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The Fractured Legacy of Antitotalitarianism. Political Usage of a Discursive Frame in EU Memory Politics and Beyond

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1. Introduction

Through the resolution of 19 September 2019, on the Importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe (EP 2019) – the latest in a series of official acts moving in this direction since the VI legislative term (2004-2009) – the European Parliament reaffirmed its commitment to the principles of antitotalitarianism. This resolution reiterates the condemnation of the so-called totalitarian regimes, whether of fascist or communist origin, emphasising the necessity of preserving historical memory to prevent the resurgence of illiberal ideologies.

The categorisation of fascism and communism under the overarching framework of totalitarianism has not been universally well-received, to use a euphemism. It has been said that it is a rhetorical term and a relic of the Cold War. Certainly, totalitarianism is an essentially contested concept (Gallie 1969) as its definition and empirical applications remain debated. Today, we are witnessing its massive exploitation in cultural industries and political discourse. Dystopia has become a pervasive motif in contemporary cultural production, spanning Young Adult literature, TV series, and superhero films[1]. It has been co-opted by right-libertarian movements to

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[1] The antitotalitarian imaginary is evident in examples such as George Orwell's *1984* (adapted into numerous films and referenced extensively in popular culture), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the revival of Philip K. Dick's works, culminating in the Amazon series *The Man in the High Castle*. Similarly, television series such as *Black Mirror* draw on themes of surveillance and control that resonate with antitotalitarian concerns, showcasing how the concept has been absorbed and transformed into a central motif of cultural production. But it is in Young Adult literature that the antitotalitarian imaginary has made its most striking appearance, capturing the imaginations of a new generation: the subgenre known as "dystopia" has been one of the most prolific over the past 15 years. One prominent example is Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy, where the totalitarian Capitol exerts brutal control over the districts through propaganda, surveillance, and orchestrated violence. Similarly, Veronica Roth's *Divergent* series depicts a society rigidly divided into factions, with authoritarian structures suppressing individuality and dissent. James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* series also reflects antitotalitarian themes, as young protagonists resist manipulation and control in a dystopian, experimental environment. Not even to mention all the movies and novels that deal with life under the Third Reich (from *Schindlers List* to *Inglourious Basterds*), antitotalitarian themes can now be found in virtually any science-fiction saga (*Blade Runner 2049*), political thriller (*Conspiracy theory*) or superhero movie (*Captain America: Winter Soldier*). We could speak of a true exploitation genre, an illegitimate heir to the Nazi exploitation films of the 1970s. These movies typically featured sensationalised depictions of war crimes within settings such as concentration camps or military brothels. The genre exaggerates historical realities for shock value, blending historical references with fictionalised and hyperbolic narratives.

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criticise different perceived forms of restriction of individual freedoms; for example, the "totalitarianism of pandemic biopolitics", the "woke totalitarianism of political correctness", or "Islamist totalitarianism". Even within memory politics, as we will discuss, we observe its plasticity and contested nature. Antitotalitarianism, which was meant to reconcile the collective memories of the European peoples, is now being used to fuel old memory divides and new alleged cultural wars.

To address this fractured legacy, first of all, it is necessary to come to terms with the complexity of the philosophical and literary debate on totalitarianism over the past century, trying to show its very plasticity. Its definitions and applications vary significantly across historical, political, and cultural contexts, often shaped by the needs of specific intellectual or political agendas. In this sense, "totalitarianism" functions not merely as a descriptive term but as a normative instrument that facilitates the construction of dichotomies and legitimises certain political orders by contrasting them with an "otherness" that is rendered monolithic and uniformly threatening.

It is hard to deny that for the peoples of Eastern Europe, the critique of totalitarianism served emancipatory aims as a means of linking the memory of Soviet domination with the condemnation of Nazifascism, framing them as a unified collective trauma. For this reason, it is essential to take into account the adoption of antitotalitarianism within European institutions, starting with the 2004-2007 Eastern enlargement, as a memory framework to incorporate narratives about the crimes of communism from former Soviet countries into the already established and shared canons of memory surrounding the Holocaust and nazifascism, and the celebration of European integration as a triumphant story of spiritual and material reconciliation (Rosoux 2017). The use of antitotalitarianism as a "unifying memorial canon" fits into a complex process of the evolution of memory politics in Europe and the EU's role in this political field (Gensburger & Lavabre 2012; Calligaro & Foret 2012; Sierp 2014; Prutsch 2015; Verovšek 2020; Apollonio 2025).

