



The rise of far-right memory politics A global perspective

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The rise of the far right is a global phenomenon. Anti-democratic parties and authoritarian leaders have been gaining influence not only in Europe but across the globe. Since the 2010s, the world has experienced democratic backsliding, with more nations moving toward autocracy than democracy. A defining characteristic of far-right politics is a revisionist engagement with the past. Far-right actors challenge established historiography and remembrance culture, promoting distorted historical narratives that fuel hate speech, xenophobia, racism, and political polarisation. They invoke a mythologised and selective interpretation of the past to legitimise their actions and ideologies in the present. Understanding—and effectively countering—the global rise of the far right, therefore, necessitates a thorough exploration of their memory politics.

The instrumentalisation of history by the far right often manifests as a reaction against the accomplishments of transitional justice and democratisation processes. Far-right actors question the culpability of perpetrators, deny facts established by truth commissions or historical research, oppose reparations for past injustices, and attack memorial sites dedicated to victims. By undermining efforts to redress historical wrongs and fuelling societal divisions, the far right poses a profound challenge to those committed to transitional justice, human rights and democracy. This includes individuals and organisations that promote remembrance to foster understanding, reconciliation, and peace.

This collection of case studies aims to shed light on the strategies and mechanisms of far-right memory politics across diverse contexts. Through four case studies—Chile, South Korea, South Africa, and Lithuania—it examines how far-right actors exploit history to legitimise their actions in the present. All case studies focus on developments in the past ten years, revealing a consistent pattern: after the democratic transitions of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which included various efforts in dealing with the past, far-right movements have gained momentum in the past decade, launching a backlash against transitional justice and democratic norms. Individuals associated with former authoritarian regimes perceived the democratic transitions at the end of the Cold War as a threat and

This collection features four case studies

CHILE

Endangered cultural memory: The impact of far-right discourses and practices on human rights related to the dictatorship in Chile

CAROLINA AGUILERA AND MANUELA BADILLA

SOUTH AFRICA

Between nostalgia and apocalypse: White nationalist remembrance of the past and fear of the future in post-apartheid South Africa

MALOSE LANGA AND PEACE KIGUWA

SOUTH KOREA

Rewriting history, undermining democracy: The role of the New Right in South Korean memory politics

HANNES B. MOSLER

LITHUANIA

Glorification, whitewashing, erasure: The populist challenge to dealing with the past in Lithuania

VIOLETA DAVOLIŪTĖ

have increasingly turned to history as a source of orientation and legitimacy. In this process, the far right is progressively promoting its own, alternative version of the past. This introduction summarises key findings on how the far right misuses the past and offers recommendations for countering these attempts.

The far right's misuse of remembrance

Understanding the far right's memory politics requires examining their actions across four key categories: spaces, tropes, identities, and time. Despite the specificities of each national context, these categories reveal shared strategies and mechanisms that the far right follows.

Spaces: Sites of contestation

The far-right misuse of the past takes place in different spaces. Monuments, memorial sites

at historical places of mass violence, and institutions commemorating victims of past injustices are frequent targets of far-right protests, vandalism, or campaigns for removal. In their place, far-right actors advocate for new monuments that celebrate their preferred historical narratives. Educational institutions and history textbooks are another critical space. The far right seeks to influence curricula and historical scholarship, aiming to reshape public understanding of the past.

Symbols such as flags and songs, which hold significant cultural and historical resonance, are also sites of contestation. Meanwhile, the digital sphere has become a crucial battleground: social media platforms are used to disseminate revisionist narratives rapidly and widely, often accompanied by hate speech and disinformation. The far right is thus active in a variety of spaces to contest established historiography and disseminate alternative interpretations of the past.

Tropes: Security, threats, and loss

When promoting their preferred version of the past, the far right frequently relies on specific tropes. Security is a dominant theme, with the far right using security concerns to influence historical narratives circulated in public spaces and practices of commemoration. Certain (minority) groups, civil society and protest movements are frequently portrayed as dangers to order and stability. This securitisation of the past reframes historical injustices as necessary measures for protecting citizens and maintaining control. At the same time, the far right portrays the past as a time when people still felt safe, in contrast to alleged present-day insecurities. This is directly connected to another common trope, namely the invocation of threats, whether external as in the case of foreign aggression, or internal as in the case of leftist political projects.

Additionally, the far right exploits feelings and fears of loss, which can take different forms: Political elites who have experienced the loss of power and resources construct distorted accounts of the past to regain legitimacy. The reorganisation of political and socio-economic rights in times of transition also risks creating a sense of relative deprivation among certain groups. In short, far-right instrumentalisation of the past are particularly effective where people feel insecure, threatened and deprived.

