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Is the far right a global phenomenon? Comparing Europe and Latin America: A scholarly exchange

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Abstract

The purpose of the *Exchange* feature is to publish discussions that engage, advance and initiate new debates in the study of nations and nationalism. This *Exchange* article is on the subject of the global far right. In the first part, Léonie de Jonge and Talita Tanscheit briefly introduce the topic, emphasising the need for such a dialogue. In the remainder of the exchange, Vasiliki Georgiadou, Daphne Halikiopoulou and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser address the following four questions: (1) Is the far right a global phenomenon? (2) What is causing it? (3) What are the implications of the rise of the far right for democracy? (4) What can we learn from comparing Europe and Latin America? By attempting to deprovincialise scholarship on the far right, our goal is to foster cross-regional dialogue and highlight the importance of comparative research between these two regions.

KEYWORDS
comparative politics, Europe, far right, Latin America

The authors are listed in alphabetical order and contributed equally to this exchange.

1 | INTRODUCTION

1.1 | Léonie de Jonge and Talita Tanscheit

The far right has emerged as a significant force, garnering momentum and support in the streets and institutions worldwide (Miller-Idriss, 2020). It is therefore not surprising that academic interest in far-right political actors and activities has increased in recent years (Mudde, 2019). Yet, much of our current understanding of this phenomenon is based on studies focusing predominantly on a set of cases in Western, and more recently, Central and Eastern Europe (Masood & Nisar, 2020). While this focus was initially justified by the earlier emergence and consolidation of far-right parties in the region, such actors are now found across diverse regions and countries, including Brazil, the United States and India (Rovira Kaltwasser & Zanotti, 2023).

In Europe, the rise of the contemporary far right dates back to the late 20th century, with several parties pioneering this political shift (Betz, 1994; Mudde, 2007). In Austria, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) under Jörg Haider marked one of the earliest and strongest manifestations of a successful far-right party. Under Haider's leadership, the FPÖ turned from a marginal fringe party into a successful challenger, capitalising on anti-immigrant sentiments and nationalist rhetoric (Wodak & Pelinka, 2002). His charismatic and controversial style resonated with segments of the Austrian electorate, who were dissatisfied with mainstream politics. Similarly, the National Rally (NR, formerly the National Front) under Jean-Marie Le Pen in France was a trailblazer for the European far right. Le Pen's provocative statements and hardline stances on immigration, law and order, and national identity struck a chord with voters, and ultimately forced mainstream parties to take a stance on these matters (Mayer, 2018). In neighbouring Belgium, the *Vlaams Belang* (VB or Flemish Interest Party, rebrand of *Vlaams Blok*) gained prominence in the 1990s by combining calls for Flemish independence with strong anti-immigrant policies (de Jonge, 2021).

These early manifestations laid the foundation for the contemporary far-right landscape in Europe. Countries that long seemed 'immune' to the renewed rise of the far right, such as Sweden, Germany and Spain, have now also witnessed the rise of several successful far-right challengers that are characterised by an ideological agenda centred on nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Mudde, 2007). In Central and Eastern Europe, the far right not only gained significant support but also ascended to political power, notably in Poland and Hungary. Over the past decades, far-right actors in Europe have mobilised through electoral and protest channels, thereby succeeding in radicalising 'mainstream' politics across the continent. While far-right parties have been responsible for the politicisation of several issues, such as immigration, environmentalism, Euroscepticism and gender, the issues at the core of their ideology are no longer exclusively owned by these organisations (Castelli & Pirro, 2024).

Across the Atlantic, in Latin America, the far right has also made significant political gains in recent years, capturing executive power in several countries. Jair Bolsonaro won the presidency in Brazil in 2018 (though he was defeated in 2022), Nayib Bukele in El Salvador in 2019 (and was re-elected in 2024) and Javier Milei in Argentina in 2023. In other Latin American countries, the far right has marked notable successes in opposition: José Antonio Kast in Chile and Rafael López Aliaga in Perú (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2023a).

Compared to Europe, where parties with distinct organisational and ideological patterns often play a crucial role, Latin America has seen the rise of strong far-right leaders — typically lacking a solid party organisation but possessing charismatic credentials — who have taken centre stage and left a significant mark on politics (Rovira Kaltwasser & Zanotti, 2023). The rise of the Latin American far right is unfolding in a context of growing discontent with the political establishment and the increasing politicisation of issues that were long absent from the regional political debate, particularly moral and law-and-order issues (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2023b).[1] Studies have generally highlighted the importance of the sociocultural dimension over the socioeconomic one, which is particularly evident in the renewed relevance of religion, specifically the Evangelic Church, and the heightened role of security forces, such as the police and armed forces, in contemporary Latin American politics (Smith & Boas, 2024). However, scholars have also observed a reinvigoration of the socioeconomic dimension, marked by a new approach to a historical feature of the regional right: neoliberalism (Díaz et al., 2023; Tanscheit, 2023). This ideological shift is most noticeable in the rise of

Javier Milei in Argentina, the first far-right leader in the region to explicitly champion neoliberalism in both his ideas and discourses (Sendra & Marcos-Marné, 2024).[2]

Contrary to Europe, nativism does not prominently appear in the Latin American far right, except in specific contexts like Chile (Díaz et al., 2023; Rovira Kaltwasser, Salas-Lewin, & Zanotti, 2024). This is not surprising given that (Western) Europe has experienced more immigration, while many Latin American countries face significant emigration. However, both the European and Latin American far right are equally characterised by racist ideologies, often targeting minorities and marginalised groups within their respective contexts. Similarly, populism may manifest differently in these contexts. For instance, leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Javier Milei in Argentina are considered 'somewhat populist', though populist attitudes may not be present in these national settings (Castanho Silva et al., 2022; Sendra & Marcos-Marné, 2024). These differences highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of the far right on a global scale.

Despite the burgeoning body of research on extremism in general and the far right in particular, however, cross-regional comparisons remain underexplored. Addressing this gap is crucial for understanding far-right extremism as a global phenomenon, especially considering the broader contexts in which it develops. In Western academia, theories generated for the Global North are often extended to the Global South. As a result, countries in the Global South are either dismissed as outliers or forced into existing frameworks, often straining to fit their unique conditions. Such academic practices have significant consequences for knowledge production, often misinterpreting the distinct political, economic and sociocultural interests of the Global South (see Chakrabarty, 2000; Masood & Nisar, 2020).

