

CHAPTER 16



**ILLIBERAL
INTERNATIONAL**

Illiberal International: The Transatlantic Right's Challenge to Democracy

Robert Benson*

The Center for American Progress, Washington D.C., US

Abstract

This chapter investigates the transatlantic dimensions of far-right political mobilization, tracing the networks linking populist and authoritarian actors across Europe and the United States. It argues that the far right has become increasingly skilled at building cross-border alliances that exchange strategies, legal models, ideological frames and digital tactics to weaken democratic norms. Moving beyond nation-centred analyses, the chapter highlights growing coordination in anti-immigration rhetoric, attacks on 'gender ideology', and efforts to delegitimize multilateral institutions. It examines organizational links among US think tanks, European party foundations and online platforms that amplify common messaging, finance convenings and train activists, with particular attention to the language of 'sovereignty', 'tradition', and 'civilizational threat' as a shared rhetorical toolkit. The chapter also analyses the diffusion of legal hardball tactics – such as assaults on judicial independence, academic freedom, media and civil society – and assesses the implications of these transatlantic linkages for democratic resilience and effective counterstrategies.

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* rbenson@americanprogress.org

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Introduction

For decades, the transatlantic relationship rested on a shared moral and institutional foundation. The United States and Europe defined their partnership through liberal-democratic values – human rights, pluralism and the rule of law. Those principles gave coherence to the Western alliance and legitimacy to its global leadership. Yet that consensus now faces a coordinated and ideologically confident challenge. A network of far-right political actors across the Atlantic has learned to cooperate across borders, fusing rhetoric, strategy and institutional power to erode liberal norms from within.

This chapter investigates the connective tissue of those transatlantic illiberal networks. It argues that the far right's rise no longer unfolds through isolated national movements but through mutually reinforcing exchanges between American and European actors. These networks trade narratives about 'sovereignty', 'tradition', and 'civilizational threat', and share tactical repertoires – legal activism, institutional capture and digital disinformation – that hollow out democratic checks while preserving a facade of procedural legitimacy in the name of a Western *vox populi* (Mudde 2004).

The chapter situates this development within the broader trajectory of transatlantic relations. It contends that the liberal consensus has weakened since 2016, replaced by a new normative alignment organized around nationalism and identity. Far-right cooperation no longer merely contests the postwar order; it offers a rival model of democracy based on majoritarian rule, cultural homogeneity and suspicion of technocratic authority. The chapter concludes with concrete policy recommendations to counter these dynamics and rebuild a transatlantic foundation grounded in democratic resilience rather than complacent liberalism.

At a scholarly level, this analysis contributes to an emerging field that examines the internationalization of authoritarian populism – a phenomenon analysed by scholars (Mudde 2020; Müller 2016; and Zürn 2019). The diffusion of illiberal tactics across borders suggests that backsliding no longer unfolds as a domestic pathology but as a transnational process. As authoritarian populists coordinate their respective narratives, liberal democracies face a globalized form of contestation that transcends national institutions and elections. This chapter joins that debate by mapping how transatlantic linkages – once engines of the liberal order – now facilitate its undoing.

The liberal consensus and its erosion

The transatlantic liberal consensus crystallized after World War II and reached its institutional maturity in the 1990s. NATO's security guarantees, the European Union's expansion, and the Helsinki process all reinforced a shared commitment to democracy, free markets and multilateral governance. Washington and Brussels viewed their partnership as the normative core of a rules-based international order. Transatlantic summits revolved around values as much as interests: open societies, free elections, and universal rights served as the moral language of Western cooperation (Ikenberry 2011).

During the post-Cold War moment, this consensus evolved into a doctrine of liberal triumphalism (Fukuyama 1992). The fall of the Soviet Union convinced policymakers that democracy and markets would inevitably spread outwards. The United States expanded democracy promotion programs through USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy, while the EU embedded democratic conditionality in its enlargement policy. 'Transition assistance' and civil society funding became instruments of global liberalization. Yet this expansion bred complacency. Liberal universalism hardened into orthodoxy, and many citizens began to see democracy promotion not as solidarity but as ideological export (Chandler 2006). From the Western Balkans to South Asia and beyond, resentment toward externally imposed models began to percolate. In Serbia and Bosnia, local elites portrayed Western conditionality as paternalism, exploiting fatigue with endless reform checklists (Ignatieff 2003). In Türkiye, EU accession delays fed nationalist narratives about cultural intrusion. Across parts of Africa and Latin America, US-backed democracy programs came to symbolize Western hypocrisy (Carothers 2004).