Identities: Reframing victims and heroes

The far right's misuse of the past heavily revolves around the construction of identities, particularly those of victims and heroes. Across various contexts, there is a strong effort to reframe who counts as a victim. The far right generally does not recognise those victims identified by transitional justice processes. Instead, they portray themselves as victims of political and social transitions, which frequently inverts the roles of victims and perpetrators. This reversal relativises and delegitimises the suffering of victims, while amplifying the far right's grievances.

Simultaneously, the far right seeks to rehabilitate controversial historical figures, elevating them as heroes of their cause. These figures, often excluded from national remembrance projects due to their authoritarian, racist, or antisemitic beliefs or their participation in mass atrocities are reimagined by omitting objectionable aspects of their biographies. Relying on the identities of victims and heroes provides an important sense of orientation and identity for far-right movements, making their narratives more appealing.

Time: Between nostalgia and apocalypse

Far-right memory politics rely on a particular view of time, invoking both the past and the future to influence present politics. The past is romanticised and glorified, with authoritarian eras often portrayed as periods of stability and prosperity. This nostalgic view of the "good old days" relies on a selective focus on certain figures and events, erasing the complexities and injustices of these periods. There is no room for historical ambivalence and nuance in the far right's approach to the past.

At the same time, the far right often uses apocalyptic framings to depict the future in dire terms. They argue that failure to act now will lead to catastrophic consequences, fostering a sense of urgency and fear. This dual invocation of a nostalgic past and an apocalyptic future serves to justify their actions and rally support for their cause.

Countering the far right's memory politics

Education, scholarship, institutions and memorials dedicated to remembering the past are essential for preserving historical knowledge, democracy and human rights. Beyond questions of historical truth, the global rise of the far right and its instrumentalisation of the past thus pose significant challenges to democratic, inclusive, and peaceful societies. This collection of case studies suggests several measures to counter this trend:

- **Protect and fund memorial sites:** Ensure the long-term protection and preservation of memorial sites as well as their staff through adequate funding and legal safeguards. Implement measures to prevent vandalism and promote awareness of their significance.
- **Support regional and international networks:** Foster international cooperation among activists and organisations in the field of dealing with the past. By sharing experiences and strategies, these networks can effectively counter the far right's own international connections. Fund transnational research on the topic to include expert knowledge from contexts not covered here to identify common strategies.
- **Create independent institutions:** Establish nonpartisan oversight bodies to promote inclusive and critical engagement with history, especially during and following times of transition. Such institutions can review educational materials to ensure accurate and balanced representations of the past. They can also prevent far-right actors from acquiring a monopoly over the interpretation of history once they gain power. Support watchdog organisations that monitor abuses of the past for political gains.
- **Promote local history:** Encourage research and teaching that highlights local historical experiences. These narratives are often underrepresented but highly relevant to local communities. Local history is also particularly suited to convey historical complexities and nuances. Facilitate participation of diverse perspectives in the creation of memory policies.
- **Strengthen education and historical knowledge:** Bolster historical education to foster collective understanding of past injustices and their lasting effects as well as the mechanisms of authoritarian rule. Address information gaps, particularly in the digital sphere, by publishing accurate historical content online. Use fact-checking initiatives and public campaigns to debunk revisionist claims. Strengthen civic education to reinforce elements of shared identity and understanding of politics as a space for negotiation of diverse perspectives and needs.
- **Transcend simplistic victim-perpetrator dichotomies:** While victims of violence must be recognised as such, remembrance work should attempt to broaden the perspective beyond rigid identities. Aim to foster integration and reconciliation in memorialisation efforts, making the past relevant to diverse audiences and future generations.
- **Find ways of dealing with loss:** Loss is a complex phenomenon, so while addressing the past can only cover certain aspects of it, it can aim to foster acceptance of perceived losses associated with redistributive justice. Encourage open dialogue about feelings and fears of loss that is co-shaped by affected and marginalised communities and avoids stigmatisation. Provide psycho-social support where needed.

The four case studies presented in this collection delve deeply into the strategies of far-right memory politics, illustrating their commonalities and complexities across contexts. We invite readers to engage with these contributions, which offer crucial insights for understanding and countering this phenomenon.

ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

The Global Learning Hub for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation is a network of organisations from Germany and across the world, initiated by the Berghof Foundation and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in early 2022. We want to facilitate an inspiring space for dialogue and learning that is driven by solidarity, inclusivity and innovation. By building bridges, generating knowledge and amplifying voices, the Hub seeks to advance the policy and practice of dealing with the past to strengthen peace and justice.

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
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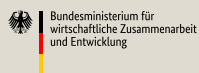
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