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## **The Dominance of Collective Mystical Thinking Within the Rise of Far-Right Politics**

The paper examines the prevalence of magical or irrational communicative practices in the development of contemporary authoritarian regimes. It explores the technologies that develop such influences, as well as reflects on the pathways of resisting them.

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## Introduction

The reliance on specific ideologies or belief systems has long been a central part to how individuals make sense of the world and their personal realities. This process is shaped by our relationship to secrecy, concealment, and the unknown, in ways that draw us into continuous performance in which we seek pathways for survival. To embrace an ideology is, in part, to open oneself to the power of hidden knowledge hence to making a 'leap into the absurd' - we tie identity to the ideas that lack clear explanations but offer the promise of a better future (Gellner 1978: 72). Such trust in unverified knowledge and unverifiable, and blind hope rather than rational principles, can reappear as an adherence to neo-traditional mysticism, or magic. Contemporary political governance frequently relies on such unreal principles, uniting people under one dominant agenda, persuading them and making them feel that it is the only correct path. As Don Slater suggests, it is the notion of technique that lends magical power to ideological appearances, transforming representations and real objects into new realities, the threshold of a 'better world' (1995). By aligning with a particular ideology and by joining in the magical performance involved, individuals become subject to the influence of authority, and, in turn, contribute to the construction of the mystical themselves. This dynamic is especially evident in the rise of far-right politics, where emotion is often valued over reason, and fiction over fact. In Russia, for example, religious narratives and comparisons of Ukrainians to Nazis are used to justify the war. In the United States, the official government communications are sometimes delivered through memes and the president is portrayed as a god-like figure. In times of upheaval and military conflicts, when millions of lives are at stake, people seek truth in illusions, admiring the spectacle imposed upon them. But is this truly the right way to search for meaning?

In this essay, I will examine the role of magical thinking, mystical imagery, and irrationality in shaping contemporary authoritarian regimes, which are characterized by strong notions of collectivity and ideological unity. Weber (1948: 140) reflected on the disenchantment of modernity and the meaningless nature of all bureaucratic and technological processes in which we are enclosed (as cited in Pels 2003). It becomes interesting to compare the rise of authoritarianism with the desire to have a certain structure and stability. The process of searching for such a comforting system also navigates to ask what it is responding to, and what aspects people are satisfied with in the new ideological certainty. Such magical structures within politics could work both on an individual level, allowing the self to be performed in various new creative, transformative roles as described in the theory of participation of Lucien Levy-Bruhl (Magliocco 2020), or on a larger collective level, developing the orders for social control and hierarchies within them (Saville-Troike 2003). Lastly, I will discuss the techniques and technologies employed to disseminate authoritarian influences, examining how such absurd practices are propagated across social media platforms like Facebook, Truth Social, and Telegram, and how the public responds to and reproduces or resists these magical ideas. The analysis is primarily based on the

*ethnography of the speaking* model by Dell Hymes (1972), which enables the exploration of how language structures are applied to interaction, focusing on patterns and functions, situations, uses, and the involved actors of communicative events. It helps to understand a culture as the whole of specific patterns of linguistic usages and actions, guiding to realize how the meaning of the world is produced based on the applications of such structures (Saville-Troike 2003: 11). To uncover the specificity of magical thinking within authoritarian politics, the model was used to analyse the contemporary communication patterns in social media within Russia and the United States. Moreover, the theories of ritual by Stanley Tambiah, photography by Don Slater, and myth by Roland Barthes are employed to understand the role of external factors beyond language that influence the formation of magical thinking.

## **Myth and Ritual**

Magic has become embedded in contemporary political order as ‘the practice intended to influence the outcome of external events, whether within secular or religious contexts’ (Magliocco 2020: 5). In the current modern age, we are involved in the constant confrontation between technologization, individuation and depersonalization and the desire to reconstruct a mythic, ideal past (Pels 2003: 18). It becomes hard to define a specific term for magic, considering that its definition is the product of history of Christian discipline and occidental science, associated with colonisation and motives to separate rational from irrational (Asad 1993 as cited in Pels 2003). Rather than thinking of magic in relation to chance and connecting it with the ideas of the primitive, hidden, and accidental, it is useful to see it as a complex of words and actions that help us navigate through the present (Tambiah 1968). When considering magical practices within political frameworks, it is essential to examine the impact they have on participants and the affective condition they produce, rather than focusing solely on the meaning they produce. The techniques that structure the belief and the achievement of a greater nonexistent cosmology set by specific ideological systems are more important than the true, valid meaning located behind them.

