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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO/TITLE: Rethinking authoritarianism: Transnational geographies between the region and the world

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/s: PAOLA RIVETTI (DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY)

Discussants: VINCENT DURAC (UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF DUBLIN) & ROBERTO ROCCU (KING'S COLLEGE LONDON)

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

This panel discusses authoritarian politics as an epistemology for the present. As we witness the spreading and emboldening of authoritarian ideologues and political movements across the world, this panel calls on scholars to re-examine how we conceptualize and know authoritarianism as a theoretical concept as well as political praxis. In this inquiry, the Middle East and North Africa have a special place as a region where political strategies for exercising power in an authoritarian manner are refined and tested. This is done with the aid of the continuous security and human precarity in the region, due to widespread armed conflicts and neo-colonial interventions, as well as with the complicity of the so-called advanced democracies of the world, which support authoritarian and war-mongering rulers financially and politically in the name of market stability and halting immigration.

The panel seeks submissions that move away from understanding authoritarianism as a domestic issue, and instead interrogate it as a manifestation of transnational politics and a concept that we can use to learn how transnational politics works. This panel invites papers that examine the issues discussed above, including:

- the circulation of authoritarian, conservative and illiberal ideas and theories, from so-called anti-“gender ideology” and carceral ideas, to conspiracy, racist and “strong men” theories;
- the sharing and transfer of security technologies, from surveillance to detention, and the authoritarian political visions they come with;
- the commercialization of war technologies, the formation of transnational neoliberal military-industrial complexes, and the authoritarian political imaginary they engender and foster;
- the authoritarian strategies for the depletion of the right to dissent and to the manifestation of counter-hegemonic political opinions, through explicit means (legislation and criminalization of activism and movements) as well as means that implicitly discourage mobilisations and/or critical thinking (for example, through the privatization of public and urban spaces, the reform of employment law and workers’ rights, the privatization of the education and reforms of the education system, reforms of the communication system and the use of social media);

This is an incomplete list of topics that the papers may cover. Papers should have a geographical focus on the region, but should connect policies and strategies implemented by the governments in the region to transnational geographies of authoritarian politics, analysing how ideas, strategies and policies travel across borders. For example, papers could offer micro-, meso- and macro-level examinations of how intergovernmental organisations may be used as fora to exchange authoritarian ideas and practices; how nation states copy and transfer such ideas and practices, and how they localise them; how class politics facilitates such exchanges through elite mingling, from intra-elite marriages to friendship and other mundane activities; how colonial legacies have created visible and less visible transnational chains of transmission of classed, raced and gendered privileges and capital accumulation; how culture and cultural artifacts (whether works of fiction, fine arts artifacts, music and other popular culture produces) have aided the circulation of specific authoritarian ideas and practices – just to name some of the possible approaches. The panel also invites theoretical papers focusing on the conceptualization of authoritarianism and authoritarian politics, and papers that historicise authoritarian ideas and practices.

The panel aims to bring together papers that showcase new approaches and under-researched subjects, and that voice new interpretations, positionalities and methodologies. The papers will be considered for publication in an edited collection.

PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Paola Rivetti is Associate Professor in Politics and IR in the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University. She has been working on Iranian politics and social movements for almost two decades. She has widely published on these topics. More recently, she has examined the connections between Italy's far right and the Iranian state. On this topic, she published "The Reception of Iran's State Propaganda by the Italian Far Right: Recasting the Diffusion of Authoritarian Discourse and Narratives" (2023), "Anti-'Gender Ideology' and the Transnational Diffusion of Authoritarianism: Examining A Common Discursive Space Between Iran and Italy (2022, with R. Ghaffari) and participated in "A conversation with Monica Cornejo, Andrea Petó and Paola Rivetti on the book Religion, Gender, and Populism in the Mediterranean" (2024).

Paola Rivetti is author of *Political participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement* (2020), numerous journal articles and edited volumes. She is Associate editor of the journals *Iranian Studies* and *Partecipazione e conflitto*. She is a member of the Council of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies, the Mentorship Committee of the Iranian Studies Association, and the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Italian Society for Middle Eastern Studies SeSaMO.

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Tracing the Global in the Local: Neo-Conservative NGOs, Familialism, and the Making of Religious Authoritarianism in Turkey

Sevgi Adak, Agha Khan University

One of the core components of the Justice and Development Party's (JDP) religious authoritarianism in Turkey is familialism. There has been in the last decade a dramatic rise in the number of "civil" channels through which JDP's state-level familialism is propagated. By civil channels, I refer to family-oriented, neo-conservative NGOs. These NGOs are linked to international familialist organisations, and draw on a global anti-gender equality, anti-LGBTQ+ discourse.

