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Europe's liberal authoritarians

Who is Juraj Cintula, the man who attempted to assassinate Robert Fico, the popular Slovakian prime minister, in the city of Handlova on 15 May? What does he stand for—or signify, perhaps better put? What does he tell us about our moment? About the political forces at work in Europe?

One reads all manner of accounts of Cintula's identity. [El País suggested in a 17 May report](#) that the 71-year-old's allegiances and beliefs have been wildly disparate, having no easily legible valences. He is or was a poet who belonged to a literary club. He was at one time associated with a pro-Russian paramilitary group. He founded a group that stood against violence. He nurses or nursed a deep contempt for the Roma people. I have read elsewhere that he used to work in coal mines.

And since his arrest immediately after he fired five nearly fatal bullets into Fico, we read something else altogether. A court document released 23 May, apparently based on depositions of Cintula while in custody, said he professed to feeling “powerless and frustrated with the state of society” and that he “doesn't agree with the policies of the current government,” meaning Fico's, and “doesn't agree with the persecution of culture and media workers.”

But what motivated Cintula to act, he told the authorities who deposed him, was Prime Minister Fico's adamant insistence, which he made clear as he ran for a fourth term last autumn, that Slovakia would not send “one more bullet” of

military assistance to Ukraine. Cintula, the court document says, “regards the current government as a Judas toward the European Union.” The formerly pro-Russian is now vehemently anti-Russian, it seems.

Did Cintula act alone on the afternoon of 15 May? This is now a key question. There have been reports that his social media accounts—Facebook and the like—were scrubbed clean within a couple of hours of his arrest. This suggests that Cintula was other than a lone assassin, and investigators are reportedly looking into this possibility. But for now we must accept that we cannot know one way or the other.

I confess I am troubled by the reports of Cintula’s strange background. He is just the sort of person a foreign intelligence agency or a foreign-funded “civil society” group would find easily manipulable—and so easily persuaded to act against a prime minister he did not like. I speculate, of course, for we cannot know this now, either. But of something else I think there is more certainty: Juraj Cintula is emblematic, if not representative, of an increasingly unruly animosity in Europe toward leaders who do not conform to neoliberal orthodoxies.

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Here I will change the topic without changing the subject.

As *GlobalBridge* readers will have gathered from numerous news reports over the past couple of weeks, the Republic of Georgia is now in an uproar of protests over a statute, the Law on the Transparency of Foreign Influence, that the legislature in Tbilisi passed on 14 May. Salome Zourabichvili, Georgia’s president, immediately vetoed the legislation, but the governing party, Georgia Dream, has sufficient votes to override the president. It has not yet moved to do so.

Georgia is dense with nongovernmental organizations, NGOs, and other civil society groups. *The Grayzone*, an independent U.S. publication that does honorable investigative work, [reported Sunday](#) that these organizations number more than 25,000. “Nearly all receive foreign funding,” Kit Klarenberg writes. “Many are bankrolled by the E.U., which finances over 130 separate ‘active projects’ and 19,000 small and medium-sized businesses in the country. American intelligence cutout U.S.AID [the Agency for International Development], and CIA front NED [the National Endowment for Democracy], are also prominent backers of the sector.”

The foreign agents law is rather simple to understand—that is, how it is written and why are very clear. It stipulates that NGOs and “independent media” that receive more than 20 percent of their funding from foreign donors—which, in the case of media, would mean they are *prima facie* not independent—will be required to register with the government as entities “bearing the interests of a foreign power.” The Justice Ministry will thenceforth have the authority to monitor registrants.

One would have to be quite ignorant of the history of internationally active NGOs, or of the “color revolutions” of the early decades of this century, or be in more or less complete denial out of ideological loyalties, not to recognize what is at issue in Georgia. As various Georgian officials and political figures have noted, this law is neither more nor less than a defense against American and European attempts covertly to subvert the integrity of Georgia’s political process. “Many foreign-funded NGOs,” Klarenberg observes, “are explicitly concerned with integrating Georgia into the E.U., NATO, and other ‘Euro–Atlantic’ structures.”

As a matter of background, the Russian Federation has had a similar law in place since 2012, and the Duma passed it for the same reason Tbilisi is about to enact its

own. The U.S.—this the height of irony—has had the Foreign Agents Registration Act on its books since 1938, and for more or less the same reasons. But the Biden regime has proven many times to be very wanting in its sense of irony. It has warned, since the legislature passed the law, in an 84-to-30 vote, that it is reconsidering its relations with Tbilisi. Secretary of State Blinken declared over the weekend that the U.S. will impose visa restrictions on those Georgian officials it deems to be “undermining democracy in Georgia.”

