

Russia is Weaponizing culture in CEE by creating a traditionalist “counter-culture”

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Putin’s regime: Logical or ideological?

The hybrid warfare that Russia has been waging against Europe and the West, especially since the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, is a fight for people’s hearts, minds and souls. Russia is not only trying to undermine trust in Europe and its institutions among European citizens, but it also aims to offer an ideological and moral alternative. While the Russian regime is, most of the time, depicted as cynical and valueless, it certainly defines itself differently. Putin, in his annual address at the end of 2013, when defending the discriminatory “anti-gay propaganda law” from international criticism before the Sochi Olympic Games, practically put Russia in the role of the global “moral compass” of conservatism.¹

We do think that Putin’s regime, while maximizing economic and political power, is not lacking ideology. In fact, Putin’s regime is increasingly ideological, investing more and more in promoting an ultraconservative, illiberal, traditionalist worldview. This is a must: as Russia becomes increasingly weak economically, ideology is needed more to make the electorate happy in Russia, and also to be able to extend Russia’s political influence in the world. And ideology is not only an epiphenomenon, something that follows the Kremlin’s actions, but more and more a real phenomenon which drives the Kremlin’s actions. In a [study](#) that was prepared by leading experts in Central and Eastern Europe, we found several patterns and players via which the Kremlin is seeking to spread an ultraconservative worldview, based on the Eurasianist ideology and some principles of the Orthodox Church.

So, the increasing effort on the Kremlin’s side to create an alternative value universe against the “nihilist, decadent” West - not only in Russia but also in the whole world - is not without European examples if not political followers. As Nina Khrushchev argues: *“Under Putin, the Soviets’ secular society began to rethink its place in a world in which conservative religious beliefs take precedence over civic norms.”*² This process is justified by the moral superiority of Eurasia over the West. Putin is depicted by the Center for Strategic Communications, a pro-Kremlin think tank, as *“World Conservatism’s New Leader”*³.

Thus, Putin can be put in line with other more and more autocratic leaders (such as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan) who resort to some sort of ultra-conservative, traditionalist, religious agenda in legitimizing their increasingly anti-liberal establishments pitted against the West. Erdoğan said that Turks should have the right to express their religious belief more outright, while declared democracy and freedom having “absolutely

¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/10513330/Vladimir-Putin-claims-Russia-is-moral-compass-of-the-world.html>

² Putin’s new ‘values pact’. <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2014/03/26/putins-new-values-pact/>

³ Vladimir Putin, Conservative Icon. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/vladimir-putin-conservative-icon/282572/>

no value” in the fight against “terrorism” even before the failed military coup in July, 2016.⁴

While most research focuses on Russia's use of soft power in Central and Eastern Europe in order to achieve specific political and policy goals (e.g. helping a “friendly” candidate such as Milos Zeman, torpedoing the installment of the defense missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic, reaching a nuclear deal in Hungary), the scope of influence is definitely broader than this.

Ideological influences are becoming increasingly strong in Hungary. Viktor Orbán’s newly defined political enemy is the “nihilist” European elite led by Jean-Claude Juncker, Guy Verhofstadt and Martin Schulz who “invite” migrants to destroy the Christian and ethnic foundations of Europe.⁵ Orbán’s words bear dangerous resemblance to that of Russian Eurasianist ideologist Alexander Dugin, who called liberalism a “nihilist” ideology.⁶ Furthermore, Orbán recently said that instead of merely accepting the Pope’s position in the refugee issue, we should wait for the statement of the Orthodox Church⁷. This is understandable in the sense that Orbán’s inhumane refugee policy is totally against the Vatican mainstream, but as a leader of a dominantly catholic country, this statement is still strange. After Orbán’s failed referendum attempt against Brussels’s quotas, he has high hopes that this and similar referenda will “force” the “nihilistic” European elite to put the question directly to the European people in other countries as well.⁸ It is bizarre when Orbán and Poland’s Jarosław Kaczyński, the most pro-Russian and most anti-Russian leaders of Visegrad cooperation, are talking about a “cultural counterrevolution”⁹ in Europe - but we can be sure that the conspiracy theory-based, ultraconservative nationalist turn that these leaders are calling for is something that would fit well the taste of the Kremlin-aligned policymakers and ideologues.