By bringing scholars with diverse regional expertise into conversation, this scholarly exchange aims to foster dialogue among researchers working on related topics in different geographical contexts, thereby expanding our theoretical and empirical understanding of extremism and democracy worldwide. In doing so, we seek to identify the commonalities and distinctions that arise when examining the far right in various countries and regions. This endeavour not only enriches our understanding of the phenomenon but also contributes to cumulative knowledge production, thereby promoting a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective on its global manifestations.

2 | IS THE FAR RIGHT A GLOBAL PHENOMENON?

2.1 | Vasiliki Georgiadou

National contexts and historical legacies play a crucial role in understanding the rise and characteristics of the far right. The term 'far right' is a broad umbrella (Pirro, 2023), encompassing a variety of populist-radical and extreme right collective actors and parties, movements and movement parties defined not only by their position on the left–right axis but also by their distinct views on democracy, ranging from anti-establishment to anti-systemic orientations (Georgiadou & Mavropoulou, 2021; Zulianello, 2018) and from 'disruptive illiberalism' that opposes the procedural norms of democracy to 'ideological illiberalism' that undermines the conceptual frame of democracy (Kauth & King 2021). The far-right spectrum is not only diverse and complex, but also fluid, with shifting boundaries between the different actors and their ideological orientations. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) is a good example. The party, which started out as Eurosceptic but economically liberal, turned into a populist radical right party that adopted nativist positions (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019) and then transformed into a 'potentially extremist organization' with extreme right factions and clandestine 'remigration' plans (ECRE, 2024). Promoting nativism as a key form of chauvinism and exclusionism and combining it with populism and authoritarianism, the far right prioritises a 'monocultural nation state' (Mudde, 2007: 218), posing a real threat to human rights, fundamental European values, and liberal democracy. The fluidity and adaptability, on the one hand, and its dogmatic intolerance and commitment to a closed belief system, on the other hand, are the main characteristics of this party family.

After the Second World War, the far right emerged as a national phenomenon with distinct subnational imprints. For example, Belgium's VB initially operated in the province of Antwerp before expanding its influence across

Flanders. Similarly, the FPÖ began as a strong local party in Carinthia before evolving into a national organisation. In Germany, for many decades, far-right parties were present at the federal-state level but lacked national representation, remaining absent from the *Bundestag*. In the 1980s and 1990s, far-right parties underwent a process of 'Europeanisation', increasingly gaining seats in the European Parliament (Camus & Lebourg, 2017). Fuelled by their hostility to globalisation and immigration, these parties have exhibited varying patterns of opposition to European integration and politics (Vasilopoulou, 2011). However, over the past decades, a new trend has emerged: The far right is now prevalent globally, not only across Europe but also in North America, Latin America, Asia and Africa.

The far right today may be viewed as part of a broader worldwide wave of a new authoritarianism that began to rise after the end of the Cold War and has accelerated during the era of global economic crisis. The pandemic has further created fertile ground for the global rise of the far right by facilitating anti-globalisation, anti-elite/expert sentiments and anti-protectionist measures (Zulianello & Guasti, 2023). This new wave of the far right encompasses a variety of illiberal, ethno-nationalist, reactionary, anti-feminist, alt-right, pan-Christian, neo-fascist, and even pro-Nazi configurations (Traverso, 2019). In other words, while the far right has become a global phenomenon, it has also become more diverse. Indeed, there is considerable variation within the far-right ecosystem itself, and significant regional and cross-regional variations exist both within Europe (Georgiadou et al., 2018) and between Europe and Latin America. Within the European context, for example, there are three different far-right political groups represented in the European Parliament in 2024 — the Patriots for Europe, Europe for Sovereign Nations, and European Conservatives and Reformists. Whatever creates conditions for the global spread of the far right — globalisation, social media, the pandemic, etc. — multiplies its varied expressions across different corners of the world. Far-right ideas, rhetoric, electoral tactics and strategies now circulate worldwide, adapting to diverse national and sub-national contexts.

This worldwide trend is also facilitated by contagion. In our paper (Roumanias et al., 2022), we explored pathways of far-right diffusion on the demand side (voters) and the supply side (party positions) between different European countries and regions, considering parties' geographical, cultural and temporal proximity. Using a database of national and European parliament elections from 2000 to 2017, we found evidence of spillovers of both far-right vote and party positions within the European continent. Contagion occurs partly between geographical neighbours but primarily between culturally proximate countries. Impulse responses suggest that transmission peaks 4–5 years following an unexpected surge in far-right vote shares or shifts in policy positions abroad. Far-right movements and parties frequently learn from and influence one another, not only within Europe but also globally. Global trends of autocratisation and growing political distrust are paving the way for the spread of far-right politics that challenge the established socio-political order. Meanwhile, the electoral success of those challenging the status quo motivates their competitors and non-far-right actors to imitate and adopt similar approaches and practices at the national, European and global levels (Roumanias et al., 2022; van de Wardt et al., 2023). As the far right expands, it increasingly 'normalises' its presence within the party arena, prompting competitors to adopt attitudes, rhetoric and policies that appeal to voters. However, this process doesn't mean that the party system is becoming homogenised or that differences between the far right and the conservative right have disappeared.

2.2 | Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser

Before answering the question, it is important to approach this topic from a broad comparative perspective. For instance, research on the origins of democracy has always been global in scope. Studies on this topic don't just focus on Eastern, Southern or Western Europe, but rather include case studies from various regions around the world. This is why, when teaching comparative politics, we often reference landmark works like Barrington Moore's *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1969). What makes Moore's book so influential is that he wasn't developing a theory solely for Europe; instead, he was advancing a comprehensive comparative approach. However, such a global perspective hasn't been as prominent in studies on the rise of the far right. While our understanding of the topic has

been growing, much of the research remains regionally siloed, and we need to consider how to bridge these different strands of knowledge. This leads to the question of whether the far right is a global phenomenon. I believe it is.