By contrast, it is equally important to focus on the unintended consequences and domestic adoption of the EU antitotalitarian memory frame (Milošević & Touquet 2018). An illustrative example is the Italian case, where antitotalitarianism is decontextualised and recontextualised by the post-fascist right to support a narrative that downplays and transcends antifascism, strategically leveraging EU institutional resolutions as a source of legitimacy.

At the crossroads of political sociology and the history of ideas, this paper offers an exploration of the intellectual and political itinerary of antitotalitarianism. We will briefly examine the genealogy of the concept throughout the twentieth century, drawing on relevant literature. Subsequently, we'll explore its usage (Jacquot & Woll 2003) in European memory politics and contemporary European politics at large, analyzing relevant literature, institutional documents, and political discourse. Our goal is to provide lenses for critically understanding opportunities and risks associated with the mobilisation of this contested notion.

2. The Origins of Antitotalitarianism

Some critics underestimate the philosophical tradition that contributed to the development of antitotalitarian philosophy: one should think not only of Hannah Arendt and Raymond Aron, but also of the left communists and the Trotskyists, the Frankfurt School, or *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in France. But this reputable genealogy has not protected antitotalitarianism from trivialisation. Enzo Traverso, critically analyzing the intellectual itinerary of the term "totalitarianism", observed that it constitutes a "chameleon word", often "descriptive rather than analytical" and "polysemic". He argued that its development stemmed from the need "to apprehend and give a name to the new forms of domination and oppression that have appeared in the contemporary world" (Traverso 1998: 106, translated by the authors).

Throughout its historical trajectory, the term "totalitarianism" has served a specific and strategic function: to aggregate and assimilate diverse political regimes under a single conceptual framework. This capacity to synthesise disparate phenomena – whether ideological, institutional, or historical – has made it an inherently comparative and relational concept. As a result, totalitarianism is best understood as a *heuristic device* rather than a strictly empirical category. Its utility lies in its ability to frame political discourse and guide moral and ideological judgments, often reflecting the interests and priorities of those invoking it. Rather than a rigorous philosophical category or political orientation, totalitarianism could be understood as an essentially contested concept, or even a floating signifier (Lévi-Strauss 1987).

Nevertheless, one can indeed identify recurring elements present in all incarnations of the concept of totalitarianism. In the early stages of its development, the concept was employed to assimilate Nazi, Fascist, and Communist regimes by highlighting perceived structural or functional similarities, such as centralised authority, the suppression of dissent, human rights violations and the pursuit of ideological homogeneity. The concept operates as a tool of abstraction, collapsing distinctions between regimes and presenting them as variations of an entirely new historical paradigm.

It is between the late 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century – ranging from Mikhail Bakunin's attacks on the Marxists' "red bureaucracy" (Guérin 1968) to Max Weber's theories on the rationalisation of the world (Löwy 2013) – that the philosophical categories were established which, later enriched by subsequent historical experiences, would come together to form the concept of totalitarianism. Thirty years after the initial debates, still theoretical and within the workers' movement, on the despotic tendencies of Leninism – at the time, it was said: "Bonapartist" – the Moscow Trials of 1936 opened the world's eyes to the dark flaws of the USSR. Three years later, in 1939, the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact convinced many left communists of a definitive convergence between Soviet and Nazi regimes. It was a Russian dystopian novel, *We* by Yevgeny Ivanovich Zamyatin, written in 1920-1921, that depicted the most evocative metaphor for the new regime, characterised by total control by the state and absolute surveillance. Here, individuality is erased in

favor of total mechanisation, reminiscent of the spread of Taylorist Scientific Management in both Russia and the United States (Beissinger 1988).

The category of Bonapartism had become too narrow to account for a sprawling and layered system of power, viewed not only as oppressive but even dehumanising. The adjective *totalitarian* was first coined by Giovanni Amendola, an Italian liberal intellectual, in 1923 to describe the fascist regime under Benito Mussolini (Traverso 1998), while "totalitarianism" began to be widely used from the late 1930s onward, both by liberal theorists (such as Aron 1944 and 1965) and communist dissidents (such as Victor Serge 2010), eventually even appearing in the writings of Trotsky. "Totalitarianism" quickly demonstrated a greater effectiveness compared to alternative formulations, such as "tyranny" (Halévy 1938) or the leftist equation between "brown fascism" and "red fascism" (Rühle 1939): the relatively new term seemed to capture the irreducible originality – and modernity – represented by the political revolutions that had occurred from 1917 onward.