Generally, there is a new wave of anti-human-rights movements all over Europe that question the very foundation of traditional conservative politics built upon a “human rights consensus”. Thus, a “profound change in the European political and value system” is under way with some countries “questioning the universal human rights framework of politics based on their ‘cultural’ exceptionalism”, as Andrea Peto argues¹⁰. As our findings suggest, actors of this profound change often find their role and policy models in Russia, and some Russian actors try to use this process to their own advantage.

⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-13746679>, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/president-erdogan-says-freedom-and-democracy-have-no-value-in-turkey-amid-arrests-and-military-a6938266.html>

⁵ http://index.hu/belfold/2016/09/11/orban_nem_a_migransokkal_van_bajunk_hanem_a_brusszeliekkel/

⁶ <https://lifeondoverbeach.wordpress.com/2016/03/19/alexander-dugin-the-liberalism-is-nihilist-ideology/>

⁷ <http://nol.hu/belfold/orban-viktor-csurka-istvan-kotcse-beszed-europai-unio-politika-nihilizmus-liberalizmus-1631387>

⁸ The world according to Europe’s insurgent parties: Putin, migration and power. http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_world_according_to_europes_insurgent_parties7055, http://index.hu/belfold/2016/09/11/orban_nem_a_migransokkal_van_bajunk_hanem_a_brusszeliekkel/

⁹ <http://www.demdigest.org/illiberal-international/>

¹⁰ Andrea Pető, “EPILOGUE: ‘ANTI-GENDER’ MOBILISATIONAL DISCOURSE OF CONSERVATIVE AND FAR RIGHT PARTIES AS A CHALLENGE FOR PROGRESSIVE POLITICS,” in Gender as symbolic glue, ed. Eszter Kováts Maari - Pöim (FEPS - Foundation for European Progressive Studies/ Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Budapest, 2015), 126. <http://www.feps-europe.eu/assets/cae464d2-f4ca-468c-a93e-5d0dad365a83/feps-gender-assymbolic-glu-wwwpdf.pdf> 14 Krekó, P., Györi, L. Russia

Cultural hybrid warfare

On a broader international level, what makes Moscow's cultural influence so dangerous is the very nature of this kind of manipulation, as well as the pan-European network spreading it. Despite the fact that reactionary values constitute one—and a seemingly minor—part of the Kremlin's efforts to subvert the liberal-democratic order and pro-Western orientation, it is a subtler form of influence compared to direct military, political or economic pursue of interests, leaving mainstream political and civil actors unprepared or unaware of these kinds of endeavours. Moreover, the Kremlin's ideological impact joins forces with other global reactionary forces within the Russian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, different evangelist movements in the United States, and thousands of pro-life, pro-family, and anti-abortion traditionalist NGOs - not to mention the dense network of far-right, and bizarrely, far-left movements running on similar or overlapping agendas. The fact that Russia is one of the biggest "illiberal states" in the world, with its cultural proximity to European societies, gives her unrivalled capabilities in these "traditionalist networks" vying to reverse the development of worldwide human rights efforts in the 21st century.¹¹

The Kremlin's ideological influence and cultural soft power have been increasingly under Western scrutiny as part of the asymmetric Russian warfare waged firstly in Crimea, later in Eastern Ukraine, followed by Syria. Maria Snegovaya claims that Russia's information warfare basically utilizes "principles and approaches (...) taken from Soviet toolkits" by which she means Ben Nimmo's 4D approach¹² of dismissing critics and distorting facts, as well as distracting and dismaying adversaries through false information.¹³ Whereas Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss warn of postmodern forms of propaganda and disinformation "weaponizing information, culture and money" to question the very foundations of liberal ideas and Western liberal establishments.¹⁴ The Political Capital Institute had earlier pointed out European far-right parties' active role in the Kremlin's foreign policy and power projection abroad.¹⁵ All experts agree, however, that the Kremlin is conducting a general propaganda campaign against the Western/Euro-Atlantic political establishment, morals and way of living. The Russian Orthodox Church, the "Kremlin's Secret Weapon" that is strongly infiltrated by the Russian secret services, and actively participates in shaping active measures and foreign policy¹⁶, is actively participating in this process.