To determine this, the first step is to clarify the concept itself. Following Giovanni Sartori's (1970) approach, defining concepts requires identifying their opposites. For example, when we think about democracy, we often contrast it with autocracy. Similarly, when considering the far right, its natural counterpart is the mainstream right. As such, the starting point of this conceptual debate should be the distinction between the mainstream right and the far right.

Existing literature highlights two key criteria for making this distinction (Bale & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021). The first criterion concerns programmatic positions. While we expect both the far right and the mainstream right to support right-wing ideas, the mainstream right does so in a relatively moderate way, whereas the far right promotes these ideas in a much more radical manner. Both mainstream right and far-right parties might oppose issues like abortion, gay rights and immigration, but their rhetoric and approach are fundamentally different. For example, whereas the mainstream right would likely frame immigration scepticism within the context of respecting human rights, the far right is more likely to frame it in a more extreme manner, even to the extent of saying something like, 'migrants will eat your pets'.[3] Their discourse, therefore, diverges significantly. Take Angela Merkel as an example. As a mainstream right politician, she introduced a bill to debate same-sex marriage in the *Bundestag*, even though she personally opposed it. In the end, her party, alongside progressive forces, passed the law. By contrast, far-right figures like Jair Bolsonaro express extreme views, such as claiming he would rather see his son dead than gay. The difference is stark. The second criterion, which is more important than the first, concerns a party's relationship with democracy. We expect the mainstream right to remain loyal to the liberal democratic system, whereas the far right often has a much more contentious relationship with liberal democracy (Mudde, 2019).

That said, we need to be more cautious when we lower the level of abstraction and begin identifying specific party families within the far right. In the European context, a key distinction is often made between two types of far-right parties: the populist radical right and the extreme right (Mudde, 2007). Simply put, the former is considered nominally democratic but opposes the liberal aspects of democracy, while the latter is openly authoritarian. While this distinction works well within Europe, I'm more sceptical about its applicability beyond Europe. This is why I think the term 'far right' serves better as an umbrella concept (Pirro, 2023), allowing us to differentiate between far-right and mainstream right forces more effectively.

From a comparative perspective, all far-right forces share a difficult relationship with democracy and adopt extremist right-wing positions. This is evident with figures like Le Pen in France, Orbán in Hungary, Modi in India, Milei in Argentina, Trump in the United States and Bolsonaro in Brazil. Consider the elections in the United States in 2020 and Brazil in 2022 — neither Trump nor Bolsonaro accepted their defeat. In both cases, similar events unfolded: the Capitol attack in Washington and the Brazilian Congress attack in Brasília. Two very different countries, yet far-right forces engaging in similar actions. This underscores that the far right is not just defined by specific programmatic positions, but also by particular behaviours.

The final point I want to make about the global dimension of the far right is that we are witnessing diffusion processes across the world. It is a global phenomenon because far-right actors are actively investing time and resources in sharing knowledge on how to advance their agendas. A good example is the *Foro de Madrid*, an annual meeting of far-right leaders from Latin America and Europe. In 2024, the meeting took place in Buenos Aires with Spain's VOX playing a key role in fostering this growing collaboration. Another example is the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), which was originally established in the U.S. but is now expanding globally. These examples demonstrate that the far right is not just a national story but a truly global phenomenon.

2.3 | Daphne Halikiopoulou

Before delving into whether the far right is a global phenomenon, it is first important to establish why this question matters. Let me illustrate with the example of another topical, potentially global phenomenon: populism. When in

the late 1960s, scholars met at a conference held at the London School of Economics (LSE) to discuss populism, Isaah Berlin famously warned against what he termed the 'Cinderella complex':

> … that there exists a shoe – the word 'populism' – for which somewhere there must exist a foot. There are all kinds of feet which it nearly fits, but we must not be trapped by these nearly-fitting feet [….]. At the same time, we must not be tempted in the other direction, which some have taken, to suppose that the word 'populism' is simply a homonym; that there are movements in America, in Russia, in the Balkans and in Africa, that they are all called populism owing to confusions in human heads, but that they have too little in common; their differences are far greater than their similarities; and that therefore nothing but confusion can be sown by using these general descriptions …
>
> (Berlin et al., 1968: 7).

In other words, if we're too specific, we are never going to find a case that fits. But if we are too broad, then every case is going to fit, and then the concept under investigation becomes meaningless. The same applies to the far right. For the concept of a global far right to be analytically useful, we need a carefully crafted definition and clearly identifiable criteria that should be met for a party or group to be categorised as far right. These criteria must not only be broad enough to allow us to generalise, but also delineated enough to allow for a counterfactual, that is a case that is not far right. Otherwise, the 'far right' is nothing but a meaningless buzzword with little analytical utility.

The question of whether the far right is a global phenomenon, or in other words if it is a generalisable trend, therefore has significant implications for our ability to analyse this phenomenon and identify its causes. As political scientists, our challenge is to identify (a) the common umbrella that makes different manifestations of this phenomenon comparable and, (b) underneath this umbrella, the patterns that help us understand under what circumstances each far-right variant or type will emerge and succeed (or fail) in different regions and contexts.

As a comparativist, I am trained to think in terms of generalisable patterns. On the one hand, this prompts me to argue that the far right is a global phenomenon, because we have been witnessing the rise of groups promoting national sovereignty, prioritising the in-group over the out-group, claiming to speak in the name of the people, and adopting personalistic leadership styles in many countries including the United States, Europe, Latin America, India and beyond (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2024). On the other hand, these phenomena manifest in different ways, with different ideological characteristics, organisational structures and patterns of support. Therefore, the task to systematically identify the criteria that makes these phenomena comparable is key.