The 1930s witnessed the emergence of a generation of intellectuals from the far left whose political analyses of this new phenomenon would go on to inspire, in subsequent decades, left libertarians, liberals, and even neoconservatives. Two notable examples of this intellectual ferment are *Partisan Review* in the United States and *La Critique Sociale* in France. On the pages of the former, the link between fascism and the rise of mass culture is critically explored – for instance, in Clement Greenberg's seminal essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (Greenberg 1939). Meanwhile, in the latter, Boris Souvarine delves into the problematics of Stalinist bureaucracy, offering a profound critique of its structures and implications (Souvarine 1985)[2].

After World War II, the memory of the struggle against Hitler and Mussolini, combined with recognition of Stalin's contribution to the liberation of Western Europe, could have discouraged further speculations on the regimes' convergences. In Italy, France, and Germany, the shared memorial canon required a narrower category: *antifascism*. However, another conflict, the Cold War, was beginning, and the concept of antitotalitarianism would prove particularly instrumental in that context. Between the 1940s and 1950s, the voices of a first generation of Eastern European dissidents, such as the Croatian activist Ante Ciliga, the Hungarian novelist Arthur Koestler, and the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz, were translated in the West. In the USA, Cold War liberals would appropriate the concept of totalitarianism and attempt to provide more precise definitions. The originating source of totalitarianism is thus linked by some to the Jacobin legacy of the French Revolution, and particularly to the phase of the Terror. In *The Poverty of Historicism* (Popper 1944-1945), Karl Popper denounces the despotic ambitions of the philosophy of history, with its dream of a social reality that can be predicted. The idea emerges that Karl Marx's thought was intrinsically totalitarian. Raymond Aron denounced the hypertrophy of a state that suffocates civil society, ultimately erasing it. Surpassing the liberals from the right, former Trotskyist James Burnham describes communism as a major threat to freedom. According to his *The*

[2] Unfortunately, this ukrainian-born intellectual, who had been involved in the founding of the French Communist Party, would later compromise himself with the Vichy regime and subsequently with the CIA.

managerial revolution (Burnham 1941), the transformation of capitalism into a managerial society signals a drift toward worldwide dystopia – a notion George Orwell would vividly illustrate in his fiction *1984*. Here, antitotalitarianism serves not only a geopolitical function in relation to Soviet Russia but also a normative role in highlighting the intrinsic tendencies, such as statism, bureaucracy, administrative despotism, not to mention utopian zeal, that pose a threat to liberal democracy.

The concept of "totalitarianism" resembles an avalanche, gathering fresh snow as it rolls downhill. Over time, it expanded its scope, incorporating additional regimes and movements perceived to share similar attributes. During the same years when Cold War liberals and neoconservatives were employing it as a central tool for ideological opposition between East and West, intellectuals and activists on the far left were assimilating Western capitalism itself into the framework of totalitarianism. For instance, one can consider the pages of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Adorno and Horkheimer (Horkheimer & Adorno 1944), the works of the atypical Trotskyists from the Johnson-Forest Tendency (James, Dunayevskaya & Lee 1950), and, later, the writings of Herbert Marcuse on "soft totalitarianism" (Marcuse 1964). These authors proposed a striking synthesis between Marxism and romantic anticapitalism, drawing heavily on Georg Lukács' theory of reification. Hannah Arendt represents an even more distinct case, undertaking a particularly controversial operation in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt 1951). Her approach does not merely ratify the assimilation of Stalinism and Hitlerism; more significantly, it shifts the responsibility of German culture in the Holocaust toward a broader critique of modernity as a whole.

Left antitotalitarianism fueled the protest movements of the 1960s. In France, the ideas championed by the activists of *Socialisme ou Barbarie* finally entered the mainstream with May '68, and its founders, Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort, became in the 1970s and 1980s leading figures of the french antitotalitarian movement, closely associated with the Socialist Party, the CFDT trade union, and the journal *Esprit*. Radicalising the theses of the Frankfurt School and the Johnson-Forest Tendency, Castoriadis develops a philosophical critique of the capitalist imaginary and its materialist obsession with calculation and productivity (Castoriadis 1975). For him as well, Marx must be held accountable for the crimes of Leninism. According to the philosopher, capitalism hinders the realisation of human autonomy by denying any space for historical creation. Despite the ostentatious radicalism of its advocates, to which can be added the so-called *nouveaux philosophes*, antitotalitarianism would eventually end up in France and beyond as the official ideology of the social-democratic Third Way.