One of the aspects of the belief creation and the participation in the magical thinking is the practice of ritual, which is ‘constructed system of symbolic communication, constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts’, and characterized by formality (conventionality), condensation (fusion), stereotypy (rigidity) and redundancy (repetition) (Tambiah 1985: 119). Ritual is the performative and expressive act that symbolises the emotions without signifying them (Tambiah 1985). It is essential to examine how the frameworks of the ritual are applied to certain far-right political acts, which involve the masses in the affective condition of ideology and social order, as well as the unity they are part of.

The myth production is another component of magical thinking, in which the form or the way the message is communicated is more important than the content itself (Barthes

1957). In the myth, the concept overrides the meaning, becoming the signifier for something else, depending on the larger context and the aim (Barthes 1957). Such fluidity of meaning aligns with the general theory of magic, which views the absence of a stable signified as central to the magic's effectiveness (Levi-Strauss 1950 as cited in Pels 2003). As Taussig argues that the power of magic centres on the production of mimesis or the representation of hidden and simulated matters which are located in between 'the technique and trick, cure and deception, faith and skepticism, play and seriousness, revelation and concealment' (as cited in Pels 2003: 37). Mythical stories act as precedents, 'embodying the knowledge presumed in performing the ritual process' (Hocart 2018). In a moment of authoritarian ideology promotion, driven by the presence of a powerful leader and the centralisation of the collective under a specific single idea, the magical or mystical qualities are used to manipulate the public and at the same time create a shared enclosed socio-cultural space for these believers. People in a playful form are getting engaged in such practices in order to recognise their own agency between the events of the past and the potential imagined future, defining their own belonging to specific groups and separating others as outsider

## Historical Context

Historically, occult, mystical practices, and beliefs were popular methods used to find alternative ways of thinking about the world as a response to the stable religious dogmas or to the rational mindset and positivist models established by the Enlightenment. The hope for a future existence and the augmentation of one's own social being, amplified in times of crisis, could be one of the motivations for engaging in such practices (Lindquist 2005). However, it is important to consider the emergence of occult or mystical motifs beyond the aspect of social crisis, rather studying them as a 'coherent statements, as symbol systems, myths, grammars, responses to the world, according to their own context-dependent criteria of rationality and meaningless' (Kerr&Crow 1983: 29).

Across 17-18th centuries the United States became the prominent place for the development of alternative spiritual movements, giving a refuge for radical believers, excluded from Europe during Thirty Years War (1618-1648) (Horowitz 2009). The colonial history of African and indigenous people's enslavement and diverse migration of people from Europe gave rise to the formation of various occult movements such as spiritualism, mesmerism, and witchcraft, gaining popularity among middle and upper-class Americans after the revolution in 1783 (Kerr&Crow 1983). A similar attraction to the occult can be observed in the history of Russian Tsardom and Empire, where peasants widely practiced and believed in hidden supernatural powers, admiring all sorts of spirits, such as *rusalki* (mermaids), wood sprites, and other creatures (Rosenthal 1979). At the end of the 19th century, with the impacts of industrialisation and cultural disintegration, the decreasing

influence of the Orthodox Church and the rise of atheism and positivism encouraged people to favor occult practices as alternative ways of making meaning (Rosenthal 1979).

The values and concepts promoted by spiritual and New Age movements, such as Theosophy, became a valuable tool for authoritarian and fascist ideologies, as they developed strategies to manipulate individuals and involve them in the larger group mantras. Adorno (1991) views the construction of fascist propaganda based on libidinal nature and the desire of individuals to express unconscious instincts into the group, activating irrational, unconscious, and regressive processes. From the dictatorship of Francois Duvalier in Haiti or Adolf Hitler in Germany to the present-day authoritarian tendencies in Russia and the United States, the occult occupies a major role in promising something big and restricting to limits at the same time. In what ways are we exposed to such dynamics, and is there a way to escape and remain aware of them?

