanding of the growing sophistication of authoritarian influence operations, and brings new comparative knowledge of Russian and Chinese propaganda strategies.

Author: Julia Leininger

Title: Private foundations: Transnational actors in autocratization?

Abstract: Democratization research has traditionally emphasized states, intergovernmental organizations, and NGOs, while private foundations remain under-researched in comparative politics. Philanthropy studies have shown that large U.S. and European foundations have considerable political influence, yet these insights are rarely connected to theories of democratization or autocratization. Even liberal, democracy-oriented foundations—such as the Open Society Foundations or German party foundations—are under-studied, typically portrayed as background funders rather than autonomous transnational actors shaping political change. The neglect is even greater regarding right-wing and radical foundations. Anecdotic evidence indicates that such organizations provide support to political leaders, movements, and parties that advance autocratic norms and contribute to democratic erosion. However, systematic research is virtually absent. We lack comparative knowledge of what these foundations do, where they operate, and how they contribute to autocratization. This paper addresses these gaps by mapping the role of private foundations as transnational actors in autocratization. It aims for examining their geographic reach, funding

strategies, and mechanisms of influence, combining cross-national grant and regulatory data with in-depth case studies. By integrating philanthropy studies and a focus on private business foundations into democratization research, the study expands our understanding of how foundations—overshadowed by other actors—shape the global dynamics of democratic erosion.

Author: Philipp Lorenz-Spreen

Title: The complex interplay of social media, network structures, and authoritarian actors

Abstract: Information and communication technology has undergone dramatic developments over the last two decades. Increasing interconnectedness has led to more self-organized public debates, platforms and their algorithms have gained new power over discourse, and generative AI has made content fabrication easier than ever. But it has also given research new tools to quantify precisely these systemic changes. Detailed data from social media allows us to measure and model their network structures and dynamics. Against this background, we ask: What is really changing, what does science know about the connection between the crises of democracy and the worldwide use social media and the mechanisms thereon? A number of political behaviors appear to be influenced by the use of digital media, such as increasing polarization or declining trust in institutions. Our findings show that while there is agreement in the literature on some of the relationships, these vary across the world and, above all, the underlying mechanisms by which these dimensions are linked are still unknown. Current research questions revolve around the relative roles of platform algorithms, authoritarian actors and the underlying social network structures. I will present results on some elements of those and conclude with a methodological outlook on how we are currently measuring the missing puzzle pieces.

Authors: Simon Meier-Vieracker & Rath, Torben

Title: Breaking Down Emotional Barriers: The AfD's Semiotic Strategies for Normalizing Authoritarian Discourse Online

Abstract: In a widely acclaimed essay published in 2019, the right-wing extremist journalist Götz Kubitschek outlined a strategy of self-trivialisation (*Selbstverharmlosung*) that aims at breaking down the ‘emotional barrier’ that prevents ordinary citizens from turning to right-wing and authoritarian positions (Kubitschek 2019). Since then, the right-wing extremist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) has found ways and means, particularly on social media, to successfully implement this strategy of achieving cultural and emotional hegemony (Strick 2021). On platforms like Facebook and TikTok, AfD politicians target different groups in an emotionalising manner in order to make authoritarian social models socially acceptable (Bösch 2023; Gerbaudo et al. 2023; Serafis/Mădroane/Lalér 2024).

In our talk, we will take a close look to AfD's social media activities from a linguistic and multimodal perspective. We will identify recurring motifs, topics, and semiotic strategies to create images oscillating between soft-focus utopias (e.g. of intact families in rural areas) on the one hand and dramatizing dystopias (e.g. of migrants' 'invasions') on the other (Wodak 2021).

Author: Murad Nasibov

Title: Substitution and Disruption in Authoritarian Networks: Explaining CSTO Under-Signalling

Abstract: This study examines strategic under-signalling (lower-than-expected) by the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)—cases where fewer joint statements were issued despite conditions that, based on prior modelling, typically trigger signalling. While earlier research found that wars, parliamentary elections, and protests significantly predict CSTO statements (but not presidential elections and referenda), this follow-up study investigates instances of under-signalling and asks whether it can be explained by two factors: security documents adopted by heads of state within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), another Russia-led soft-security organisations, and domestic leadership changes. The findings show that both factors are associated with under-signalling. This finding suggests that *first*, there is a strategic choice between the available platforms – the CIS and the CSTO, and *second*, disruption in the network of authoritarian leaders results in under-signalling. Yet, more crucially, the effect of CIS activity is found to be conditioned by leadership change, meaning that when there is a leadership change, the authoritarian network in question is more likely to shift from the CSTO, a hard-security organisation, to the CIS, a soft-security organisation. These results underscore how substitution and disruption operate within the network of authoritarian leaders.

Author: Sergiu Spatan

Title: The Epistemic Role of Strong Ties in Authoritarian Networks

Abstract: Abstract: Building on previous work on trust dynamics in epistemic communities (Spatan & Rich, 2025, Topoi), this presentation examines the central role of strong ties – marked by repeated interactions and mutual support – in the functioning of authoritarian networks. I argue that beliefs tied to social or political identity are often shaped by strong-tie contacts, both due to normative pressure to align with the group and their influence on individuals' trust in sources of information. This insight helps explain how authoritarian networks operate across regime types. In democratic contexts, authoritarian actors exploit strong-tie networks to spread misinformation, erode trust in reliable expertise, and foster conditions ripe for democratic disruption. Once authoritarian regimes are established, these networks are leveraged to enforce conformity with regime-sanctioned norms and suppress dissent. To illustrate these dynamics, I draw on the case of Romania – my home country – which has experienced both extremes: a repressive communist regime that used strong-tie networks for surveillance,

and a contemporary surge in far-right influence fueled by disinformation and social fragmentation. I argue that strong ties, while often seen as stabilizing forces, can become powerful conduits of authoritarian influence – making them critical to understanding both the erosion and consolidation of democratic order.

Author: Manès Weisskircher

Title: The Fifth Wave of Far-Right Politics since 1945: Government, New Issues, and Extraparliamentary Activism

Abstract: Klaus von Beyme and Cas Mudde have identified four distinct waves of far-right politics in western Europe and beyond since 1945. In the early 21st century, the fourth wave of the far right was marked by processes of mainstreaming and normalisation. This article proposes the emergence of a fifth wave of far-right politics, defined by three interrelated developments. First, far-right actors increasingly occupy senior government roles, including prime ministers and presidents, rather than remaining junior coalition partners. Second, their political agenda has expanded beyond the core issue of immigration to encompass issues such as climate policy, gender, or war, broadening their electoral appeal. Third, far-right parties now engage in street protest and alternative media-building, shifting extraparliamentary activism from the margins to party-led initiatives. The article argues that recognizing this fifth wave is essential for understanding the far right's growing impact on political discourse, policy, and democratic institutions.