The voices of communist dissidents experienced then a renewed phase of attention in the West, with the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* in Paris in 1973, followed by a wave of antitotalitarian novels, such as the Czech writer Milan Kundera (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 1979) and the Albanian writer Ismail Kadaré (*The Palace of Dreams*, 1981), in which the reference to the Kafkaesque imaginary is central to describing the specificities of totalitarianism as an absurd regime. Alongside these novelists, political thinkers associated with dis-

senting movements in Eastern Europe during the Cold War, such as Solidarity in Poland and Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, made a crucial contribution to the development of antitotalitarian thought. A notable example of this is the essay *The Power of the Powerless* (Havel, 1985), written by Václav Havel and circulated clandestinely from 1978 onwards[3]. These represent the visible part of a rich literary production that accompanied the struggles against communism and the long phase of political transition through liberalism. From Budapest to Prague, passing through Montenegro and Croatia, Eastern Europe has made a significant contribution to antitotalitarian thought. Figures such as Milovan Đilas, Ota Šik, and Branko Bošnjak, whose political, economic, and philosophical reflections critically engaged with authoritarianism and its ideological foundations, stand out as key contributors. For the peoples of Eastern Europe, the construction of a broad category of totalitarianism – encompassing both fascism and real socialism – has implied the acknowledgment of an oppression of equal significance, if not a shared one, with that experienced by the peoples of Western Europe.

The avalanche, as it continues to roll, shows no signs of ceasing its accumulation of snow. In subsequent decades, the concept has continued to evolve, incorporating ever-new forms and political phenomena. This expansion underscores its dynamic adaptability but also raises questions about its conceptual boundaries and coherence. However, a *common* conceptual core can be identified in all its various incarnations. Totalitarianism represents the antithesis of democracy, with the characteristics of the former emerging as the inverse of the latter: oppression versus freedom, uniformity versus plurality, and authoritarianism versus self-governance. On the other hand, the idea also emerged that totalitarianism is somehow a *consequence* of democracy – a manifestation of its excesses, or at least a caricature of it. Democracy, it was argued, carries within itself the seeds of its own defeat (Gauchet 2002). As a reversed mirror of democracy, totalitarianism also became the guiding star meant to orient it.

3. From antifascism to antitotalitarianism: EU enlargement and shifts in Memory Politics

This paragraph explores the intersection between antitotalitarian thought and European integration[4]. Antitotalitarianism emerged as a central principle in the Ventotene Manifesto (first written in 1941), which has long been regarded as one of the foundational texts inspiring European unity after World War II. The Manifesto denounces the crisis of nation-states and proposes a democratic European federation as the only viable antidote to the rise of a "totalitarian civilisation". Given that Altiero Spinelli – one of the authors of the Manifesto and a former communist and member of the PCI – had already developed a strong anti-Stalinist position during the 1930s

[3] To further explore the role of the dissident intellectual in Eastern Europe during the Cold War (and the influence on the concept of totalitarianism), read: Forti, 2023.

[4] For a more extensive treatment, see: Apollonio, A. (2025). Politiche della memoria e narrazioni sulla storia nel Parlamento europeo: un'indagine sociologica. PhD dissertation, Università di Torino.

(Graglia 2010), it is reasonable to interpret the manifesto's antitotalitarianism as encompassing both anti-fascist and anti-stalinist dimensions. With Eastern enlargement (2004-2007), antitotalitarianism progressively gained centrality in EU memory politics, determining a new advancement in its long development and aiming to bridge the diverse Western and Eastern European historical experiences. The *European Day of Remembrance for Victims of all Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, observed annually on August 23rd, was proclaimed such by the European Parliament in 2009 (EP 2009) to commemorate the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939, considered a symbol of the convergence of the two regimes. However, its implementation varies across member states, and, in some contexts, it has fueled debates over historical memory and local ideological divides.

The adoption of antitotalitarianism by European institutions over the past twenty years must be contextualised in the evolutions that affected public discourses and national memories on World War II from the postwar period onwards (e.g., Baldissara 2016; Assmann 2007; Judt 1992; Focardi & Groppo 2013). From 1945 to 1948, the interpretation of total Nazi-fascist responsibility for the outbreak of the war generally prevailed, greatly amplifying the actual scale of the resistance phenomenon and obscuring collaboration, all for the sake of a quick reconciliation of social groups and reconstruction[5]. This phase of "benign oblivion" aimed at accelerating material and social reconciliation in the West gradually came to an end in the following decades, also thanks to the critical contributions of historians and intellectuals. One only needs to consider the intellectual debate over the historical and political meaning of the Holocaust in Germany (Historikerstreit, 1986/1987), its uniqueness, and its relationship with Soviet communist totalitarianism; the crucial reflections of Henry Rousso in France on the "Vichy syndrome" (Rousso 1987); and, in the Italian context, Claudio Pavone's reinterpretation of the resistance phenomenon as a “civil war” (Pavone 1991). It is in the 1980s and 1990s that, following an initial political-identitarian phase in which a national framework of memory prevailed, an institutional-pedagogical phase emerged, with the diffusion of a "civic duty of memory" focused on the remembrance of the Holocaust (Assmann 2007; Baldissara 2016). With the end of the Cold War, we observe "an eruptive return of memory and a reawakening of history" (Sierp 2023), that is, the return of repressed negative memories to the political and public sphere, which were set aside at the national and European levels in the face of the ideological and political dispute between capitalism and liberal democracies on one side, and communism on the other (Judt 1992; Wæhrens 2011).

