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Global Elite and its Clubs: The Case of Bilderberg Group

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Ph.D. Thesis

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2. I declare that this thesis has not been submitted in satisfaction of the requirements for another university degree.
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Abstract of the dissertation

The following five interdisciplinary essays contribute to International Relations, sociology and media studies, mainly on empirical, but also on theoretical level. Their overarching message is to reject paranoid, but also benign narrative of global elite clubs as exemplified on the case of the controversial transatlantic forum Bilderberg Group.

On theoretical level, the dissertation highlights continuing relevance of sometimes overlooked neo-Marxism. It offers further support for the thesis that some kind of transnational capitalist class (TCC) has developed, which is disputed even by several neo-Marxists, let alone other scholars. Specifically, the findings on Bilderberg Group corroborate the existence of Euro-Atlantic TCC. Within this social network, the European fraction seems to be the most consolidated one.

On empirical level, the dissertation is the first publication that thoroughly exploited data from the recently launched official Bilderberg Group's website. From another under-researched source, the dissertation compiled new datasets about all post-Cold War Bilderberg conferences. On this basis, the essays provide original quantitative and qualitative insights into the composition of Bilderberg attendees and topics of their discussions.

The dissertation offers the first multifaceted appraisal of post-Cold War power of Bilderberg Group. It came to balanced conclusions, namely that Bilderberg Group was and continues to be influential, but its power decreases. This trend is documented on two areas of which Bilderberg Group cares most – European integration and transatlantic ties. The argument is that both Brexit and TTIP's failure imply that Bilderberg Group no longer fulfils its role of uniting the Western countries.

The dissertation introduces a new research agenda, as it conducts the first robust test of the hypothesis that Bilderberg Group can serve as career elevator. It shows that there are dozens of politicians who *first* attended Bilderberg conference(s) and *later* became key ministers, prime ministers, presidents and heads of international organizations like EU, NATO, IMF or UN. These findings add new provocative dimension to understanding of the processes of political elite recruitment and networking.

Finally, the dissertation proves that Bilderberg Group is no longer taboo for Western mass media, but there is still a marked difference in the coverage of the conferences in

European newspapers. Only British daily *The Guardian* systematically reported on Bilderberg gatherings for more than a decade.

Acknowledgments

Completion of this work would not be possible without the great-hearted attitude of my supervisor Assoc. Prof. Jan Karlas, who first agreed to auspice dissertation on controversial and hardly-accessible topic and later tolerated that my research lasted so long (also due to multi-year interruption of the study). In this connection, I also owe gratitude to the Head of my IR department Assoc. Prof. Běla Plechanovová, who let me exploit to the maximum time for my study.

Plus, I am heavily indebted to both of the reviewers, whose comments contributed to improvement of the first version of the thesis. Due to time constraints, I could not fully incorporate all of the suggested additions, but I did it at least partially and I responded to (the remaining) reviewers' arguments. In my planned future continuation of research on Bilderberg Group, I will also use reviewers' recommendations.

Biggest thanks go to my parents, who supported and encouraged me during my endless university years. Unfortunately, I had to neglect family, but also (girls) friends (and dogs), because unavoidably, time dedicated to writing is time not dedicated to all other things, including relationships. In this tragic sense, life is zero-sum game and social costs of this dissertation were high. So I appreciate all relatives and friends, who repeatedly showed understanding that I did not have (enough) time (and/or mood) for them.

Motto

“Conspiracy theorists may be frustrated that among them there are so many divisions and inefficiencies, so few secret handshakes and coded messages, but perhaps they will find some solace in the fact that the aligned interests of large segments of the superclass often produce the same outcomes that dark conspiracies might: a world that often seems to favor those who need favor the least, that empowers the powerful and ignores even the most urgent needs of the weakest.” (Rothkopf, 2008: 294-295)

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Introduction:

Bilderberg Group as an Intellectual Debt

Motto:

“It is said by some, including the right hon. and learned Gentleman, that Bilderberg is a conspiracy. Of course it is not a conspiracy. Nevertheless, 130 of the world’s top decision makers do not travel thousands of miles simply for a cosy chat. Those people came here in order to concert their plans to deal with a particularly awkward stage in western capitalism, and in view of that we, the public, are entitled to ask some questions and to hold them to account.”

Labor MP Michael Meacher in parliamentary debate on Bilderberg conference in 2013 in UK
(<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201314/cmhansrd/chan14.pdf>, p. 26)

Let us start a little bit pathetically. For various reasons, until recently, established academics and journalists paid minimum attention to Bilderberg Group. As a result, the topic was almost completely monopolized by “conspiracy theorists” (Dice, 2015; Estulin, 2009; Jeffers, 2009; Tucker, 2005; Wisnewski, 2010). This in turn made the issue seemingly “toxic” for serious scholars. In other words, the mainstream ignorance of Bilderberg Group was mistake that created an intellectual debt which has to be repaid. This dissertation is part of a collective attempt to eliminate this debt – debt to academic curiosity, critical thinking, intellectual and human honesty.