Drawing on the theoretical insights that we have about the far right, these criteria should touch upon both supply and demand-side characteristics. In terms of supply, we need to focus on the parties themselves, and whether their narratives, policy proposals and programmatic agendas meet the criteria of the far right (Ennser, 2012). Here I focus on Mudde's (2007) three criteria of (a) nativism- or more broadly nationalism, (b) populism and (c) authoritarianism. A brief look at European and Latin American cases suggests interesting similarities and differences. For example, while all cases mobilise on some form of conflict between in-groups and out-groups, European and Latin American cases utilise this in-group/out-group division very differently. This suggests that Latin American far-right parties are not 'nativist' in the narrower, more exclusionary, ethnic understanding of the term. However, the broader term 'nationalism' as opposed to nativism can serve as the common umbrella criterion, with its three core attributes including the celebration of an imagined community as a locus of loyalty and solidarity, the drive for sovereign self-rule over a distinct territory pursued by a significant segment of a group's elite and a repertoire of symbols and practices that embody the nation (Mylonas & Tudor, 2023: 5).

In terms of demand, we need to focus on the voters themselves and assess the extent to which they are driven by similar factors in the two regions. A quick look at Latin American far-right voters, suggests that they do not necessarily fit the profile of the 'typical' European far-right voter: a lowly educated, male individual with poor prospects in the labour market who dislikes immigrants. Instead, research on Latin America suggests that issues such as crime,

security and the economy are more pertinent (Rovira Kaltwasser, Espinoza, et al., 2024). It is important to note, however, that this 'typical' profile is also changing in Europe. In fact, the far-right voter pool is extremely diverse, even when it comes to immigration, and socio-economic factors are more important than often assumed in the European contexts (Stockemer et al., 2020).

3 | WHAT IS CAUSING IT?

3.1 | Vasiliki Georgiadou

The spread and rise in far-right party support are rooted in a number of factors that fall into the following broad categories: cultural backlashes (Norris & Inglehart, 2019) and economic insecurities and rising inequalities (Georgiadou et al., 2018; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022). Let me highlight three main sets of reasons related to these factors:

1. Globalisation, economic hardship and political distrust: The far right has gained support by capitalising on socio-economic changes, inequalities, unemployment and globalisation. As industries shift and economic opportunities are outsourced, citizens experience downward mobility and financial insecurity. Coupled with economic grievances, political grievances and institutional distrust have grown significantly. As citizens become disillusioned with political institutions, anti-establishment sentiment also grows. Far-right parties and leaders tap into these anxieties, portraying themselves as defenders of the 'common people' against the 'cosmopolitan elites' who benefit from globalisation (Georgiadou et al., 2018; Mudde, 2007). This populist narrative positions far-right actors as the protectors of those who lose out from these processes.
2. Social media, which have played a crucial role in facilitating the spread of far-right ideologies across national borders: Platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter/X, Telegram, YouTube, Parler and Truth Social, allow far-right groups to easily share ideas, tactics and propaganda, reaching a global audience and creating transnational networks. These platforms amplify polarising content, contributing to the radicalisation of users. Far-right groups have used the digital environment to bypass traditional and established media which are accused by the far-right elite of acting as gatekeepers preventing the spread of far-right ideas, and touch individuals directly, quickly and at a low cost, fostering a sense of community and shared grievances across countries (Caiani & Kröll, 2014).
3. Anti-immigrant rhetoric and cultural anxiety: Rhetoric against migrants has been a powerful tool for the far right, fuelling public anxiety over the preservation of national identity and culture. Migration often triggers fears of cultural erosion or loss. Far-right parties and movements tap into these fears, portraying immigrants and minorities as threats to national cohesion. The far right promises to protect national identity from these perceived cultural and social threats has an effect on electoral rise and success (Wodak, 2015). The 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory is a narrative that with the one or the other way far-right groups use to justify exclusionary, protectionist and authoritarian choices and positions (Ekman, 2022).

In addition to these factors, let me return to the question of contagion and also highlight the importance of Trump's victory in 2016, which represented a pivotal moment and a significant boost for the global far right. Trump's presidency symbolised the potential for far-right and authoritarian figures to occupy the highest offices of government, thereby encouraging similar mobilisations and processes worldwide (Mudde, 2019).

3.2 | Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser

That's the million-dollar question! If a political scientist could definitively answer it, they'd probably win a new category Nobel Prize in Political Science. That said, I think there are two ways to approach this.

The first is the more sceptical view, which would suggest that there is no single explanation but rather many different factors, some of which apply better to certain cases than others. In that scenario, I could provide a long list of arguments.

The second is to group some generalisable arguments. If we're doing such a literature review, there are at least four key arguments that tend to come up. The first is about the growing convergence between mainstream parties (Bale & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2021). As mainstream parties become increasingly similar, people at the political extremes—both left and right — start demanding new ideas. This creates an opening for political entrepreneurs who aim to represent sectors of the electorate that feel unrepresented by the establishment. The second argument, somewhat related to the first, involves the structural transformation of societies leading to greater fragmentation of the political landscape (de Jonge, 2021). The era of catch-all parties, like the social democrats or Christian democrats, mobilising 30–40% of the electorate is over. This fragmentation creates opportunities for far-right forces to rise. The third argument is the diffusion process, which we've touched on before. Once the far-right gains momentum in one country, it sparks imitation or 'copy-paste' efforts elsewhere. The final argument centres on the debate between economic versus cultural explanations (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019). Some scholars emphasise structural economic changes, while others highlight the growing importance of cultural issues — or argue for a combination of both. This is just a brief and tentative overview of some of the possible explanations.

That said, let me take a shot at winning the new 'Political Science Nobel Prize' by proposing a broader argument that goes beyond the usual list of explanations. In fact, this explanation that might seem a bit counterintuitive: the rise of the far right is a consequence of the very success of liberal democracy. When we think about liberal democracy today, most of us understand it as more than just popular sovereignty and majority rule — it also includes checks and balances, respect for minorities and a commitment to individual rights.

What's interesting is that this version of liberal democracy has become successful precisely because it has been able to better incorporate historically marginalised groups. If we look at the long-term trend, there's growing support for respecting and protecting groups that have faced systematic discrimination, such as women and minorities. Paradoxically, because liberal democracy is improving in this regard, it creates the potential for a backlash (Rovira Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2025). This backlash isn't driven by the majority, but rather by a minority of the population that resents these advancements. Far-right actors are capitalising on this resentment, seeking to politicise and push back against the increased inclusion of these groups (Buštíková, 2020; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2023a).