It is arguably the European Union, in the early 1990s, the first transnational agent to work toward the Europeanisation of Holocaust memory (Kucia 2016; Aleksiun, Wóycicka & Utz 2024). The Europeanisation of Holocaust memory, in this perspective, consists of "the process of building, institutionalising, and disseminating beliefs related to the Holocaust, as well as formal and informal norms and rules regarding the education and remembrance of the Holocaust that were first defined

[5] This explains the numerous amnesties for former fascists and the partiality of transitional justice processes (Judt 1992: 90-92).

and consolidated at the European level and then incorporated into the practices of European countries" (Kucia 2016: 98). The European Parliament, during this phase, played a prominent role in defining the first soft norms and rules, adopting declarations and resolutions related to the establishment of an International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the symbolic and material reparations to the descendants of victims, and the preservation of former Nazi extermination camps as negative heritage[6] (Kucia 2016), and formulating "memory frameworks" that were more attuned to national sensitivities (Sierp 2020b, 2021). This shift coincides with the EU's incursion into memory politics, i.e., a field of political interactions and struggles between various actors, within or close to the European institutions, concerning narratives, practices, and policies that mobilise and manipulate the 'Europe's past' to support claims and projects in the present. The approach of EU institutions to the past as a political resource to bolster their legitimacy (Calligaro & Foret 2012; Sierp 2014; Verovšek 2020; Apollonio 2025) changed radically: it was no longer about crafting a purely positive memory of integration, its leaders, and its openness to the future, nor about mobilising abstract symbolic references to the fratricidal conflicts of the past. Instead, it was about confronting the memory of 20th-century genocidal tragedies and World War II, and recognising the national co-responsibilities of Nazifascism and its victims, engaging in symbolic compensation and the so-called "politics of regret" (Olick, 2007).

This "negative" memory was progressively adopted as a "defining myth" (Littoz-Monnet 2013) underpinning European integration, and strenghtening the EU's moral authority on the world stage. The centrality of the theme was such that, according to some authors, a nation's ability to confront the memory of the Holocaust became a soft criterion for joining the European project (Sierp 2020, Judt 2005, Droit 2007). These developments posed significant challenges for the countries of the East, which were emerging from decades of communist rule and preparing for integration with the West. It involved confronting the "frozen memories" in state archives and the need to develop a public discourse on the Holocaust – a phenomenon that had directly involved the countries of Eastern Europe – while simultaneously adhering to the process of Europeanisation of this memory. The Europeanisation of the Holocaust in the former Eastern Bloc followed different dynamics and timelines, also due to the confrontation and clash with the "memory of the gulags" and Soviet crimes (Kucia 2016; Himka & Michlic 2013).

[6] To name a few: Resolution on European and international protection for Nazi concentration camps as historical monuments (11/02/1993); Resolution on racism and xenophobia (27/10/1994); Resolution on a day to commemorate the Holocaust (15/06/1995); Resolution on the return of plundered property to Jewish communities (14/12/1995); Resolution on Auschwitz (18/04/1996); Resolution on racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism and on further steps to combat racial discrimination (18/12/1998); Resolution on the restitution of the possessions of Holocaust victims (16/07/1998); Resolution on countering racism and xenophobia in the European Union (16/03/2000); Written declaration on the Remembrance of the Holocaust (07/07/2000); Recommendation on the European Union's position at the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and related Intolerance (16/05/2001); Resolution on a legal framework for free movement within the internal market of goods whose ownership is likely to be contested (17/12/2003); Resolution on the Remembrance of the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, and racism (27/01/2005).

