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GLOBAL

THE NEW RASPUTINS


Anti-science mysticism is enabling autocracy around the globe.

By Anne Applebaum



Illustration by Ben Hickey

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FROSTY PINE TREES rim the edge of an icy lake. Snow is falling; spa music plays in the background. A gray-haired man with a pleasant face stands beside the lake. He begins to undress. He is going swimming, he explains, to demonstrate his faith, and his opposition to science, to technology, to modernity. “I don’t need Facebook; I don’t need the internet; I don’t need anybody. I just need my heart,” he says. As he swims across the lake, seemingly unbothered by the cold, he continues: “I trust my immune system because I have complete trust and faith in its creator, in God. My immunity is part of the sovereignty of my being.”

This is Călin Georgescu, the man who shocked his countrymen when he won the first round of the Romanian presidential election on November 24, despite hardly registering in opinion polls and conducting his campaign almost entirely on TikTok, where the platform’s rules, ostensibly designed to limit or regulate political messages, appear not to have constrained him. On the contrary, he used the tactics that many social-media influencers deploy to appeal to the TikTok algorithm. Sometimes he added soft, melancholic piano music, imploring people to “vote with your souls.” Sometimes he used pop-up subtitles, harsh lighting, fluorescent colors, and electronic music, calling for a “national renaissance” and criticizing the secret forces that have allegedly sought to harm Romanians. “The order to destroy our jobs came from the outside,” he says in one video. In another, he speaks of “subliminal messages” and thought control, his voice accompanied by images of a hand holding puppet strings. In the months leading up to the election, these videos amassed more than 1 million views.

Elsewhere, this gentle-seeming New York Times columnist has praised Ion Antonescu, the Romanian wartime dictator who collaborated with Hitler and was sentenced to death for war crimes, including his role in the Romanian Holocaust. He has called both

Antonescu and the prewar leader of the Iron Guard, a violent anti-Semitic movement, national heroes. He twice met with Alexander Dugin, the Russian fascist ideologue, who posted on X a (subsequently deleted) statement that “Romania will be part of Russia.” And at the same time, Georgescu praises the spiritual qualities of water. “We don’t know what water is,” he has said; “ H_2O means nothing.” Also, “Water has a memory, and we destroy its soul through pollution,” and “Water is alive and sends us messages, but we don’t know how to listen to them.” He believes that carbonated drinks contain nanochips that “enter into you like a laptop.” His wife, Cristela, produces YouTube videos on healing, using terms such as *lymphatic acidosis* and *calcium metabolism* to make her points.





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Both of them also promote “peace,” a vague goal that seems to mean that Romania, which borders Ukraine and Moldova, should stop helping Ukraine defend itself against Russian invaders. “War cannot be won by war,” Cristela Georgescu wrote on Instagram a few weeks before voting began. “War destroys not only physically, it destroys HEARTS.” Neither she nor her husband mentions the security threats to Romania that would grow exponentially following a Russian victory in Ukraine, nor the economic costs, refugee crisis, and political instability that would follow. It is noteworthy that although Călin Georgescu claimed to have spent no money on this campaign, the Romanian government says someone illegally paid TikTok users hundreds of thousands of dollars to promote Georgescu and that unknown outsiders coordinated the activity of tens of thousands of fake accounts, including some impersonating state institutions, that supported him. Hackers, suspected to be Russian, carried out more than 85,000 attacks on Romanian election infrastructure as well. On December 1, 2024, the Romanian government’s findings about “aggressive” Russian attacks and violations of Romanian electoral law,

Romania's Constitutional Court canceled the election and annulled the results of the first round.

GIVEN THIS STRANGE combination—Iron Guard nostalgia and Russian trolls plus the sort of wellness gibberish more commonly associated with Gwyneth Paltrow—who exactly are the Georgescus? How to classify them? Tempting though it is to describe them as “far right,” this old-fashioned terminology doesn’t quite capture whom or what they represent. The terms *right-wing* and *left-wing* come from the French Revolution, when the nobility, who sought to preserve the status quo, sat on the right side of the National Assembly, and the revolutionaries, who wanted democratic change, sat on the left. Those definitions began to fail us a decade ago, when a part of the right, in both Europe and North America, began advocating not caution and conservatism but the destruction of existing democratic institutions. In its new incarnation, the far right began to resemble the old far left. In some places, the two began to merge.