Cracks in that consensus appeared in earnest after 9/11. The United States' invasion of Iraq divided the alliance and exposed European doubts about American exceptionalism. By the late 2000s, economic crises and migration pressures fuelled domestic disillusionment with globalization. The 'liberal script', once a source of pride, became a lightning rod for grievances about lost sovereignty and cultural change (Börzel et al. 2024). Across Europe, populist leaders framed Brussels as an unaccountable bureaucracy and the EU's rights agenda as an assault on tradition.

Donald Trump's presidency marked its rupture. His 'America First' foreign policy rejected multilateralism and treated alliances as transactional. Trump's public



praise for authoritarian leaders and his attacks on NATO, the EU and the mainstream media emboldened Europe's far right. Orbán, Le Pen and Salvini hailed him as proof that nationalist populism could capture the world's most powerful democracy. In turn, American conservatives drew inspiration from European 'illiberal democrats', celebrating Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland as models of Christian governance that thoroughly rejected the post-1968 liberal emphasis on secular multiculturalism (Judt 2005; Krastev and Holmes 2019).

The effect was cumulative. By 2020, Trump administration officials such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo described Hungary as a model of sovereignty, while European populists echoed Trump's increasingly conspiratorial rhetoric about the 'deep state' (Bowman 2019; *Le Monde* 2025). When President Biden took office, he sought to restore traditional transatlantic language, organizing a 'Summit for Democracy'.¹ Yet by then, the intellectual current had shifted. The transatlantic right had institutionalized its own moral vocabulary, positioning nationalism as the authentic heir to Western civilization. By the 2024 election and Trump's triumph at the ballot box, it became clear that Biden – not Trump – had been the aberration.

The postwar ideal of the transatlantic alliance as a moral community gave way to ideological fragmentation. Shared democratic values no longer defined the relationship; instead, competing visions of sovereignty and identity began to dominate. While the Biden administration restored rhetorical commitment to democracy, the structural erosion of shared norms persisted. The far right now operates as a transnational movement that adapts to electoral setbacks and translates domestic victories into global influence.

Mapping the networks: Actors, institutions and mechanisms

The far right's transatlantic infrastructure spans think tanks, media platforms, political parties and increasingly influential advocacy networks. These actors collaborate through conferences, digital ecosystems and funding flows that sustain a common ideological front.

In the United States, institutions such as the Heritage Foundation, the Leadership Institute, and the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) serve as anchor

1. For the full statement, please see U.S. State Department (2021–2025).

points. They train conservative activists, produce model legislation, and coordinate messaging on issues from religious liberty to ‘gender ideology’. Their international branches, especially ADF International, operate across Europe, supporting legal interventions and advocacy seeking to restrict abortion rights, challenge LGBTQ+ protections, and expand claims of religious freedom. In Italy, for example, ADF International filed legal briefs opposing same-sex marriage legislation, aligning with Catholic organizations to block broader recognition (Savage 2020; See also Alliance Defending Freedom International 2015).

Across Europe, a parallel network mirrors this architecture. Hungary’s Danube Institute in Budapest functions as a regional hub linking Central European intellectuals, US conservatives and right-wing British Brexiteers. Funded through government-aligned channels, it hosts American speakers and frames national conservatism as the moral defence of Christian Europe. Regular attendees include Nigel Farage, Santiago Abascal, and US commentators from Fox News and Newsmax, who broadcast the message to sympathetic audiences at home (Applebaum 2020; See also Danube Institute 2025). What began as a network of think tanks and training institutes has now evolved into a stage-managed political spectacle designed to project moral legitimacy and global reach. CPAC Hungary operates as the movement’s global showcase. In recent years, it has featured keynote addresses from Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, and Eduardo Bolsonaro, presenting Budapest as the centre of a global ‘anti-woke’ awakening (CEU CEFAS 2025).