In Europe, this often revolves around immigration. Thirty years ago, being an immigrant in Europe was a different experience than it is today, and the kinds of stereotypes that were once acceptable are now challenged by the norms of a multicultural society. In Latin America, the key issues are less about immigration and more about women's and LGBTQ+ rights. Seen in this light, at its core, the far right represents a movement opposed to the further inclusion of historically marginalised groups. I think this theoretical framework applies relatively well across different regions and helps explain why the far right is gaining traction globally.

3.3 | Daphne Halikiopoulou

What I find interesting about studying the far right is the puzzles it poses, often defying our theoretical expectations about the role of cultural, economic, and immigration-related factors. Empirical evidence suggests that the 'typical' far-right voter no longer exists (Stockemer et al., 2020). Far-right parties fare well among both more and less affluent individuals, both men and women with varying levels of education and in very different national contexts. To understand this phenomenon, I suggest a demand and supply framework that focuses on the heterogeneity of the far-right electorate: on the demand side, a range of socio-economic and institutional grievances drives voters to support the far right, resulting in coalitions of support from voters with very different concerns; on the supply side, far-right

parties have been effective in mobilising support among insecure populations by proposing solutions that are distinct from their older market liberal stances and utilise a type of nationalism that makes them appear normalised (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019).

With regard to the demand side, the literature often points to the importance of cultural factors (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), because far-right party success depends largely on mobilising grievances over immigration (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020). However, immigration is a multi-faceted issue where both cultural and economic dimensions matter. There are reasons to expect that competition with immigrants will likely also be shaped by material interests as voters may view immigrants as competitors in the labour market or for welfare and scarce state resources. Beyond immigration, there are also a range of socio-economic and institutional grievances that may drive voters to support the far right.

A closer look at empirical data illustrates that many far-right populist are not prompted by nationalism (defined in cultural terms), as various material concerns also increase the likelihood of voting for a far-right party (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019). On the one hand, core far-right voters, or 'culturalists', are ideological. These are voters mostly driven by ethno-cultural nationalism. They are likely to be primarily concerned with the cultural threat posed by immigration and the extent to which immigrants (or national outsiders) may erode the national culture and way of life. While these core voters constitute the prime far-right party constituency, they only make up a small share of the far-right electorates in most European countries.

Peripheral voters, on the other hand, are opportunistic rather than ideological (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2023). They are mostly motivated by protest considerations or discontent, and a range of concerns including economic and labour market insecurity, societal decline, lack of access to welfare and state resources and distrust in institutions. These voters are less loyal to the far right but constitute a much larger proportion of its electorate.

In my previous research, I have identified a range of European peripheral far-right voter groups. The list is not exhaustive, but indicatively it includes:

- The 'materialists' (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2020), who are likely to support the prioritisation of the in-group on economic grounds, but who do not necessarily identify with the other nationalist elements of far-right party agendas.
- The 'welfarists' (Vlandas & Halikiopoulou, 2021), who are exposed to high social or economic risks and are in need of welfare provision.
- The 'decliners' (Gugushvilli et al., 2023) who have experienced downward class mobility and are subsequently often unable to cope with economic, social and cultural acceleration and/or feel marginalised and unfairly treated.
- The 'distrustful' (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2023), who are discontent with the democratic process, negatively evaluate system performance and policy outputs and are likely to reward political parties that challenge the establishment and existing political norms.
- The 'anti-environmentalists' (Arndt et al., 2022), who reside in rural or peripheral areas that are economically dependent on old industries and/or have incurred actual or perceived losses from climate change measures.

What these parties have managed to do, quite successfully, is to forge electoral coalitions between these voters. How? By putting forward nationalist narratives that make them appear normalised. But there are interesting patterns and variations across Europe. In Western Europe, far-right parties make multi-faceted nationalist appeals by employing *civic nationalist normalisation strategies* (Halikiopoulou et al., 2013) that allow them to offer nationalist solutions to all types of insecurities that drive voting behaviour. This strategy has two features: First, it presents culture as a value issue and justifies out-group exclusion on ideological grounds, and second, it focuses on welfare chauvinism as a means of appealing to economically insecure voters (see also Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2019). The French RN is a case in point.

In Southern Europe, the picture is more mixed, as far-right party narratives — as well as their success patterns — vary significantly across countries. In Greece and Cyprus, far-right parties adopt mostly *ethnic nationalist narratives* that emphasise ascriptive criteria of national belonging. These parties are often 'extreme right' variants, adopting violent practices. Indeed, following the eruption of the financial crisis, Greece was the only Southern European country to develop solid far-right party support with the election of the Golden Dawn (GD), a previously marginalised neo-Nazi party, in the Greek parliament. By contrast, Spain and Portugal were for a long time considered 'exceptional cases', as far-right parties failed to make substantial electoral gains despite favourable conditions. However, these countries have experienced a substantial rise in far-right party support with the increasing success of Vox and Chega respectively, both 'radical right' variants with mixed *cultural/civic narratives*, but with an emphasis on traditional values and a distinct focus given country-specific conditions.

In Central and Eastern Europe, far-right parties adopt predominantly *ethnic nationalist* strategies. They attempt to mobilise voters on socially conservative issues and exclude predominantly on ascriptive criteria of national belonging. Their primary focus is the rejection of minority rights. Their welfare positions are 'blurry' and ambivalent, partly because of constraints related to the region's socialist past. Their welfare chauvinism centres on policies they identify as 'national' priorities, for example the protection of native families. They also employ anti-West narratives, focusing on 'Western exploitation' and the importance of empowering domestic businesses. There are also notable variations within the region. In the more ethnically homogenous countries such as Poland, Hungary and Slovenia, immigration levels are low and nationalist mobilisation occurs along socially conservative lines. Notable examples include the Hungarian Fidesz and the Polish (Law and Order) PiS, both of which may be described as 'ethnopopulist' (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022). In the more ethnically pluralistic societies such as Estonia and Latvia, far-right parties have mobilised against larger politicised ethnic groups, most notably the large Russian minorities (Buštíková, 2020).

4 | WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE RISE OF THE FAR RIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY?

4.1 | Vasiliki Georgiadou

The global rise of the far right poses significant challenges to liberal democracy, with far-right actors often undermining the democratic principles they claim to support. While liberal democracy has been successful in many ways, there has always been a persistent minority opposed to its core values, and far-right movements capitalise on this discontent.