In this paper, I focus on these family-oriented NGOs in Turkey and examine the ways in which they support and disseminate a new type of conservatism by tapping into, as well as contributing to, a transnational mobilisation for a neo-conservative gender order. Drawing on an analysis of a national platform of family-oriented NGOs, the Turkey Family Platform, and one local association active in the province of Bursa, the paper argues that the network of family-oriented NGOs, at the national as well as local level, plays a crucial role in the shaping of familialism in Turkey. They function as "civil" channels of religious authoritarianism especially in the provinces. The paper situates the discourse and campaigns of these NGOs within a transnational context by a) identifying their connections with similar international organisations, b) tracing their alliance building efforts through international conferences and NGO platforms, and c) analyzing the international references, especially "academic" literature and research, they frequently utilise in creating a new "scientific" discourse around gender and relations within the family.

Russian and the media in the Middle East and North Africa : justifying authoritarianism and international revisionism

Thomas Richard, University of Lille

This paper aims to question how Russian revisionism is conveyed in the media sphere by analyzing and comparing two sources and two fields. It has been now well documented that Russian revisionism is, among other things, conveyed through a form of "hybrid war" against the West, with Russian pro-Kremlin media considering themselves waging an information war against the West, with the aim of contesting what they perceive as an hegemonic Western narrative, and supporting what they consider to be Russia's legitimate claims (Kofman and Rojanski 2015, Salminen 1999), something that could already been perceived during the 2008 war against Georgia and its news coverage (Heinrich and Tanaev 2009), and which has since attained new heights with the war against Ukraine (Fedor 2015, Pavlik 2022).

Beyond these documented cases, based on previous research, we aim to question how Russian revisionism is developed in the Middle East and Africa by actors which are close to the Kremlin, but remain independent, and actors whose part could already been perceived in 2008, but has gained some more importance since then. On the one hand, this paper aims to question how ANNA News, a news agency, has developed a narrative of information war against Western media through its coverage of the war in Syria. ANNA News reporters, which have been embedded with Syrian troops for years, have carefully crafted a narrative that aims at justifying the Russia intervention, re-legitimize the Syrian regime, and systematically violently contest the Western understanding of the situation in Syria, using what can be described as media guerilla. While they know that their coverage does not attract the same audience as Western media, they try to cast doubt on the Western narrative, using very powerful images, and what they describe as proof, with the aim of “reinforcing” (in their understanding) the audience.

On the other hand, this paper focuses on the use of films in Africa (Tourist, Granit, Shugayev...) portray Russia as a benevolent ally, true to its old anti-imperialist alliances, reliable, and selfless in the continent. These films, which often portray Russian mercenaries in a very positive light, blur the lines between fiction and reality, and, make use of a number of symbols and mementos to contest, here again, what is perceived as a Western hegemony on the continent, racist and interest-driven. Despite not being of a very high quality, these films were rather well received in Africa, particularly in activist milieus. Our aim here is to go beyond the mere issue of propaganda and to question how these narratives can connect, and can be linked together as part of a strategy that is not only that of the Russian regime, but also that of activists which are linked to it, but also independent. Beyond this, we aim at questioning what part is played by this media strategy in the development of Russian revisionism in the Middle East and Africa, by sustaining but also constraining the political strategy.

Authoritarian Practices of Data Control and Manipulation: The Case of Transnational Border Mobilities in MENA Bilge Yabanci & Cemile Gizem Dinçer, University of Venice Ca' Foscari & METU

This study delves into the intricate relationship between data control/manipulation and the governance of transnational border movements by authoritarian regimes. There is an expanding literature on how authoritarian states increasingly leverage data as a tool for surveillance, repression, and manipulation of their own citizens as an integral aspect of authoritarian governance in the domestic sphere. In this paper, we attend to authoritarian data control and manipulation as a practice with transnational effects and consequences for non-citizen subjects.

Bringing together theories from digital authoritarianism literature and migration studies, we argue that authoritarian states engage with various practices to control and manipulate data about various types of transnational movements of people across borders. We categorize these practices into two interlinked regimes. The first one is ‘secrecy and disinformation’¹ and mainly concerns citizens. By harnessing and selectively disseminating centralized data related to border movements in and out of the country (e.g., releasing data selectively about the new asylum seekers and migrants and detained or deported irregular migrants), authoritarian governments mitigate perceptions and quell or coopt societal backlash concerning failed migration governance. While doing so, they also securitize some transnational mobilities and depict an image of total control over national or state security. The second one is ‘arbitrary surveillance’ and datafication, which concerns people engaged in transnational mobility (i.e., asylum seekers, refugees, undocumented migrants, and circular migrants). New ICT technologies allow arbitrary surveillance and datafication and entangle these people in a spiral of profiling, sorting, and channelling. This authoritarian practice produces ‘ever-controllable’ and disposable non-citizen subjects.