## **Technologies of Making**

### Divine Imagery

The integration of divine imagery and direct association with the sacred origin are constitutive characteristics of occult or magical within far-right politics. Hocart compared the functions and organization of governance with ritual, where the central principal or leader is associated with divine-like figures (Laughlin 2018). Such images are particularly important during the social upheaval or in times of change when the previous order is unstable and the new leader is perceived as greater, embodying non-ordinary or mysterious power (Asprem 2020). Across Donald Trump's communication with his followers at the Truth Social network, the president often deploys such comparisons, signifying his role as special within the wider public (Fig. 1). The post was published in May 2025 before the implementation of promised reforms on 'Liberation Day' tariffs, making his authority seem more powerful and decisive. The president is depicted in full light, walking on a nighttime street with a bright background behind him, which might allude to the greater changes he brings to everyone. The text in captions is directive, emphasizing the confidence in Trump's intentions and his unique role in bringing the change.

A similar integration of divine symbolism is observed in Russia, where the state's ideology heavily relies on the Orthodox Church. Across most popular social media in Russia like Telegram or VK, it is possible to observe the public belief in a special holy destiny of Russia and intentions of its nation with Putin's presentation as a godfather (Fig. 2). The fans of the channel merged two pictures, where in the first Putin is giving a talk during the St Petersburg International Economic Forum and in the second Zelensky is looking upwards while checking the F-16 military jets due to be delivered to Ukraine. Compositionally, the picture is arranged in such a way as to present Putin as a prophet of a sacred message, while Zelensky looks on from below with a pleading and defenseless expression. Putin's

head is positioned within the beige-colored circle in the background, which creates a halo effect, and his raised hand further alludes to his exalted rank. It is interesting to note that during this conference there were some tarot cards distributed to participants, depicting Russian politicians as medieval kings, complemented with titles 'king of cups', 'king of wands', 'king of swords' (Fig. 3).

The perception of national leaders as powerful divine figures leads people to construct similar imagery of themselves and larger groups as unique, filling up their hopes for a better future. In authoritarian regimes, the leader becomes the group ideal, replacing the moral values of the individual ego ideal and 'gratifying the followers twofold wish to submit to authority and to be authority himself' (Adorno 1951: 127). The interaction is built entirely on irrational principles, creating an enclosed system with a special leader at the top, which further dictates the order and allows others to feel connected to greater forces or destiny.



Figure 1. @Donald J. Trump (Truth Social). 28/05/2025. Figure 2. @Seversochi777 (Telegram, *Чат Великой России*). 21/06/2025



Figure 3. @Pavel Ivanov (Gazeta.Ru). 21/06/2025

## Repetitions

Usage of repetition and reliance on mythical actors and stories of the past are other prominent techniques employed to manage the public and sustain the authoritarian ideology. Authoritarian communication represents the form of ritual, the style of which uses 'symbolic devices, specially coined words, and words without meaning to fill in gaps' (Vansina 1965 as cited in Tambiah 1968: 26). The emotional appeal rather than referential or true value is central to such type of communication, involving participants to trust to and accept the ideal effect instead of facing rigid and uncertain reality. Repetition creates a strong emotional colouring of words, downgrading the reasonable and logical explanations (Lindquist 2005).

The recent mottos 'Make America Great Again' or 'Big Beautiful Bill' represent the repetitive, metaphoric, and metonymic principles used to manipulate the masses and create a particular effect within a single ideological reality. The phrases became widely popular, being redistributed across various mediums, including prints on T-shirts and social campaigns, without carrying a specific meaning. 'Make America Great Again' or, in short, MAGA, alluding to something magical, refers to the general and idealised notion of the American past, allowing it to be used across different contexts and adapting its meaning to specific manipulative purposes. Similarly, 'Big Beautiful Bill' does not contain any useful information but attracts with its repetitive sounds and the hidden or fantastic reality it promises. Across most of the posts in Truth Social, Trump uses such techniques, creating an implicit form of repetitive occult, emphasising it using capital letters, exclamation marks, informal language (Fig. 4).

Russian authorities rely on techniques of repetitions as well, focusing on the 'greatness' of Russia, on 'achievements of ancestors', especially in the victory of World War II, and on the

idea of a 'deep state' or the binary 'West' and its values they are fighting against. For instance, the communication of one of the most popular Russian media, RIA Novosti' uses a variety of visual imagery and linguistic methods to create an image of Russia as innocent and a fighter for truth and liberty. Moreover, in recent times, the political supernatural entertainment shows have become widely popular in the country, such as 'New Russian Sensations', 'Star Against Zelensky', and 'Grandfather Vanga'. Some of the shows feature people who act as prophets of sacred messages from the past, carrying important messages that predict the future. In the show 'In Reality', the participants uncover and interpret the forgotten predictions from Baba Vanga (a Bulgarian mystic and healer who claimed to have foreseen the future), using metaphorical phrases like 'fall of a tall building' to allude to the power of Russia. The effect of the words is further enhanced by the studio context, which involves audiovisual sacral motifs such as mystical music, photographs of old notes as proof, as well as physical representations of space where 'it's impossible to lie'. Repetition is a part of the linguistic performance of power, where, through the evocation of special words confined to a specific mythical reality, social control is developed (Saville-Troike 1982). Authoritarian ideologies enchant reality with repetitions, further involving masses to be certain in their 'special mission' they carry to the world.