Far-right actors can generally be divided into two camps: the populist radical right (PRR) and the extreme right (ER). According to Mudde (2007), the PRR is not explicitly opposed to democracy. It participates in elections, adheres to democratic procedures, and seeks to enter government. However, this formal commitment to democracy is questionable. While PRR actors position themselves as supporters of democratic values, they often pursue policies that weaken democratic institutions from within. For example, the PRR often advocates direct democracy and appears pro-democratic, but this focus on direct democracy and/or on hybrid democratic procedures — for example the coexistence of a parliament and representative bodies with extra-parliamentary entities — weakens democratic checks and balances and undermines liberal democracy (Georgiadou, 2020).

The ER, by contrast, is openly hostile to liberal democracy and rejects the democratic political system altogether. ER actors challenge state authority, condone violence and disregard the rule of law, seeking instead to replace liberal democratic institutions with authoritarian structures (Mudde, 2019). This camp is willing to engage in illegitimate and violent actions that pose a direct and explicit threat to democratic governance (Rori et al., 2022).

Despite the PRR's formal embrace of democracy, it often shares the ER's substantial disregard for democratic values. While PRR actors may express support for democratic ideals, they often undermine the practical components

that sustain democracy, such as parliamentary procedures, judicial independence and minority rights (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). This reflects a broader pattern within the far right, as both camps show a fundamental disregard for the procedural aspects of democracy. Far-right rhetoric against the so-called gender ideology is another example, as it undermines core democratic values by framing gender equality and human rights as a threat to national identity.

I remain unconvinced that the PRR and the ER differ significantly in their attitudes towards liberal democracy. Although PRR representatives frequently invoke the concept of democracy, they do not seem to value the procedural and practical aspects of democracy. Democracy is more than an abstract idea; it is sustained by concrete procedures and institutional frameworks. My scepticism lies in whether far-right actors really support the fundamental democratic components. It is no exaggeration to say that the qualitative characteristics of democracy and the integrity of its processes are declining in several countries, which facilitates the growth of the influence of the far right, while the more its influence grows, the more vulnerable democracy becomes.

In sum, although the PRR and ER differ in their attitudes towards democratic participation, both camps contribute to the erosion of liberal democratic values and procedures. The growth and normalisation of the far right threaten not only electoral democracy, the integrity of which remains an open issue, but also the liberal foundations on which democratic institutions rely (Pirro, 2023). This process of weakening democratic norms and values risks fostering an authoritarian alternative, transforming democratic systems from within while eroding the core principles that sustain them.

4.2 | Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser

If we reflect on democracy, particularly after 1945, the main political cleavage was the left–right divide, especially along the economic dimension, where incorporating more people meant including the working class. For example, Przeworski's (1985) classic argument is that democracies struggle to survive because class conflict becomes so intense that it makes maintaining social peace impossible. Yet, for a time, we experienced what many call a 'golden age', where inequality declined, the welfare state expanded, and although poverty and inequality persisted, things improved significantly, particularly in the United States, Europe and, to some extent, in Latin America. However, as recent research by Piketty (2014) and others shows, inequality is rising again, and this resurgence has profound consequences for the functioning of democracy.

At the same time, liberal democracy is no longer just about incorporating the working class — it is about the much broader inclusion of historically excluded groups. This is a defining shift of the 21st century. Consider the role of gender in democracy. While we may refer to contemporary Switzerland as a model democratic country, in the early 1970s, this country held a referendum on whether to grant voting rights to 51% of its population: women. By today's standards, leaving out half the population would disqualify a country from being considered democratic. But at the time, many still viewed Switzerland as a democracy because it effectively incorporated the working class, even though it excluded large segments of society.

Let's imagine some future scenarios. There's an ongoing debate about migration in Europe, and it is widely understood, at least at the technocratic level, that without migrants, Europe won't be economically sustainable. Now, if the migrant population continues to grow and these migrants are not given the right to vote, we could end up in a situation like Switzerland in the early 1970s. Would we still consider a country democratic if 51% of the working class, or even a significant portion of the population, were migrants without voting rights? Based on today's criteria for liberal democracy, the answer would likely be no, because our understanding of what constitutes liberal democracy has evolved.

This shift is precisely what has triggered the current backlash. Interestingly, if we look at public opinion data, it is not the majority of the population supporting this backlash. It is a smaller, more concentrated segment — depending on the country, a bit more or less — but certainly not the majority. One of the challenges we face is that while we conduct a lot of valuable research on the far right, we sometimes overestimate its growth. Yes, it is expanding to

some degree, but we often overlook the fact that a significant portion of society remains opposed to it, and that liberal democratic values are still deeply embedded across many societies.

4.3 | Daphne Halikiopoulou

Democracies often die from within (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019). To understand the significant impact the far right has on democracy, we first need to appreciate how extensive its success has been. This success has three features: (1) increase in votes cast, (2) joining governments and making policy and (3) normalisation and the ability to drive party competition. This has significant implications for democracy: by rejecting liberal democratic institutions and processes, far-right parties reject the very basis upon which our representative democracy is premised. While these parties may prefer to be termed 'populist' because this term is 'people-centred', and by extension sounds democratic, in practice, the far right is a threat to democracy (Bonikowski et al., 2019: 2). Far-right parties adopt undemocratic narratives, they target minorities and once in governing positions attempt to undermine institutional checks and balances and subvert democratic institutions.

Specifically, I will focus on three ways in which the far-right impacts democracy (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2024). First, systemic entrenchment leads to the normalisation of hate and extreme ideas. Far-right issues become increasingly normalised as they become 'propagated by mainstream parties' (Mudde, 2022: 104). The British Conservatives' appropriated UKIP's Brexit agenda and facilitated the country's exit from the EU. The main party line has visibly shifted to the right with a staunch anti-immigrant narrative. This normalisation often extends beyond the political realm. For example, extensive media coverage is offering far-right ideas widespread exposure (Mudde, 2022).