Russian-linked media outlets, although not formally integrated into the network, often amplify the event’s messaging, exploiting its resonance with Kremlin narratives about Western decadence, cultural decay and moral weakness. This convergence is not accidental: both camps share an interest in discrediting liberal democracy and promoting an image of the ‘real West’ as spiritually conservative and geopolitically sovereign. The porous boundary between these movements illustrates how transatlantic illiberalism increasingly overlaps with a broader ecosystem of authoritarian influence that stretches from Moscow to Budapest and beyond (Applebaum 2024).

Digital coordination then extends this ecosystem online, giving it reach and velocity. Platforms such as Rebel News, Epoch Times and Breitbart Europe circulate narratives that fuse European and American grievances – migration, ‘wokeness’, and elite betrayal – into a single story of civilization under siege. Influencers move seamlessly across audiences, translating slogans for local contexts while reinforcing



a shared moral panic. This transnational publicity turns regional political experiments into global templates, demonstrating how authoritarian and illiberal actors now learn from, legitimize and amplify one another.

Financial flows and personnel exchanges further institutionalize these ties. US donors such as the Koch network and Christian legal foundations fund European conferences, while European governments sponsor sympathetic American commentators. Researchers tracing nonprofit disclosures have documented patterns of mutual support that blur the line between domestic advocacy and international influence operations (Archer 2020; Datta 2021; Laruelle 2022). Together, these linkages sustain what might be called an illiberal epistemic community – a transatlantic network that produces knowledge, training and legitimacy for antiliberal politics.

Ideological and rhetorical alignment

Although Europe's far right remains nationally diverse, its leaders increasingly speak a common language. That lexicon centres on three core narratives: *sovereignty*, *tradition*, and *civilizational threat*.

The rhetoric of sovereignty casts technocratic governance as a usurpation of the popular will. American conservatives frame Washington bureaucrats, the 'deep state', and the federal judiciary as rogue agents. European populists substitute Brussels and Strasbourg for the same role. The parallel is no coincidence; strategists exchange slogans and framing devices through joint forums. The idea of 'taking back control', born in Britain's Brexit campaign, migrated into American Republican discourse, while 'America First' became a template for nationalist rebranding in Europe.

The appeal to tradition provides moral ballast. Movements describe themselves as guardians of Christian civilization, opposing secular pluralism and feminism as existential threats. 'Gender ideology', once a fringe Vatican term, has become a unifying transatlantic rallying cry (Ayoub and Stoeckl 2024; Cupać and Ebetürk 2020; Korolczuk and Graff 2022). From Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' laws to Hungary's 'child protection' amendment, conservatives share the same rhetorical script. They depict liberal tolerance not as virtue but as decay – a sign of civilizational weakness that invites chaos and migration. Conservative Catholic institutions in Spain and Poland now distribute translated versions of US legal briefs and training materials

from ADF, illustrating how moral discourse travels with ease (Corporate Europe Observatory 2024).

Finally, the notion of a civilizational threat binds the narrative together. Far-right discourse positions the West in a cultural war against both internal subversion and external invasion. Migrants, Muslims, and ‘globalists’ occupy interchangeable roles in this story. Leaders like Giorgia Meloni, Marine Le Pen, and Donald Trump portray themselves as defenders of an embattled civilization that must reclaim its purity through moral renewal. The effect is to redefine democracy not as pluralism but as cultural self-assertion.

This ideological alignment does not erase local differences; it creates a shared emotional grammar. Phrases such as ‘real people’, ‘common sense’, and ‘nation first’ resonate on both sides of the Atlantic (Moffitt 2016; Wodak 2021). Conferences like National Conservatism (NatCon) codify this worldview, offering a theological and historical narrative that connects Jerusalem, Rome, and Washington in one ‘civilizational’ arc.