Due to lack of solid investigations and ensuing frequent misperceptions, this introduction starts with summary of rudimentary information about Bilderberg Group. The remainder of this section outlines the content of the dissertation.

Basic description of Bilderberg Group

Bilderberg Group unites elites from (mainly Western) Europe, North America (US and Canada) and Turkey. It is a loose private social network of dozens of prominent

businesspeople, politicians and intellectuals. From its beginning, the club pursued two main objectives – promotion of European integration and transatlantic rapprochement.

The inception of Bilderberg Group dates back to 1952. In 1954, Bilderberg Group organized its first conference. Then, this event became a tradition and centerpiece of Bilderberg Group's activity. Each subsequent year, usually one conference took place. So far, Bilderberg Group organized 67 conferences.

The conferences were staged at luxury hotels, in various European countries and to a lesser degree in USA, Canada and exceptionally in Turkey (see Table 1). Some places hosted the conference repeatedly. This is the case of Inter Alpen-Hotel Tyrol in Austrian Telfs-Buchen (place of Bilderberg Group's conference in 1988 and 2015), Astir Palace Hotel in Greek Vouliagmeni (place of Bilderberg Group's conference in 1993 and 2009) or Westfields Marriott hotel in American Chantilly (place of Bilderberg Group's conference in 2002, 2008, 2012 and 2017).

Table 1 – places of Bilderberg Group's conferences

Place	Number of conferences held at the place
Europe	47
USA	12
Canada	5
Turkey	3

Source: <https://publicintelligence.net/1963-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/> (calculations are the author's)

The conferences usually last three or four days, which is a long time. Each conference is dedicated to several key topics, which often revolve around current world developments, especially in Europe, North America and strategic regions like Russia, China and Middle East. Different topics are addressed at different panels and by different (key) speakers. Some well-informed participants usually prepare papers as foundation for the discussions. In this sense, Bilderberg Group conclaves resemble academic conferences. However, this formal program is not the whole story of Bilderberg Group's gatherings. There are also joint dinners, encounters and chats on the sidelines of the conference and all these elements can be more important. In any case, each presentation and conversation at Bilderberg conference is

confidential and strictly off-record. Very little is made public, so it remains a task for researchers to try to reconstruct what could have happened at the conferences and what impact it possibly had on future developments.

Bilderberg Group publishes only a list of participants and topics of individual conferences. Some (leaked) documents from Bilderberg Group (summaries of the discussions) can be found on the website Public Intelligence, but these materials are mainly from Cold-War era. Participants of the conferences are discouraged from disclosing details about the discussions, in particular, who said what. On the other hand, they could – and perhaps even should – spread the general ideas that are part of “Bilderberg consensus” (see chapter 2).

At their beginnings, Bilderberg conferences were attended by approximately 70 people. In recent years, this number raised almost twofold. This suggests that Bilderberg Group is prospering, contrary to some claims of its increasing irrelevance and out-datedness (see chapter 3).

In line with existing literature, this dissertation calls Bilderberg attendees “Bilderbergers”. Yet there are differences among them. Some people are invited only once, whereas others appeared at numerous Bilderberg gatherings. For this and other reasons, one should distinguish between central and peripheral members of the network (see chapter 2). Plus, Bilderberg Group has had its so-called steering committee – kind of a “club inside a club” or “hard core” of Bilderbergers (see Table 2). This committee has a leading role, because it organizes the conferences and selects the participants.

Table 2: 34 members of Bilderberg Group's steering committee (as to 6.6.2021)

Name	Country	Function/affiliation
Halberstadt, Victor	Netherlands	steering committee's co-chair, Leiden University
Kravis, Marie-Josée	USA	steering committee's co-chair, Hudson Institute
Abrams, Stacey	USA	Chair, Fair Fight Action
Achleitner, Paul M.	Germany	Chairman Supervisory Board, Deutsche Bank AG
Altman, Roger C.	USA	Founder and Senior Chairman, Evercore Inc.