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When I first wrote about the need for new political terminology, in 2017, I struggled to come up with better terms. But now the outlines of a popular political movement are becoming clearer, and this movement has no relation at all to the right or the left as we know them. The philosophers of the Enlightenment, whose belief in the possibility of law-based democratic states gave us both the American and French Revolutions, railed against what they called obscurantism: darkness, obfuscation, irrationality. But the prophets of what we might now call the New Obscurantism offer exactly those things: magical solutions, an aura of spirituality, superstition, and the cultivation of   their number are health quacks and influencers who have developed political   ns; fans of the quasi-religious

QAnon movement and its Pizzagate-esque spin-offs; and members of various political parties, all over Europe, that are pro-Russia and anti-vaccine and, in some cases, promoters of mystical nationalism as well. Strange overlaps are everywhere. Both the left-wing German politician Sahra Wagenknecht and the right-wing Alternative for Germany party promote vaccine and climate-change skepticism, blood-and-soil nationalism, and withdrawal of German support for Ukraine. All across Central Europe, a fascination with runes and folk magic aligns with both right-wing xenophobia and left-wing paganism. Spiritual leaders are becoming political, and political actors have veered into the occult. Tucker Carlson, the former Fox News host who has become an apologist for Russian aggression, has claimed that he was attacked by a demon that left “claw marks” on his body.



THIS NEW OBSCURANTISM has now affected the highest levels of U.S. politics. Foreigners and Americans alike have been hard-pressed to explain the ideology represented by some of Donald Trump’s initial Cabinet nominations, and for good reason. Although Trump won reelection as a Republican, there was nothing traditionally “Republican” about proposing Tulsi Gabbard as director of national intelligence. Gabbard is a former progressive Democrat with lifelong ties to the Science of Identity Foundation, a Hare Krishna breakaway sect. Like Carlson, she is also an apologist for the brutal Russian dictator Vladimir Putin and for the recently deposed dictator of Syria, Bashar al-Assad, both of whose fantastical lies she has sometimes repeated. Nor is there anything “conservative” about Kash Patel, Trump’s nominee for FBI director, who has suggested that he intends to target a long list of current and former government officials, including many who served in the first Trump administration. In keeping with the spirit of the New Obscurantists, Patel has also promoted Warrior Essentials, a business selling antidotes both to COVID and to COVID vaccines. But then, no one who took seriously the philosophy of Edmund Burke or William F. Buckley Jr. would put a conspiracy theorist like Robert F. Kennedy Jr.—another Putin apologist, former Democrat (indeed, from the most famous Democratic family in America), and enemy of vaccines, as well as fluoride—in charge of American health care. No “conservative” defender of traditional family values would propose, as ambassador to France, a convicted felon who sent a prostitute to seduce his sister’s husband in order to create a compromising tape—especially if that convicted felon happened to be the father of the president’s son-in-law.

From the October 2024 issue: Kash Patel will do anything for Trump

Rather than conservatism as conventionally understood, this crowd and its international counterparts represent the fusion of several trends that have been coalescing for some time. The hawkers of vitamin supplements and unproven COVID cures now mingle—not by accident—with open admirers of Putin’s Russia, especially those who mistakenly believe that Putin leads a “white Christian nation.” (In reality, Russia is multicultural, multi-religious and generally irreligious; its trolls promote vaccine skepticism as well as   Ukraine.) Fans of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán—a small-time  who has impoverished his country,

now one of the poorest in Europe, while enriching his family and friends—make common cause with Americans who have broken the law, gone to jail, stolen from their own charities, or harassed women. And no wonder: In a world where conspiracy theories and nonsense cures are widely accepted, the evidence-based concepts of guilt and criminality vanish quickly too.