¹¹ On the right side of the political spectrum, neo-Nazi movements and far-right parties have established far-right cultural networks infusing neo-Nazi ideology with the Neo-Eurasianism of Alexandr Dugin. Traditionalist pro-life, pro-family organizations encounter a similar international network of NGOs close to the Kremlin, for example CitizenGo or the World Congress of Families.

¹² <http://www.stopfake.org/en/anatomy-of-an-info-war-how-russia-s-propaganda-machine-works-and-how-to-counter-it/>

¹³ Maria Snegovaya: Russia Report I, Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine, The Institute for the Study of War, September, 2015 - last accessed April 4, 2016, <http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Report%201%20Putin's%20Information%20Warfare%20in%20Ukraine-%20Soviet%20Origins%20of%20Russias%20Hybrid%20Warfare.pdf>

¹⁴ Peter Pomerantsev, Michael Weiss: The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money, The Interpreter, Institute of Modern Russia, 2014 - last accessed April 4, 2016, http://www.interpretermag.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Menace_of_Unreality_Final.pdf

¹⁵ The Russian Connection, The spread of pro-Russian policies on the European far right, Political Capital Institute, March 14, 2014 - last accessed April 4, 2016, http://www.riskandforecast.com/useruploads/files/pc_flash_report_russian_connection.pdf

¹⁶ Marcel H. Van Herpen (2016): Putin's Propaganda Machine. London: Rowman and Littlefield.

Our comparative analysis of Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland highlights another, moral dimension of Russian hybrid warfare against the West which is the export of “illiberal values” abroad - that may be labelled as the “weaponization of culture” after Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss.¹⁷ Nevertheless, this kind of weaponization of culture is in fact a long-term strategy of investing in or building up a “traditionalist counter-culture” in the midst of the European Union’s member states based on hundreds of different state and non-state actors, NGOs, political and media personalities in line with the Kremlin’s dominant ideological agenda. It is a process of Moscow uniting, and mobilizing the European “reactionary” fringes to frame key policy issues, for example religion, reproductive rights, LGBT, national identity, in order to suit the geopolitical needs, and internal stability of the Russian regime.

Russia’s moral stand against Western liberal decadence

The core of Russia’s soft power is the promotion of conservatism, traditionalism, and family values, as well as the moral superiority of Russia over the West as the cornerstone of ideology. Russia has defined its position as a moral fighter against Western amorality, ideological decay and overall social chaos, as it is popularly seen in Russia. Moralism and traditionalism à la Russia convey not only conservative ideals, but also religiosity, anti-Westernism, traditionalist values, and a broad spectrum of illiberal social values. Thus, following this line of logic, while Russia is occupying its well-deserved global position of power, it must also be protected from the Western ideological machine.

This ideological direction manifests itself in a social, religious, cultural and legal web of relations as well. The “Foreign agent law,” “Anti-gay propaganda law,” or STOP-Patriot Act are the best known examples of legislative policies explicitly aimed at eradicating Western influence and presence in the country, as well as laying a firm foundation for an illiberal society with limited human rights, weak civil society, and no independent public institutions.

Putin pledged already in 2012 to protect Christianity worldwide,¹⁸ as well as reassuring conservatives around the world that Russia is ready to stand up for “‘family values’ against a tide of liberal, Western, pro-gay propaganda ‘that asks us to accept without question the equality of good and evil (...) ‘defend traditional values that have made up the spiritual and moral foundation of civilisation in every nation for thousands of years’.”¹⁹ The leaked excerpts of the 2016 “Doctrine of Information Security” directly links information warfare with the export of “illiberal values”. It states that the “information sphere plays an important role in ensuring political stability in the country, defense and state security” which requires among others the “promotion of spiritual and cultural values of the peoples of Russia in the world.”²⁰ This is not totally new, as the concept of “spiritual security” was already part of the Russian National Security Concept back in 1999, in the late Yeltsin-era - and Putin already played a significant role in formulating it back then as secretary to the National Security Council²¹. But it has been put even more into practice since the