Figure 4. @Donald J. Trump (Truth Social). 12/06/2025

## Visual Representation

Visual representations are another tool for manipulating reality, specifically the visual technologies that alter our perception of surroundings. The rapid development of AI models and photographic technologies prompts us to reevaluate our beliefs and the methods we use to find truth. Photography not only conveys the meaning of the world, in the process of which we understand what we can see, but also creates a spectacle that further inspires our belief in the presented image (Slater 1995). The technique, which could simulate the supernatural effect and the occult plausible, is all-important, in which 'the power is attributed not so much to know the surface of reality (and thus truth) but rather to transform

the surface and control it' (Slater 1995: 230). We get enchanted by the enacted performance upon us, wanting to immerse ourselves in such a magical and alluring world, where the feelings and coherence dominate the reason.

Russians are widely using AI to generate fantastic entertainment audiovisual content, reproducing the common ideological narratives of its power and degradation of Western values. For instance, in the videos shared in the popular social media Telegram, Russians employ AI to generate imaginative realities, in which Zelensky films own vlog as homeless, sharing his poor conditions and seeking refuge in the European Union (Fig. 5). The visual narration is supported with linguistic applications, in which Zelensky implements such degradative reality with the phrase like 'every evening I pray to Ursula (President of the European Commission) to send food ration'. Despite understanding the artificiality of produced content, the video complements the ideological reality of the Russian state, blurring the boundaries between truth and falsehood.

A similar example from the social media users in the US could be observed, in which Trump appears as a rockstar playing drums, going in parallel with videos bombing Iranian nuclear sites on 22 June, 2025 (Fig. 6). There are no realistic representations in such a video, only the feeling which sustains specific imagery we want to trust. Often, such videos or photos are accompanied by text or music to engage the viewer fully and create a sensorial experience that satisfies the purpose of authoritarian ideology.



Figure 5. @ЕкатеринаКатя31 (Telegram, Чат Великой России). 23/06/2025.  
<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DLE2dnJlZRs/>



Figure 5. @imglover (Truth Social). 25/06/2025. <https://truthsocial.com/@imglover/114741327553051449>

## Resistance

Although there is a difference in the motivations behind the use of magical thinking in modern Russia and the United States, they are united by the same structure, aiming to evoke power and control the masses. People are being drawn together under the same effect, values, and reasoning, creating a large group formation in which collective consciousness dominates individual aspirations. However, ideologies and their forms are always shifting, provoking various modes of resistance and individual agency with oppositional sets of beliefs and images.

The resistance movement, such as *Bind Trump*, is a great example of how the structure of any mythological production could be challenged. Such magic resistance uses similar creative elements such as imagery and symbolism to 'craft a response to political oppression that is much aesthetic and performative as its religious' (Magliocco 2020:10). Whether its development of counterlanguage or breakage of stable norms of interaction, the resistance approaches work to reveal the manipulative effect of the first order, sometimes inspiring a formation of new radical beliefs. Across social media, there are various instances of resistance content, which works to mock and destabilise the initial structure of a specific myth (Fig. 6). For example, in a picture in which Trump depicts himself as a Pope, one follower left a comment, mocking the president's authority. The

follower created a similar picture, preserving the mythological role of Trump, however, adding additional ironic context, revealing the hidden nature of Trump's concept of 'Pope' with the phrase 'Patron Saint of Economic Collapse'. Barthes (1957) viewed the possibility of breaking the myth and its influence by naming the concept that stands behind it or revealing the second-order semiological structure, in which 'a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second'. The example is built upon this approach, revealing the entire structure of mythical enactment.

The theory of ethnography of communication, developed by Dell Hymes, which situates linguistic analysis within a social context, can be combined with an approach of resistance, helping to understand the basis and patterns of any communication. The combination of this theory with Barthes's understanding of the myth could become a valuable tool for creating experimental media content that responds to authoritarian manipulations, as well as helping affected communities disseminate messages of negative influence to the wider public.