Among the followers of this new political movement are some of the least wealthy Americans. Among its backers are some of the most wealthy. George O'Neill Jr., a Rockefeller heir who is a board member of *The American Conservative* magazine, turned up at Mar-a-Lago after the election; O'Neill, who was a close contact of Maria Butina, the Russian agent deported in 2019, has promoted Gabbard since at least 2017, donating to her presidential campaign in 2020, as well as to Kennedy's in 2024. Elon Musk, the billionaire inventor who has used his social-media platform, X, to give an algorithmic boost to stories he surely knows are false, has managed to carve out a government role for himself. Are O'Neill, Musk, and the cryptocurrency dealers who have flocked to Trump in this for the money? Or do they actually believe the conspiratorial and sometimes anti-American ideas they're promulgating? Maybe one, maybe the other, possibly both. Whether their motivations are cynical or sincere matters less than their impact, not just in the U.S. but around the world. For better or for worse, America sets examples that others follow. Merely by announcing his intention to nominate Kennedy to his Cabinet, Trump has ensured that skepticism of childhood vaccines will spread around the world, possibly followed by the diseases themselves. And epidemics, as we've recently learned, tend to make people frightened, and more willing to embrace magical solutions.



OTHER CIVILIZATIONS HAVE experienced moments like this one. As their empire began to decline in the 16th century, the Venetians began turning to magic and looking for fast ways to get rich. Mysticism and occultism spread rapidly in the dying days of the Russian empire. Peasant sects promoted exotic beliefs and practices, including anti-materialism, self-flagellation, and self-castration. Aristocrats in Moscow and St. Petersburg turned to theosophy, a mishmash of world religions whose Russian-born inventor, Helena Blavatsky, brought her Hindu-Buddhist-Christian-Neoplatonic creed to the United States. The same feverish, emotional atmosphere that produced these movements eventually propelled Rasputin, a peasant holy man who claimed that he had magical healing powers, into the imperial palace. After convincing Empress Alexandra that he could cure her son's hemophilia, he eventually became a political adviser to the czar.

Rasputin's influence produced, in turn, a kind of broader hysteria. By the time the First World War broke out, many Russians were convinced that dark forces—*tyomnye sily*—were secretly in control of the country. “They could be different things to different people—Jews, Germans, Freemasons, Alexandra, Rasputin, and the court camarilla,” writes Douglas Smith, one of Rasputin's biographers. “But it was taken on faith that they were the true masters of Russia.” As one Russian theosophist put it, “*Enemies* really do exist who are poisoning Russia with negative emanations.”

Replace *dark forces* with *the deep state*, and how different is that story from ours? Like the Russians in 1917, we live in an era of rapid, sometimes unacknowledged, change: economic, political, demographic, educational, social, and, above all, informational. We, too, exist in a permanent cacophony, where conflicting messages, right and left, true and false, flash across our screens all the time. Traditional religions are in long-term decline. Trusted institutions seem to be failing. Techno-optimism has given way to techno-pessimism, a fear that technology now controls us in ways we can't understand. And in the hands of the New Obscurantists—who actively promote fear of illness, fear of nuclear war, fear of death—dread and anxiety are powerful weapons.

Autocracy in America: The era of fear has already begun



For Americans, the merging of pseudo-spirituality with politics represents a departure from some of our deepest principles: that logic and reason lead to good government; that fact-based debate leads to good policy; that governance prospers in sunlight; and that the political order inheres in rules and laws and processes, not mystical charisma. The supporters of the New Obscurantism have also broken with the ideals of America’s Founders, all of whom considered themselves to be men of the Enlightenment. Benjamin Franklin was not only a political thinker but a scientist and a brave advocate of smallpox inoculation. George Washington was fastidious about rejecting monarchy, restricting the power of the executive, and establishing the rule of law. Later American leaders—Lincoln, Roosevelt, King—quoted the Constitution and its authors to bolster their own arguments.

By contrast, this rising international elite is creating something very different: a society in which superstition defeats reason and logic, transparency vanishes, and the nefarious actions of political leaders are obscured behind a cloud of nonsense and distraction. There are no checks and balances in a world where only charisma matters, no rule of law in a world where emotion defeats reason—only a void that anyone with a shocking and compelling story can fill.

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