¹⁷ http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC_reactionary_values_CEE_20160727.pdf

¹⁸ <https://www.rt.com/politics/putin-foreign-make-representatives-797/>

¹⁹ <http://new.spectator.co.uk/2014/02/putins-masterplan/>

²⁰ See the following reports: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2829842>, <https://news.mail.ru/politics/23585916/?frommail=1>, and the official description of the earlier version of the doctrine: <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/6/5.html>.

²¹ Marcel H. Van Herpen (2016): *Putin’s Propaganda Machine*. London: Rowman and Littlefield

beginning of the third presidential term of Putin. And a consequence we are witnessing xenophobic, homophobic, and generally anti-Western, illiberal groups in Europe finding an ally in the Kremlin, and rather than being ostracized from the European political and cultural landscapes, they may, and often do, turn to Russia for support.

Value export via different channels

The Ukrainian crisis has been a catalyst for the expansion of Russian political and ideological influence in Central Europe, increasing Russian political and “cultural” activities in all the five countries under review. The dissemination of anti-human rights and non-Western ideology abroad through soft power has three explicit channels:

- 1) **“Public diplomacy,”** primarily with the help of various organizations, events, forums, and conferences;
- 2) **Media,** especially international resources such as RT and Sputnik (and the now defunct Voice of Russia until the end of 2014), which became an important instrument of disseminating reactionary and anti-Western narratives and disinformation about international relations and Russia’s foreign policy. Media and social media are essential in diffusing an illiberal ideology, and a new doctrine on information is currently being formulated in Russia, to be accepted next year.^{22, 23}
- 3) **“Protection” of the Russian minority, or “compatriots,” abroad,** including access to appropriate cultural, ideological and patriotic information/education. Overall, protection of Russian communities abroad is yet another pretext for Russia to exert its hard power; however, the ratio of Russian-speaking minority is low in all the countries under investigation (but not negligible in Austria and Czech Republic).

Table 1: Russian diaspora living in CEE

Country	Number	% of total population	Source
Austria	30 032	0,35	Statistik Austria, 2015
Czech Republic	31 545	0,3	2011 Census of the Czech Republic
Hungary	2 512	0,03	2011 Census of Hungary
Poland	13 046	0,034	2011 Census of Poland
Slovakia	1 997	0,037	2011 Census of the Slovak Republic

Cultural battlefields in Central and Eastern Europe

Strange phenomena are taking place in these countries nowadays. In Hungary, for example, a new university identitarian movement is popping up from nowhere and starting anti-gay campaigns²⁴. The same organization hosts Daniel Friberg, a “conservative writer” well known from the Swedish neo-Nazi movement, who came to Hungary recently and is alleged to have close ties to the Kremlin.

²² See the following reports: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2829842>, <https://news.mail.ru/politics/23585916/?frommail=1>, and the official description of the earlier version of the doctrine: <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/6/5.html>.

²³ According to the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s recent speech on the 10-year anniversary of Russia Today, RT can expand to other countries, such as Serbia, Hungary, Romania, and Portugal as well. See speech at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwNmzD22dfg&app=desktop>

²⁴ http://index.hu/belfold/2016/04/15/leragasztottak_a_melegbarat_matricat_a_konzervativ_hallgatok/

The Kremlin is clearly taking different approaches to spreading its influence in each country, adjusting the forms of influence and the messages to the particularities of the recipient countries. As none of the examined countries display dominantly pro-Russian public opinions (similar to that of Greece or Bulgaria) the value export activity is much stronger via fringe organizations (radical parties, small NGOs, diaspora organizations, fringe media) facilitated by the pro-Russian political elite - for example in Hungary.

Each country represents a unique case to weaponize culture on the old continent.