Second, far-right populism is emboldened by, and in turn exacerbates, political polarisation, which also negatively impacts democracy. At the party system level, political competition becomes defined by adversarial dynamics, which heighten confrontation and undermine consensus. At the popular level, polarisation and extreme partisanship drive support for undemocratic behaviour among citizens, who become increasingly likely to forgive undemocratic behaviour (Svolik et al., 2023).

Third, the far right in power compromises liberal democratic institutions. Far-right leaders introduce a series of constitutional reforms which undermine institutions such as the judiciary and media, thus negatively impacting on democratic rights and freedoms. These reforms are constitutional and thus designed to outlast the government of the day. Hungary's Orbán, for example, has used his constitutional majority to fundamentally change the Hungarian political system, transforming the country into an illiberal democracy (Mudde, 2022).

The implications for democracy are significant. The far right is no correction to democracy, but rather a significant threat. This phenomenon, however, is not irreversible. The answer lies in democracy itself. At the core of the analysis presented above is the proposition that the increasing success and entrenchment of the far right, and subsequent erosion of democracy, is to a great extent a supply-side phenomenon. Socio-economic acceleration, cultural change and technological advancement all generate winners and 'losers', that is people negatively affected by these changes. But the far right has not always been a given under such circumstances. Far-right normalisation is not simply facilitated by demand, but by other actors in the system who accommodate these parties. But within the democratic framework, there is also agency. If what inflates far-right party support is the accommodation of its ideas by the mainstream, then the reverse can also occur: the marginalisation of far-right ideas, and compensation of those on the losing side, can serve to contain them.

There is a paradox here: On the one hand, we are often tempted to attribute the rise of the far right to a backlash against liberal democracy; on the other hand, the very way to safeguard liberal democracy is to strengthen the institutions that are meant to manage, balance and reconcile clashing societal views. In democracies, political actors have the agency to shape their own political fortunes. If democracies die from within, they can also only be shielded from within.

5 | WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM COMPARING EUROPE AND LATIN AMERICA?

5.1 | Vasiliki Georgiadou

First, historical legacies play a crucial role in shaping the appeal of the far right. In Europe, the far right, especially its first wave, as well as the ER camp over time, are linked to past fascist and the authoritarian regimes of the 1930s and the nationalist movements that emerged before and after World War II (Copsey, 2018). They draw on fascist elements, authoritarian and anti-egalitarian traditions and violent practices. The National Democracy Party (NPD) in Germany and Casa Pound in Italy are two characteristic examples of far-right parties with links to historical legacies. The historical legacies of Pujadist populism in France and the 'Common Man' (*L'Uomo Qualunque*) movement in Italy also serve as foundational influences for the populist-radical right in contemporary Europe (Georgiadou, 2008). In the southern European countries (Greece, Portugal, Spain) that followed the third wave of democratisation, the emergence of the far right was initially slow. However, as the memories of these authoritarian pasts began to fade and younger generations grew up without any direct experience of them, the historical obstacles to supporting PRR and ER parties diminished (Frantzeskakis & Sato, 2020). Consequently, electoral preferences for the far right became more pronounced, allowing it to gain traction and visibility in the political landscape. In Latin America, the far right is influenced by the region's history of military dictatorships and also by the recent 'pink tide' of left-wing populism, positioning the far right as a counter-movement. This does not mean that there are no transnational similarities between Europe's and Latin America's far right. 'Historical' or 'classical' populisms (de la Torre, 2017) have also fed the far right and its leaders have been inspired by Peronism and populist movements in Latin America. The transnationality of the far right is based not only on interactions but also on a perception of a common tradition and common destiny (Schlembach, 2011).

Second, context is essential. Immigration, for example, is a defining issue for the far right in Europe, fuelling anti-immigrant sentiment and shaping discourse. However, immigration holds a different place in the discourse of the Latin American far right, where it plays a less central role. This highlights how specific contextual factors contribute uniquely to the far right's appeal in different periods and/or different regions (Georgiadou et al., 2018). However, this context is evolving. While immigration may not always be a primary concern for voters, far-right parties consistently emphasise the issue, reminding the electorate of its significance regardless of its prominence on the public agenda. This strategy serves to keep immigration at the forefront of the political debate and reinforces the relevance of the far-right party positions and political orientations.

Third, socio-economic conditions serve as common ground that contributes to the spread of the far right across regions. While cultural issues, moral values, and the clash between progressive and traditional norms often create opportunities for the far right to enter the political scene and attract citizens' support, we have also overlooked the importance of socio-economic factors. Socio-economic hardships — such as inequality, unemployment, social welfare concerns, as well as concerns about declining social status and facing economic insecurities — consistently play a significant role in strengthening far-right support not only within (Georgiadou et al., 2018; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2022) but also outside Europe (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2023a). Today, far-right parties emphasise the economy and the welfare state much more than in the past. Understanding their positions on the economic left–right dimension, as well as the socio-economic concerns of citizens, is essential to understanding the rise and maintenance of the far right globally.

5.2 | Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser

What do we gain from conducting cross-regional research? This is a crucial question, and my initial response is that it allows us to generate cumulative knowledge. As I mentioned earlier, we have a substantial understanding of the far

right in Eastern and Western Europe, and we are gradually accumulating research on the United States and Latin America. By comparing these regions, we uncover intriguing puzzles, as many issues may transcend borders and lead to new questions and insights.

If we undertake this comparative exercise, we can identify several key differences between Europe and Latin America. First, immigration is a primary driver of far-right sentiments in Europe, while this is not necessarily the case in Latin America. In Latin America, the main issues revolve around crime, gender and sexual politics. This highlights that while we can discuss the far right in both regions, it is essential to recognise that different issues are politicised depending on the regional context (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2023b).

Another important aspect to consider is that in Latin America, the far right is often associated with personalist, charismatic leaders, such as Bolsonaro, Milei and Bukele. In contrast, Europe's far right is characterised by relatively strong political organisations. For example, in Austria, the FPÖ continues to thrive even after the death of its charismatic leader, Haider. Similarly, while the RN in France has significant personalist ties to the Le Pen family, the far right would not vanish if Marine Le Pen were to disappear tomorrow. In summary, Europe's far right is anchored in robust organisations, a feature that is typically less prominent in the Latin American context.