These narratives increasingly infiltrate mainstream conservative parties. The United States’ Republican Party has absorbed much of Trump’s illiberal vocabulary, framing political opposition as betrayal and portraying federal institutions as corrupt elites. In Europe, centre-right parties from Spain’s Partido Popular to Germany’s Christian Democrats (CDU) have echoed sovereigntist language to win back voters (Mudde 2019a; Mudde 2019b). This normalization effect blurs distinctions between democratic conservatives and authoritarian populists, allowing illiberal rhetoric to migrate from the margins into governing discourse.

Strategic diffusion and legal hardball

The collaboration between US and European conservatives extends beyond rhetoric to institutional tactics. What unites these actors is their ability to learn from each other’s experiments in bending democratic rules while maintaining formal legality.

American conservatives pioneered the technique of judicial capture through a process of constitutional hardball, using the letter of the law to violate its intent. The Federalist Society’s vetting of Supreme Court nominees provided a model of long-term institutional strategy. European populists adapted that logic to parliamentary systems. In Poland, the Law and Justice Party restructured the



judiciary through legislative manoeuvring and disciplinary chambers that undermined judicial independence while preserving constitutional form. Hungarian authorities replicated the approach by packing the Constitutional Court and taking over judicial administration (Benson 2025). Lawyers in Poland connected to the Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture – a conservative–religious legal organization – openly cite American legal precedents in their briefs, translating US culture-war litigation into European constitutional idioms (Coakley 2021).

Conversely, European examples now inspire American actors. Hungary's media consolidation – centralizing ownership under pro-government foundations – has attracted the attention of US right-wing strategists who call for a patriotic media ecosystem. Hungary's regulation of foreign-funded NGOs and universities informed US debates about restricting 'foreign influence' and targeting liberal foundations. The flow of ideas thus moves in both directions: elite learning across borders produces a repertoire of 'legal hardball' tactics that exploit institutional loopholes to entrench power (Barry 2025; Benson et al. 2025).

Conferences serve as accelerators for this diffusion. CPAC Hungary and the Danube Institute's seminars invite US jurists and politicians to exchange strategies with European counterparts. The presence of figures such as Tucker Carlson, Mike Pence and members of the Heritage Foundation lends these events a sense of legitimacy and global reach. Speeches often emphasize that the 'fight for Western civilization' requires coordination, not isolation. The audience learns that illiberal reform is not parochial but visionary – a model for reclaiming democracy from cosmopolitan elites.

Digital mobilization reinforces these lessons. Online influencers and media outlets document each success story, turning national policies into templates. When Poland's constitutional tribunal restricted abortion rights, American platforms celebrated it as proof that cultural pushback was possible. When Florida curtailed diversity programs in universities, Hungarian state media showcased it as evidence of global ideological realignment. Each side validates the other, creating a feedback loop of right-wing legitimacy (Dougherty 2021; Knefel 2023).²

2. For wider discussion of the issue, see Híradó (2024).

Implications for the transatlantic democratic order

The rise of transatlantic illiberal networks reshapes the meaning of the West itself. For most of the postwar period, Western identity signified liberalism – rule of law, minority protection and multilateral cooperation. Today, those concepts coexist with their opposites. Leaders who undermine judicial independence or vilify minorities still claim to defend Western civilization. This rhetorical inversion erodes the clarity of the transatlantic project.

The consequences for policy cooperation are profound. Divergent value systems weaken the alliance's ability to respond to authoritarian threats (Benson 2023a; Benson 2023b). When Washington or Brussels condemns democratic backsliding, illiberal governments frame the criticism as ideological imperialism. Shared values once enabled coordinated responses to global challenges; now they produce internal dispute. This fracture carries direct geopolitical costs. The Kremlin exploits these divisions to erode Western unity on sanctions, aid and military assistance to Ukraine. Russian propaganda outlets actively echo the rhetoric of Western populists, portraying the war as a clash between traditional sovereignty and decadent liberalism. In turn, segments of the European and American right adopt that framing to justify fatigue with Ukraine's defence or scepticism toward NATO. The result is a feedback loop in which Moscow's narratives and transatlantic illiberal discourse reinforce one another, blurring the line between domestic dissent and foreign influence.