In Slovakia, different paramilitary organizations seem to be the most important tools and sources of influence, while in the Czech Republic it is the pro-Russian media, and in Hungary the governmental party Fidesz and its satellite organizations, the far-right Jobbik and traditionalist NGOs. In Poland, Russia tries to push political statements, not values, through various channels with limited impact - there is a small pro-Russian political and institutional circle around Mateusz Piskorski, currently reportedly under investigation for pro-Kremlin espionage.²⁵ In Austria, beside strongly pro-Russian political players (FPÖ, most notably), organizations are rather used for reaching specific political and economic goals rather than to exert ideological influence.

Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary are the countries where public diplomacy already played a crucial role and will continue to do so in spreading socially illiberal ideologies, since they have major pro-Russian players among the elite, namely PM Viktor Orbán or Czech President Miloš Zeman. The pro-Russian media presence is most decisive in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, while fringe organizational structure matters the most in Poland and Slovakia. Still, in Poland, direct spread of Russian illiberal values plays a marginal role due to the dominant fears over Russian expansion in the country. Here, we can rather talk about parallel tendencies instead of causal links.

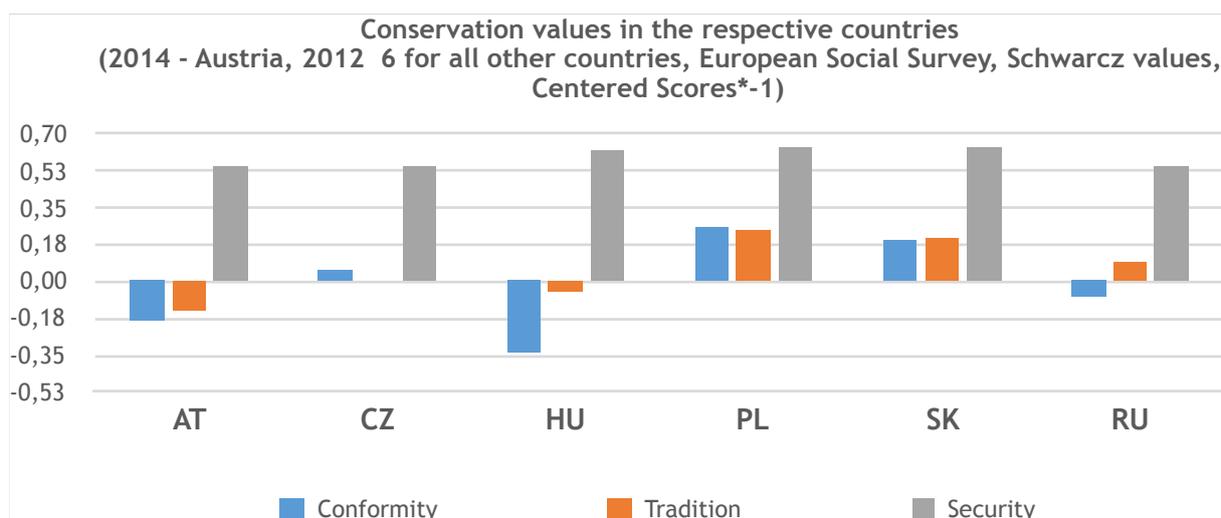
Impact of the Kremlin's cultural warfare on individual societies and Europe

The export of illiberal values abroad has two major implications: firstly for the countries under revision, secondly for Europe as a whole. Figure 1 reviews the tripartite values-set of tradition, conformity and security facilitating or hindering the success of the Kremlin's ideological impact in the receptive societies.²⁶

Figure 1. Conservation values in the five countries under revision

²⁵ <http://www.newsweek.pl/polska/abw-zatrzymano-lidera-partii-zmiana-mateusza-piskorskiego,artykuly,385868,1.html>

²⁶ All of these values are related to the "Conservation" orientation in the Schwarcz universal values scale, one of the scientifically best grounded models for human values. See: https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/methodology/core_ess_questionnaire/ESS_core_questionnaire_human_values.pdf



The populations of Poland and Slovakia might be the most receptive to the traditionalist, anti-gender and anti-progressive messages; the Austrian and Hungarian populations are strongly receptive to security-based messages, but less to traditionalism and conformity. Czech public opinion seems to be receptive to security (and securitization), but this is rather a non-traditionalist and non-conformist society. At the same time, the strategy of Kremlin is rather to focus on the “Push” than on the “Pull” factors: the Russian society, for example, is much less traditionalist and conformist according to values surveys than the official ideology would suggest.