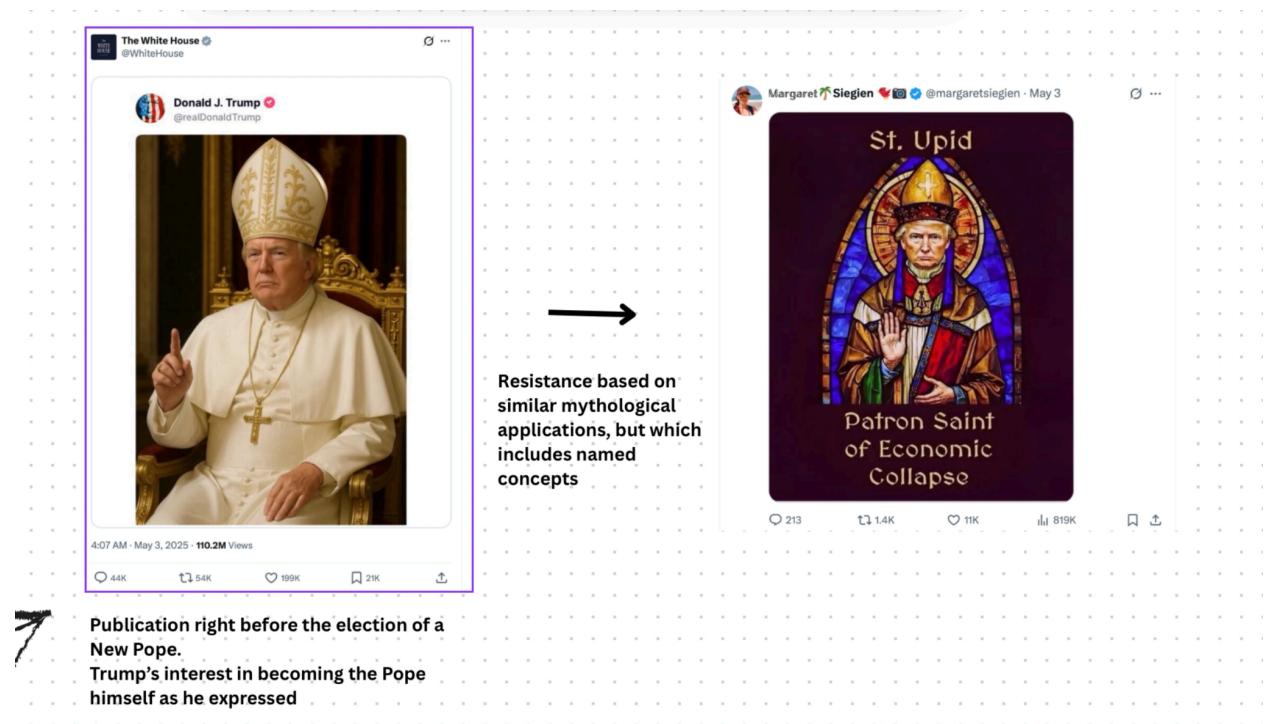


Figure 6. @The White House (Truth Social). 3/05/2025. Post and a comment by the follower @margaretsieglen

## Conclusion

To conclude, magical thinking could be compared with the desire to preserve coherence between members of the society or to unite with the hope of becoming the more powerful

version of oneself. People aspire to keep conceiving of life and living in order to make sense between connections from the past and present and ritually control their life (Laughlin 2018). The story or the myth works hand in hand with the action or the ritual, creating a whole practice of everyday life. Authoritarianism uses various forms and techniques of the mystical, enacting deeper people's desires, fears, intentions and involving them into the imaginative emotive play. In a play with the specific rules, prohibitions and hopes, that gifts coherence and certainty in existence, survival of the self within the group. Individuals emotionally engage with absurdity to mark clear distinctions between the 'self' and 'other' as well as recreate the ideal notion of reality the most advantageous to their successful life. In some instances the play could become dangerous, clashing with the ideology of others which might threaten the condition of being. People become intertwined in the system to fight for ideas and individuals that doesn't exist, sacrificing their own life in order to please the truth the group has created. One moment the standards of truth and advantage are shifting, amplifying the new ideas that hopefully will give a more certain promise of the future. For how long will we be able to persist?

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