We focus on Turkey as a heuristic case of the recent global rise of authoritarian governance and the largest hub for transnational border mobilities in the MENA. According to the UNHCR, Turkey currently hosts about 3.2 million Syrians and approximately 260,000 refugees under international protection, mainly from Iran, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The case of Turkey allows us to illustrate our argument concerning the authoritarian data control and manipulation practices laid out above, namely how the strategic utilization, dissemination, and governance of data empower authoritarian states within and beyond their borders, particularly concerning transnational border mobilities in the broader MENA region. The study is based on a triangulation of interviews with key informants, focus group discussions with citizens in eight cities across Turkey, official statistics, and the government’s discourse and policies reported in the news media.

Professionalism, reformism and their ordering/ordinary exceptions: transnational entanglements of authoritarian coercion in (post)revolutionary Tunisia

Daniela Musina, PhD student at the Scuola Normale Superiore and Visiting Fellow at the Institut de Recherche sur le Maghreb Contemporain (IRMC), Tunis

The paper builds on my PhD thesis’ research work and contends that transnational policing under paradigms of security sector governance and reform interfere with and fuel processes of both legal standardization and ordinary,

everyday exception and ultimately reinforce authoritarian coercive (re)centralization and the masculine 'security custodianship' (Sayigh 2012; Challand 2023). Theoretically and methodologically, the article draws from an international political sociology perspective that looks at policing practices and effects diachronically and relationally, accounting for (post)colonial continuities and afterlives, while grasping and unpacking contingent ruptures and reconfigurations in the present. There is a strong need to escape methodological nationalism, essentialism, and presentism in analyses of coercion and policing in the MENA region (Said 2021), to move beyond binaries of 'internalism' and 'externalism' and to consider how transnational developments shape dynamics of internal coerciveness sustaining repressive police practices, exception and autocratic drifts or restaurations. Just as these processes cannot be explained exclusively looking at endogenous structural processes as they were independent from local mediation and instantiations (see Ben Rohmdane 2011). Empirically – and this is intended to be the main contribution of the article – the article focuses therefore on how practices aimed at 'professionalisation' of security and police actors under neoliberalism (normed through reformist paradigms of so-called 'capacity-building', training etc.) are adopted, adapted and bargained by the coercive/political central power as an extraverted strategy at self-preservation and, especially since 2021, power reconfiguration. This produces some visible effects in the Tunisian context, namely that crime and 'anti-terrorist' provisions and related practices that historically developed mainly as 'shadow ones' under Tunisian regimes (especially under Ben Ali) progressively find legal and procedural channels of standardization and formalization (thus legitimation) according to transnational standards (here examples). Ultimately, they contribute enhancing centralised regime coerciveness.

These processes, however, must not be perceived as irreversible, but in relation to the various manifestations of the 'thawra al karama' that began in 2011, which caused a crisis of legitimacy of the security apparatus and its enchainment with subsequent presidential regimes. It is no coincidence that paradigms of professionalization and reform are being co-opted and re-adapted by the Tunisian coercive regime in line with transnational norms of 'community policing' and 'human security' as a façade shield vis à vis civil society and contentious movements contesting institutional violence and its dehumanizing forms.

Pre-emptive security as imagined futures: preventing violent extremism and the circulation of authoritarian practices

Fabrizio Leonardo Cuccu – Merian Centre for Advanced Studies in the Maghreb (MECAM) - 2024/2025, Université de Tunis

This paper undertakes a critical discourse analysis of the Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) National Strategies of Tunisia and Lebanon, published in 2016 and 2018 respectively. Through a comparative lens, these strategies are examined alongside the UN Action Plan for Preventing Violent Extremism (2015) and the EU Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (2016), illuminating shared ideologies surrounding security and surveillance. In so doing, this research reveals how pre-emptive approaches to security not only address present concerns but also operate on imagined futures (Ahmad & Monaghan 2020; Pomarède 2021; Baker-Beall and Mott 2022), employing anticipatory interventions in the present (Stockdale 2013) that amplify the discretionary subjectivity granted to state authorities.

Drawing on decolonial approaches to the study of security, this paper connects the policies and strategies implemented by national governments to the transnational circulation of security measures (Jabri 2013; Honke and Muller 2016; Cuccu 2023). In so doing, this research explores how ideas, strategies, and policies traverse borders, influenced by international institutions, intergovernmental organisations and colonial legacies. In turn, the circulation of pre-emptive security approaches facilitates the dissemination and localisation of authoritarian practices, leading to a convergence of security governance between the Middle Eastern region and the global North.

In aligning with the theoretical approach of the panel, this paper contributes to the conceptualisation of authoritarianism and authoritarian politics, examining pre-emptive security approaches within the framework of the circulation of authoritarian ideas and practices. By analysing the PVE strategies of Tunisia and Lebanon within a broader transnational framework, this research sheds light on the role that the interplay between security imperatives, colonial legacies, and imagined futures play in shaping contemporary governance paradigms.