When reflecting on the similarities, it is important to emphasise that the supporters of the far right in most societies constitute a minority, not a majority. For instance, recent high-quality surveys conducted in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile indicate that roughly 30% of the population supports the far right, while about 60% oppose it (Rovira Kaltwasser, Espinoza, et al., 2024). Similarly, data from Western Europe reveal a comparable pattern, with around 20% to 25% of the electorate being core supporters of the far right, while approximately 55% are firmly against it (Meléndez & Rovira, 2021; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2024). This shows that, although the far right can mobilise a segment of the population, it does not represent the majority. While this opposition is encouraging, there's a significant challenge: the 50% to 60% of the population opposed to the far right is extremely diverse. This group includes progressives, conservatives, and individuals who may not be particularly engaged in politics. If we aim to defend liberal democracy, the key issue is how to effectively mobilise this 55% to 60% of the population. We need to conduct much more research to explore strategies for uniting those who disagree with the far right.

The final point I want to make is that when comparing the two regions, we can identify a common mistake made by the centre-left that helps explain the growing success of the far right. Typically, the centre-left tends to overpoliticise issues that it cannot fully own. For instance, if immigration becomes the dominant topic of discussion, it can easily become the key issue in an election. However, voters are more likely to choose parties perceived to have ownership of the issue. Once you've tried 'Coke', you may not want to switch to 'Pepsi'. In other words, if the election revolves primarily around immigration, voters are more inclined to support the original rather than a diluted alternative. In Europe, social democratic parties often focus heavily on migration while neglecting other critical issues that matter to their electorate. Public opinion data indicates that, across many European societies, key existential issues such as housing are most relevant to voters. This should be a central concern for social democrats, which could attract significant electoral support. By concentrating primarily on immigration and failing to address issues such as housing, social democratic parties risk inflating far-right party support. Similarly, in Latin America, we see progressive forces fixating on crime. When crime becomes the focal point of the election, candidates who present tough-on-crime stances gain an advantage, thereby handing the election to them. This behaviour of the centre-left, viewed from a comparative perspective, offers valuable lessons.

5.3 | Daphne Halikiopoulou

Let me go back to Cinderella. The reason why the comparison between Europe and Latin America is important is because it allows us to ultimately establish whether the rise and entrenchment of the far right is an isolated, case-specific phenomenon or whether it is a generalisable trend with similar causes and implications for our democracies worldwide.

The emergence of the far right in Latin America is relatively new. As such we have limited knowledge about the similarities and differences between the far right in Latin America and other regions. Broadly speaking, there are three different types of instructive comparisons that we can make to determine how generalisable the phenomenon is. First, within Latin America, as in Europe, important intra-regional patterns can be identified. Second, significant differences exist between Latin America and Europe, given the interesting demand- and supply-side variations across the two regions. Finally, comparisons can be drawn between Latin America, Europe, and other global cases, such as the United States, Australia and India, illustrating the breadth and reach of this phenomenon.

The starting point for any such comparison should be the context within which these parties operate. Contextual factors in Latin America are in many ways different from those in Europe: these countries are in their majority new or 'third wave' presidential democracies with highly personalised political parties; they have a history of populism from the left and strong left–right divides; they are also immigrant societies, and immigration is not a salient issue in comparison to other issues such as crime, corruption, violence and economic instability. What this means, in turn, is that we are looking at specific patterns of party competition, relationships with democracy and the politicisation of in-group/out-group conflicts that differ from those of Europe. The far-right parties themselves tend to be socially conservative and authoritarian, but not 'nativist' (Mudde, 2007) as they primarily target crime and corruption instead of immigration. While many of them adopt populist narratives, they are also extreme.

To facilitate these comparisons, a second step would be to identify the following patterns: (1) patterns of success: are these parties in government or in opposition, are they strong, weak or almost non-existent electorally? (2) patterns of supply: how do these parties utilise nationalism, populism and authoritarianism in their programmatic agendas? (3) patterns of origin: are these splinter parties from the right, or from agrarian parties, or are they new parties? (4) patterns of exclusion: who they 'otherise' and how? And finally (5) patterns of demand: who are their voters?

While this exercise presents us with exciting opportunities for the accumulation of new knowledge, we also face some challenges in our attempt to establish the generalisability of the phenomenon. Inevitably, the more diverse cases we examine the more differences we will identify, which will require theorisation. This takes us full circle to the question of whether it is possible to place diverse parties and groups under a common umbrella that makes them comparable. If the common umbrella is ideology, are nativism (or nationalism), populism and/or authoritarianism necessary, sufficient, neither or both for a party to be classified as far-right? If some of these parties are not nativist, are they far right at all? If they are closer to the libertarian rather than the authoritarian side of the political spectrum, like the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV) in the Netherlands and Javier Milei's La Libertad Avanza in Argentina, are they far right at all? If the common umbrella is the basis of support, is immigration scepticism a necessary minimum or can we include broader drivers of discontent in our definition? These questions are complex, and without carefully crafted specifications of the phenomenon we are trying to explain, we may end up comparing apples and oranges. Ultimately, however, comparisons are about a trade-off between in-depth case specificity and generalisability (Ziblatt et al., 2006). The attempt to compare the far right in Europe and Latin America can help us identify important empirical puzzles, formulate general theoretical propositions and develop broader arguments about our specific empirical findings whether we strive for universal generalisations or more middle-range theories.

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ENDNOTES

[1] One reason for the rise of anti-establishment politics in Latin America is the politicisation of major corruption scandals. When voters become dissatisfied with the political system, they are more likely to be drawn to politicians who present themselves as 'outsiders' disconnected from the 'corrupt elite'. A key example of this is Operation Car Wash, which played a decisive role in Bolsonaro's victory in Brazil in 2018 (see Zanotti et al., 2023).

[2] Under Carlos Menem, the government in Argentina embraced neoliberal populism as part of the third wave of populism in Latin America. However, Menem himself was not associated with the far right, but rather with the mainstream right (see also Zanotti et al., 2023).

[3] During a debate in the run-up to the 2024 US Presidential Elections, Donald Trump falsely accused Haitian immigrants eating people's pets in Springfield, Ohio.

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