What comes and what can be done?

As for the future: the current trends predict the escalation of the weaponization of culture. As Russian economical influence is getting weaker, ideological influence will get stronger. In Russia and beyond, values will serve as substitutes of bread. A new doctrine on information is currently being formulated in Russia.²⁷ The expansion of the value export via media is planned to be accelerated in the future: according to the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s recent speech on the 10-year anniversary of Russia Today, RT could expand to other countries, such as Serbia, Hungary, Romania, and Portugal as well.²⁸ Where these media outlets do not operate, alternative media may serve as the main channel of dissemination of illiberal ideological messages. Post-Brexit Europe, busy with its internal problems, provides vast opportunities for political influence.

And finally, a few recommendations on what to do:

First, Deconstruct the self-definition of ultraconservative groups in Russia. It is essential to highlight the kleptocratic nature of Putin’s regime that uses “conservative” and “traditionalist” narratives domestically with only one aim: to preserve the corrupt regime from any social, political and economic change. On the other hand, while the Kremlin claims it follows a family-friendly political agenda, the demographic figures are catastrophic. Birth rates in Russia are on the decline and Russia is becoming more and more similar to the aging societies of the West it wants to distinguish itself from. Projects aiming at bringing these basic facts to the public and at provoking debates that can help raise awareness and immunize the public would be essential.

²⁷ See the following reports: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2829842>, <https://news.mail.ru/politics/23585916/?frommail=1>, and the official description of the earlier version of the doctrine: <http://www.scrf.gov.ru/documents/6/5.html>.

²⁸ See speech at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwNmzD22dfg&app=desktop>

Second, reverse the allegations on “Foreign Agents.” All information on the foreign funding and diplomatic support of the ultraconservative groups from Russia should be discredited with the same arguments that Putin’s regime uses to discredit NGOs domestically. Questioning the ideological sincerity of such ultraconservative groups and focusing on their role as the tool of the Kremlin can help discredit these groups and their messages. EU Member States need to reform their laws with the aim of making the sources of funding for political parties and the media transparent.

Third, find ways to support and stabilize both public and private media. State media need to become truly “public,” with checks and balances that separate them from elected politicians and local oligarchs who may have an interest in dealing with Putin’s regime in the economic, financial or energy spheres and, thus, may directly or indirectly promote illiberal and antiWestern values. European institutions could advise on the drafting of media laws and regulations, which would meet democratic standards and encourage constructive public debate. The “journalism training” programs created in the 1990s are insufficient in the current climate. Without legal support, the press will easily be manipulated both by Russia and by various pro-Russian extremist groups seeking to gain political power.

Fourth, corruption in the region is often connected to Russia and must be understood as a vital security issue for the entire continent, not least because allegations of corruption, whether true or false, are often used to discredit liberal democratic and progressive political parties. Russia aims to extend its influence via corrupting individuals and organizations in the political, journalist and expert community. International economic institutions need to come up with better means of identifying and sanctioning lawbreakers, especially those who use offshore banking systems and other techniques that are difficult for smaller governments and poor bureaucracies to investigate.

Fifth, framing Russian influence as a “hard,” geopolitical and security issue instead of a mere “soft” human rights question. It is a fair assessment given the often violent “active measures,” backed by the Russian secret services, aiming to undermine and discredit political systems and their leaders in Europe, and also, to spread violence. It raises the importance of the question in the eyes of many.

And finally, Kremlin-critical messaging should avoid any Russophobe flavor, as such statements only help the Kremlin. The distinction between criticism of the Putin government and Russian society should be emphasized in all public activities. It is also crucially important not to alienate but involve the Russian-speaking minorities in EU member states, but to reach out to them with programmes and projects instead.