The result is a transnational ecosystem of distrust that corrodes confidence in electoral integrity, journalism and scientific expertise. In the United States, European talking points about 'cultural Marxism' and 'globalists' circulate daily on cable news and social media, reframed through American populist idioms. In Europe, US-style conspiracy theories – from QAnon to vaccine disinformation – find new life in far-right Telegram channels and street protests (Schulze 2022). Each side validates the other, portraying democratic institutions as captured by unseen powers. This cross-pollination normalizes cynicism and fuels the perception that politics itself is rigged. The contagion spreads not through formal alliances but through shared emotional affect – anger, humiliation and nostalgia – creating a digital transatlantic common of resentment. As this sentiment seeps into mainstream debate, it weakens the civic trust that underpins democratic governance and ultimately, transatlantic solidarity.



At a structural level, the erosion of shared norms transforms the transatlantic relationship from a moral alliance into a transactional partnership. Security and trade cooperation continue, but the normative glue has dissolved. Instead of universal values, the relationship revolves around selective interests.

The question is no longer whether shared values are weakening – they clearly are – but whether democratic actors can forge a new consensus around defending institutional pluralism itself. The challenge lies not in restoring the Cold War's moral clarity but in constructing a forward-looking democratic solidarity that acknowledges ideological diversity while safeguarding liberal principles.

Policy takeaways and recommendations

Countering transnational illiberalism demands a transnational democratic strategy. Policymakers must recognize that far-right cooperation operates across borders; national responses alone cannot contain it. The following recommendations outline potential interventions. They are necessarily aspirational, given current political realities and would require – at a minimum – a new administration in Washington willing to prioritize democracy promotion and transatlantic coordination.

1. Increase transparency and accountability.

Governments and the EU should strengthen disclosure requirements for political foundations, advocacy organizations and media outlets that receive cross-border funding. Transparency does not suppress free speech; it clarifies the origins of influence. The United States and the EU could establish a joint registry for political nonprofits engaged in transatlantic advocacy.

2. Build democratic resilience networks.

Civil society cooperation should mirror that of the far right. Universities, local governments and NGOs need transatlantic partnerships that share best practices in civic education, digital literacy and counter disinformation. Programs like the U.S.–EU Democracy Dialogue, now dormant, could expand into a permanent platform for democratic innovation.

3. Coordinate digital governance.

The EU's Digital Services Act offers a model for regulating online platforms that amplify extremist content. US policymakers could align transparency standards and

algorithmic accountability with European frameworks. Joint initiatives between the Federal Trade Commission and European regulators would prevent regulatory arbitrage.

4. Reinvest in public diplomacy and narrative competition.

Illiberal actors win not only through policy but through storytelling. Democratic governments must promote narratives of inclusion and dignity that resonate emotionally. Cultural diplomacy, youth exchanges, and support for independent media should form part of a long-term strategy to restore trust in democratic ideals.

5. Engage the democratic periphery.

Cities, universities and civil society networks can act as laboratories for democratic renewal. Transatlantic cooperation at the subnational level – mayor-to-mayor partnerships, university consortia – builds social capital that resists illiberal capture. Democracy flourishes through participation; it decays through isolation.

Conclusion

The transatlantic relationship stands at a crossroads. The liberal order that once unified Washington and Brussels no longer commands universal allegiance, even within the West. Illiberal networks have learned to cooperate across borders, translating national grievances into a shared civilizational narrative. Their success lies in coordination: they exchange ideas, tactics and legitimacy faster than liberal institutions adapt.

This chapter has traced how far-right actors transformed the transatlantic space from a community of shared values into a contested ideological arena. It showed how think tanks, conferences, and digital platforms weave an alternative network of power that undermines democratic norms while claiming to defend the West. The result is neither the collapse nor the strengthening of shared democratic values but a strategic weakening – a shift from liberal universalism to national conservative pluralism.

Reversing that trend demands proactive engagement. The defence of democracy cannot rest on nostalgia for a bygone consensus; it must evolve into a deliberate partnership that treats democracy itself as a shared security interest. If liberal actors can match the far right's strategic clarity and cross-border coordination, the transatlantic relationship may yet renew its moral purpose.



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