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When we place these circumstances side by side, Slovakia’s and Georgia’s, we must borrow a famous phrase and turn it to new purpose. A specter is haunting Europe. It is the specter of liberal authoritarianism.

There are various policies the Fico government advances that may not be to one’s liking. Fico stands against the “L.G.B.T.” movement as a manifestation of Western decadence. He takes a strong position against large-scale immigration into Slovakia. These positions have put Fico sharply at odds with the liberal “values”—which do not seem to include nonintervention into the affairs of others.

So we must borrow again, this time from Mao, to judge Robert Fico’s politics, typically described as left-populist, as they should be judged. There are primary contradictions and secondary contradictions, the Great Helmsman used to say, and the right understanding requires the two be correctly distinguished. In Fico’s case, the policies just noted and various others like them are secondary contradictions—secondary to the primary contradiction. And the primary contradiction is Slovakia’s right to defend its sovereignty and determine its future without the

interference of other nations or supranational institutions such as the European Union.

Just after Cintula shot Fico, RT International, Russia's BBC, published [a compendium of statements](#) Fico has made in the course of his long political career, most of them drawn from the recent past. A few of these follow.

On the sovereignty of nations:

Our partners abroad have been taught that whatever they ask and request from Slovakia, they will automatically get it. But we are a sovereign and self-confident country....

As long as I am the head of the Slovak government, I will never agree that a country should be punished for fighting for its sovereignty.

On the Ukraine crisis:

We can pour all the weapons of the world, all the money there, and Russia will never be defeated militarily. It is the turn of 2023 and 2024, and you will see that Russia will begin to dictate the terms of settlement of this conflict....

I say it loud and clear and will do so: The war in Ukraine didn't start yesterday or last year. It began in 2014 when the Ukrainian Nazis and fascists started to murder Russian citizens in Donetsk and Lugansk....

I will support zero military aid to Ukraine.... An immediate halt to military operations is the best solution we have for Ukraine. The E.U. should change from an arms supplier to a peacemaker....

There has to be some kind of compromise. What do they expect, that the Russians will leave Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk? That's unrealistic.

On the reigning orthodoxies in Brussels:

If we can't tell the truth at the Brussels table—that, for example, anti-Russian sanctions didn't work, that further destruction of Ukraine and killing Ukrainians is going nowhere, that the fanatic implementation of the Green Deal is killing our economies, that 20,000 casualties in the Gaza Strip cannot be overlooked just because Israel causes them—we are on a slippery slope that can be not only politically, but also economically destructive for Europe.

I do not see why any of these statements is unworthy of consideration, if not approval. I see entirely why they have put Robert Fico at odds with the liberal authoritarians he describes so succinctly.

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It is well understood that a very sizable proportion of Georgians—a clear majority, I read in some reports—favor a Western-tilted future for themselves. But this does not explain why they are filling the streets of Tbilisi, claiming the law is intended to make Georgia's inclusion among the Atlantic nations impossible. It is commonly called “the Russian law” because those oppose it are convinced it is meant to move Georgia into the Russian camp. Demonstrators also view it as a doorway opening on to repression and extreme levels of official surveillance.

What is the basis of these interpretations? There is not, so far as one can see from the outside, an explanation for them. The language of the law does not suggest these kinds of readings. I have wondered about this for weeks.

Kit Klarenberg provides insightful reporting on this question in his *Grayzone* piece:

The sincerity of citizens who continue to occupy public spaces in Tbilisi, for fear their government's actions will sabotage Georgia's E.U. aspirations, cannot be doubted. But there are clear indications that many have been severely misled about the nature of the new law, with some reportedly convinced it will mandate mass surveillance and compel the public to denounce their neighbors as "foreign agents."

The drive to misinform Georgians about the bill is led primarily by foreign media outlets and foreign-funded NGOs themselves.

This strikes me as the very zenith of the hypocrisy one so frequently finds among the liberal authoritarians. As they provoke Georgians into the streets to demand the fall of the Georgian Dream government—and I take Klarenberg's reporting to be credible—they indulge themselves in precisely the invisible, interventionist work the law is intended to prevent.

The conclusion is obvious—and an old story. I ought to add: The U.S. and its E.U. clients are not fighting for democracy, as they incessantly claim. In the name of democracy that are corrupting it.

Robert Fico has said many times that the danger Slovakia faces is that it will become another Ukraine, ruled by anti-democratic cliques installed by way of Western subterfuge. Georgia, and not for the first time, is at risk of the same fate.

These are the primary contradictions along Europe's eastern flank.

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