With the accession of post-communist states from the former Eastern Bloc between 2004 and 2007, new historical experiences and political memories were progressively introduced into the discourses and policies of the European institutions (Perchoc 2015, Neumayer 2015). The European Parliament was the venue where these dynamics were most concentrated, providing fertile ground for antitotalitarian memory entrepreneurs (Neumayer 2015; Toth 2019; Boschetti 2020). Among the newly elected representatives, a distinctly anti-communist group composed mainly of Central and Eastern European MEPs from conservative right-wing groups promoted the antitotalitarian frame and the idea of equivalence among twentieth-century totalitarian regimes (Toth 2019, Dujisin 2021). This group challenged Western narratives about the representations of World War II and the uniqueness of the Holocaust as a "negative defining myth" (Littoz-Monnet 2013), sparking tensions and conflicts over the adoption of a broader canon (Toth 2019: 1036). The clash between Eastern and Western memorial representations intertwined with the political struggle between right and left, as well as internal divisions within national delegations. In this context, two resolutions approved in 2005 (EP 2005a; EP 2005b) marked a symbolic turning point in European memory debates (Kaiser 2012; Toth 2019). These were the first institutional documents to explicitly address "memory" as "European" and to challenge the incomparability of Nazifascism and the uniqueness of the Holocaust (Toth 2019: 1036). The process evolved in the following years and reached its maturity in 2009 with the adoption of the resolution "On European Conscience and Totalitarianism" (EP 2009), which arguably marked the definitive institutional shift from the paradigm of the uniqueness of the Holocaust to a more broadly antitotalitarian one. In 2019 (IX legislative term), this antitotalitarian narrative proved its dominance once again, finding a new significant affirmation in the resolution on "The Importance of European Memory for the Future of Europe" (EP 2019). The novelty of this document lies in the new geopolitical function assigned to memory as a strategic resource in EU foreign relations, as it is employed to delegitimise the Kremlin's manipulative use of history and its imperialist ambitions (Apollonio 2025); a political concern that proved to be right with the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian full-scale war in 2022 and the weaponisation of history in that context.

In summary, the gradual and contentious adoption of antitotalitarianism as a unifying memory framework and soft conditionality for the enlarging European community responded to the necessity to bridge the historically divergent post-WWII experiences between Western Europe and Central-Eastern Europe, while constructing a broader symbolic framework. The memory of the victims and crimes of all totalitarian regimes as the "absolute evil" became the new foundational memory, in contrast to which the European Union was defined as a stronghold of democratic values, liberal principles, and human rights. Despite provoking significant opposition from the political and intellectual left in the West – which generally interprets communism as an emancipatory ideology and the Soviet Union, along with its Red Army, as the heroes accountable for the liberation of Auschwitz and, more generally, Western Europe – this discourse sought to bridge significantly divergent historical experiences, advan-

cing the effort to promote a shared culture of remembrance, inextricably linked to the foundational values enshrined in the European Treaties.

4. The weaponisation of a floating signifier: antitotalitarianism in the Italian context

In sum, in the EU institutions, antitotalitarianism aimed to be a "unifying resource" to link the memory of Soviet oppression with the condemnation of Nazifascism, framing them as a shared collective trauma and bridging diverse and objectively divergent historical experiences.

However, research shows that the antitotalitarian memory framework developed by the EU via the "uploading" of new memory narratives (Milošević 2017), has determined unintended consequences in its "downloading" in some regions for future enlargement, such as the Western Balkans, where the EU's framework has been used to renegotiate ideological conflicts emphasising suffering under communist rule while promoting nationalist narratives and ethnic understandings of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s (Dragović-Soso 2012; Milošević & Touquet 2018). In this sense, EU moral opposition to totalitarianism in favour of reconciliation and democratisation has paradoxically offered an opportunity to push nationalist sentiments and sometimes even historical revisionism.

In our view, a comparable dynamic is also traceable in a founding European member state such as Italy, where antitotalitarianism has been promoted as a "divisive resource" and a substitute for antifascism, serving sometimes as a dog whistle for the far right. Antitotalitarianism has become a political tool to scale back and challenge the symbolic and memorial frameworks that underpinned the post-war Republican social pact, and the very foundations of Italian civil religion. For thirty years now, the national debate around historical memory crystallises around the celebrations of April 25th, the holiday commemorating Italy's Liberation Day (*Festa della Liberazione*), which marks the end of Nazi occupation and Fascist rule in 1945. It is a day of national significance, celebrating the values of resistance, antifascism, and the renewed democracy. According to the far right, April 25th is indeed a "divisive" holiday, in the sense that it underscores the exclusion of a segment of the population that views the Resistance as a condemnable historical experience. This exclusion serves a fundamental meta-political function. Along with the establishment of the Italian Republic, a boundary was drawn, delineating an inside and an outside of the democratic spectrum and promoting a set of shared beliefs and practices.

