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Progressives Need a Global Movement

di Michelle Goldberg

It's a strange irony that in recent years the nationalist right has gotten much better at international organizing than the ostensibly cosmopolitan left. The Conservative Political Action Conference, or CPAC, went [global](#) during Donald Trump's first term; it's held gatherings in Israel, South Korea, Hungary and Argentina, among other countries. American conservatives have a growing pantheon of international leaders they take inspiration from, including Hungary's Viktor Orban, El Salvador's Nayib Bukele and Argentina's Javier Milei.

This right-wing internationale trades ideas and memes. Its members support one another across borders. A steady stream of American conservative operatives, including the influential strategist Chris Rufo, has passed through Hungary's government-aligned Danube Institute, learning from the country's successful record of using the state to crush liberal institutions. Earlier this year, members of the MAGA movement from Alex Jones all the way up to Vice President JD Vance [rallied](#) around an ultranationalist Romanian presidential candidate who had been disqualified as a result of charges of Russian interference. This week, the nationalist group Patriots for Europe Foundation held a conference at the European Parliament with members of India's right-wing government with the aim of building an alliance based on "civilizational sovereignty" — as opposed to universal human rights — and the fight against Islamism.

There is nothing comparable to this global network among progressives, which is one sign of the left's deep crisis.

Partly, progressives' problem is one of inertia. For decades now, when people on the left have coordinated across borders, they've often done it through liberal institutions: international bodies like the United Nations, international NGOs,

academic conferences. These institutions tend to favor styles of communication that are highly specialized and bureaucratic. (To be part of the U.N.'s orbit, for example, grass-roots feminist groups often must learn its jargon: "gender mainstreaming," "S.H.R.H.," "duty-bearers.") "The progressive forces, the left and socialist forces, lost the way of communication with the people," Alexis Tsipras, a leftist former prime minister of Greece, told me. They became, he said, "more systemic."

And now the systems that sustained the left — particularly academia and nonprofits — are under concerted attack. "The left basically depended on a fantasy view of the stability of institutions," said Subir Sinha, a scholar at the University of London who has studied the links between far-right movements in India and Europe. Progressives, he said, neither anticipated nor planned for how they might answer a central question of our time: "How would you do politics when the ground has shifted so dramatically from under your feet?"

Some of that planning has now begun, however belatedly. This week, Tsipras convened a conference in Athens of progressives from Europe, Turkey, Latin America and the United States to discuss the global crisis of liberal democracy. It was the second such gathering he had organized, and the first since Trump was re-elected. Among the speakers was Senator Bernie Sanders, joining remotely. "Right-wing extremists all over the world have been organizing effectively, and I think that it's time that we built an international progressive socialist movement, and this is a step forward," he said.

A challenge for the left is figuring out what that movement will be built on. The right has a clear picture of the world it wants to create, one that seems utopian to its supporters, however dystopian it appears to the rest of us. It has a sense of momentum and destiny. That's what progressives have lost, first with the fall of Communism, and then with the decay of liberalism. One of the Martin Luther King Jr. quotes most often repeated by Barack Obama was this: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Until about a decade ago, it seemed, at least in cosmopolitan quarters, like the world was moving inevitably toward greater enlightenment, greater equality and greater integration.

Especially after Trump's re-election, such optimism has been largely obliterated. Except on the left-wing fringes, where people still nurture millenarian hopes of revolution, the dominant progressive mood seems like a combination of confusion and despair. "The problem is that we have lost our vision for the future and our capacity to convince people that if the progressives will be in the government, their future will be different," Tsipras told me. "We have to discuss that openly."

I asked Tsipras if he saw any global leaders who were forging a model that might counter the authoritarian threat. He was circumspect. As a kid, he said, he was a member of Greece's Communist youth movement. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, he came to believe that a society could not be free and equal without democracy. These days, he said, he's come to believe that our situation is so dire that, unfortunately, "we have to fight not for a democratic socialism, but for a democratic capitalism," as opposed to ascendant oligarchy and autocracy. Figuring out how such a project can capture people's fragmented attention and speak to their inchoate hopes will be a huge and daunting project. That makes taking the first small steps even more important.