The 1994 celebration marked a radical shift in Italian politics in general and in the political significance of the anniversary, coinciding with Silvio Berlusconi's entry into politics (Focardi 2019, Baldissara 2024). After the collapse of the First Republic, rooted in the values of the Italian Resistance, the emerging center-right coalition, aiming to legitimise the inclusion of members of the post-fascist far-right (Alleanza Nazionale - AN) in the government (Cabrero, Sierp 2024), sought to gradually replace the previous foundation of political legitimacy – centered on antifascism – with a

new framework based on the opposition between totalitarianism and antitotalitarianism. As Gianfranco Fini, then-leader of Italy's post-fascists, said: "Everything would be easier if, in Italy as in the rest of Europe, antifascism was synonymous with antitotalitarianism"[7] (Franchi 1994; Baldissara 2024: 140). This leitmotif, while facing political and public opposition, continuously recurred in the moderate and far-right representatives' positions. In his speech on April 25, 2009, Silvio Berlusconi described the Italian Constitution as "the best compromise possible at the time" but noted, "However, the goal of creating a 'common' moral conscience for the nation was missed, a goal perhaps premature for those times. As a result, the prevailing value was antifascism, but not antitotalitarianism"[8]. The crusade against anti-fascism had the effect of indirectly banalising fascism and legitimising nostalgic politics (Cabrero & Sierp 2024). This tendency took an even stronger prominence after the 2022 coming to power of Giorgia Meloni and the radical right party Fratelli d'Italia, founded in 2012 from the ashes of Alleanza Nazionale.

PM Meloni has followed a similar approach to that of Berlusconi and Fini, but with one crucial difference: the progress made by the EU in memory debates, which, as demonstrated, aimed to bridge the divergent historical experiences of Western and Eastern Europe, is now explicitly de-contextualised and re-contextualised within Italy's own memory disputes. References to the European Parliament's Resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism (EP 2009) and the resolution on The importance of European memory for the future of Europe (EP 2019) are used to strengthen their position in the domestic debate. In this context, antifascism is presented as an incomplete civil religion, requiring further development, expansion, and interpretation. This dynamic is exemplified by the institutional celebration of 25 April 2023. This is how PM Giorgia Meloni addressed the nation in a letter published in the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* (Meloni 2023) on that occasion:

> A wish that I not only share but also wish to renew today, precisely because 78 years later, love for democracy and freedom is still the only true antidote against all totalitarianism. In Italy, as in Europe. An awareness that led the European Parliament to unequivocally and definitively condemn all the regimes of the 20th century, without exception, with a resolution of September 2019 in which I totally recognise myself, and which the Fratelli d'Italia group, together with the entire family of European Conservatives and the entire centre-right, voted for without any hesitation (unlike, unfortunately, others)[9].

A few days earlier, in the same context, the parliamentary right-wing coalition had submitted a motion to the Senate (Senato 2023), requesting a guarantee that public commemorations be conducted with "historical accuracy, without being used as an occasion for attacks on opponents", and emphasising the need for greater "inclusion" (*sic*). The motion also referenced the European Parliament's 2019 resolution

[7] Translated by the authors.
[8] Speech of the Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi at Onna, 25 April 2009. Translated by the authors.
[9] Translated by the authors.

and the "unanimous stance" it expressed "against all totalitarian regimes, regardless of ideology", specifically targeting Nazism, Fascism, and Communism[10].

These examples aim to suggest that the European antitotalitarianism has arguably been adopted by the Italian right, and especially the Italian post-fascist right, in the last three decades to gradually downplay the legacy of the Resistance and challenge its centrality as a constitutive element of the country's civil religion. By adopting the label "antitotalitarian" and referencing EU resolutions, the contemporary Italian far-right avoids adopting antifascism by promoting a supposedly more inclusive (but actually divisive) European memorial narrative that neutralises issues related to their post-fascist legacy. This way, reference to the EU official stances serves as a strong legitimisation source (argumentum ab auctoritate) to push forward nationalist sentiments and downplay the antifascist roots of the Italian Republic and, more generally, of EU integration.

Ultimately, the domestic instrumentalisation of European memory frames and the unintended consequences of EU symbolic narratives should be contextualised in a broader tendency. Explicit or implicit references to totalitarianism saturate Western public debate, whether from radical, liberal, conservative, or populist standpoints. Every perceived form of restriction on individual freedoms, even when enacted through democratic and lawful processes, can be potentially denounced as totalitarian: whether it concerns health restrictions during a pandemic, green transition's necessary regulations, measures to combat violence against women, or the protection of minorities. The alleged spread of the so-called "wokeism" has often been denounced as a totalitarian tendency in the public sphere, particularly by critics who interpret it as a form of ideological imposition, marginalising dissent. This narrative typically frames "woke culture" as a threat to free speech and traditional Western values, alleging that it enforces conformity through social pressure – in other words, totalitarianism from below. Finally, after September 11, 2001, countless analyses have been published equating Islamic theocracies (if not Islam itself) with a form of religious totalitarianism[11]. August Bebel called antisemitism the "socialism of fools", and one might wonder whether we are now dealing with an "antitotalitarianism of fools" (Ventura 2024)[12].

[10] The document was submitted on April 19, 2023, and, together with a motion from the centre-left, was discussed and adopted during Senate Sitting No. 59 on April 20, 2023, XIX legislative term.

[11] Former CIA Director James Woolsey described the current global conflict as a "Long War," comparing it to World War II and identifying "three totalitarian movements" as the primary adversaries. According to Woolsey, these include the "secular fascists" of the Ba'athist regimes in Iraq and Syria, the "Shiite Islamist jihadists" led by figures in Iran and supported by Hezbollah, and the "Sunni Islamist jihadists," such as al-Qaeda and other extremist groups influenced by Wahhabism. Woolsey emphasised that, despite their ideological and historical hostilities, these movements are capable of forming alliances of convenience, much like totalitarian regimes did in the past.

[12] For still others – aware of the lessons of the great political philosophers of the twentieth century – it means attempting to envision a democratic system of governance capable of replacing the pseudo-rational despotism of bureaucratic capitalism (Vioulac 2020).

5. Conclusion

The examination of antitotalitarianism's itinerary in European politics led us to streamline two main conclusive observations.

The first observation is intended as a diagnosis of the legacy of antitotalitarianism. Our reconstruction of the intellectual conceptualisations and sociopolitical uses of totalitarianism – with its remarkable capacity to subsume diverse political phenomena under criteria that are sometimes excessively abstract (see the first section of the paper) – illustrates how a floating signifier can sustain a fluid ideology, risking a loss of conceptual grip and opening the door to exhausting interpretative wars and rhetorical misuses[13]. The issue is that totalitarianism is not a solid critical-analytical concept, but rather a partially indeterminate notion invested with normative value. Empirically, it serves as an emotionally powerful but semantically malleable and plastic symbol, applied to frame alleged forms of individual freedom restrictions that are vastly different from one another, to serve political goals and ideologies in an unpredictable and ambivalent manner.

The subsequent observation concerns the recognition of the limits and unintended consequences of top-down community-building attempts, highlighting the risks and potential misuses inherent in the domestic reception and "strategic usage" (Jacquot & Woll 2003) of EU soft outputs. These include symbolic narratives (Foret 2025) and memory frames, which may be instrumentalised as *argumentum ab auctoritate* in local disputes. What was meant to serve ambitious, supranational memory narratives aimed at reconciliation, democracy, and integration may end up fostering new divisions on a national scale. Recent debates, as described in the second and third sections of the paper, have provided proof of this.

As its widespread instrumentalisation in recent political debates shows, by erasing the historical specificities of the political experiences it seeks to encompass, the vague reference to totalitarianism is sometimes stripped of the concreteness and groundedness essential to the preservation of memory. Just as developing all-encompassing concepts does not replace the need for more nuanced ones, building a shared memory does not require erasing local memories. Antitotalitarianism should neither be used to downplay the objective responsibilities of those who participated in oppression nor to discredit those who contributed to emancipation, regardless of which side they were on.

Undoubtedly, European people and states generally agree on rejecting totalitarianism as the manichean counterpart of liberal democracy and its non-negotiable values. However, the historical and political meaning and implications of embracing an-

[13] The new American edition of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* opens with a preface (misleadingly labeled as an "introduction") by liberal philosopher Anne Applebaum. To bridge the gap between their two different political traditions, Applebaum focuses on those general aspects of Arendt's thought that support the liberal antitotalitarianism of the early twenty-first century. What are the key highlights of Arendtian thought, according to her prefacer? First and foremost, her disdain for the masses, perceived as foolish and easily manipulated: an "uninterested, apathetic majority" that consumes (russian) "disinformation and propaganda on a mass scale". All of this wisdom packed into 576 densely written pages: the Germans sure do know how to keep it brief!

titotalitarianism are still a contentious issue according to diverse contexts and actors. Properly reframed, the notion could still serve as a moral compass and a form of civil religion for the European community in the making, fostering a renewed commitment to its values.

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