Alverà, Marco	Italy	CEO, Snam SpA
Barbizet, Patricia	France	Chairwoman and CEO, Temaris & Associés SAS
Barroso, José Manuel	Portugal	Goldman Sachs, EU Commission's ex-chef
Botín, Ana P.	Spain	Group Executive Chair, Banco Santander
Brende, Børge	Norway	President, World Economic Forum
Carney, Mark J.	Canada	UN Special Envoy for Climate Action and Finance
Castries, Henri de	France	President, Institut Montaigne, AXA's ex-chef
Döpfner, Mathias	Germany	Chairman and CEO, Axel Springer SE
Gruber, Lilli	Italy	Editor-in-Chief "Otto e mezzo", La7 TV
Hedegaard, Connie	Denmark	Chair, KR Foundation, ex EU Commissioner
Hobson, Mellody	USA	Co-CEO and President, Ariel Investments LLC
Karp, Alex	USA	CEO, Palantir Technologies Inc.
Koç, Ömer M.	Turkey	Chairman, Koç Holding A.S.
Kudelski, André	Switzerland	Chairman and CEO, Kudelski Group SA
Leysen, Thomas	Belgium	Chairman, Mediahuis and Umicore
Liikanen, Erkki	Finland	IFRS, Helsinki Graduate School of Economics
Micklethwait, John	USA	Editor-in-Chief, Bloomberg LP
Minton Beddoes, Zanny	UK	Editor-in-Chief, The Economist
Mundie, Craig J.	USA	President, Mundie & Associates LLC
O'Leary, Michael	Ireland	CEO, Ryanair DAC
Papalexopoulos, Dimitri	Greece	CEO, TITAN Cement Company
Sawers, John	UK	Executive Chairman, Newbridge Advisory
Schadlow, Nadia	USA	Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute
Schmidt, Eric E.	USA	Former CEO and Chairman, Google LLC
Sikorski, Radoslaw	Poland	Harvard University, ex-minister of foreign affairs
Thiel, Peter	USA	President, Thiel Capital LLC
Wallenberg, Marcus	Sweden	Chairman, Skandinaviska Enskilda Banken AB
Winter, Jaap	Netherlands	Partner, Phyleon leadership & governance
Zeiler, Gerhard	Austria	Chief Revenue Officer, WarnerMedia LLC

Source: Bilderberg Group website (<https://bilderbergmeetings.org/background/steering-committee/steering-committee>)

Review of literature on Bilderberg Group alas gaps filled by this dissertation

Bilderberg Group has been studied by IR scholars (van der Pijl, 2010), sociologists (Wendt, 2016) as well as historians (Gijswijt, 2018). Yet, despite its multidisciplinary appeal, the club is systematically covered by just few academic publications. Some of these works explore solely Bilderberg Group's (early) Cold-War history (Aubourg, 2003; Gijswijt, 2018; Thompson, 1980; Wilford, 2003). Although valuable, such scholarship has only a limited use for this dissertation, which focuses on post-Cold War period.

Zieliński (2017) wrote the most recent publication that deals with post-Cold War developments within Bilderberg Group. This critical work contributed to existing research in several ways. For instance, it offers concrete example of possible lobbying that probably took place at Bilderberg meeting in 2015 (see chapter 3). Nonetheless, Zieliński produced just a chapter, in a form of an overview, so he could provide only anecdotal information on each of many points that he addressed.

Wendt (2016) authored the most recent monograph on Bilderberg Group. Unfortunately, this seminal publication might be hardly accessible to international audience, because it is written in German language. In first part of his book, Wendt surveyed sociological theories that can be applied in studies on elites and by extension, on Bilderberg Group. Subsequently, he shows how different actors portray this club. Most interesting is the section on how politicians and mainstream journalists (mis)represent Bilderberg Group and its power(lessness).

This dissertation extends Wendt's research in at least two ways. First, Wendt focuses on German newspapers, whereas this thesis includes also those from Britain and France (see chapter 5). More fundamentally, Wendt mapped various discourses about Bilderberg Group's power(lessness), but he did not try to establish which discourse corresponds most with reality. In other words, Wendt (2016: 3) avoids the complicated task of estimating how much power the club indeed has. This work offers such appraisal, albeit tentative (see chapter 3).

This thesis draws mainly on another ground-breaking monograph (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011), which is based on exclusive extensive interviews with 13 Bilderbergers. Some interviewees remain anonymous; others consented to disclose their identities. All assembled testimonies are interesting, but on the other hand, they do not

reveal much that is really surprising, counter-intuitive, controversial, let alone shocking. It could be that nothing surprising or controversial is happening at Bilderberg conferences. But it is also possible that the interviewees did not say everything they know.

The present dissertation extends Richardson's research in at least two ways. First, Richardson's book is not framed in any theory, whereas this thesis applies and enriches neo-Marxist school of thought, namely the concept of transnational capitalist class (see chapter 2 and conclusion). Second, Richardson offers virtually no quantitative findings (the same is also more or less true for the other reviewed authors). In contrast, this work includes dozens of tables with some basic, but original statistical figures and computations (see especially chapter 2 and 4).

Post-Cold War Bilderberg Group is briefly discussed in several other publications. One prominent example is a long book about the so-called "Superclass" (Rothkopf, 2008). The author of this fascinating study – an insider from U.S. elite – also quotes several Bilderbergers. Unfortunately, Rothkopf dedicates only few paragraphs to Bilderberg Group, which would be insufficient even if this club was really irrelevant, as one of the cited Bilderbergers claimed.

Van der Pijl (2010) investigated Bilderberg conference that took place in Istanbul in 2007. This research is valuable, although it focused on just one isolated Bilderberg meeting. However, the findings were presented in a section of a chapter, so the author had only short space. Another limitation lies in van der Pijl's sources, whose trustworthiness might be disputed.

To be objective, it is necessary to stress that much of the above mentioned scholarship (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011; Rothkopf, 2008; van der Pijl, 2010) was published before Bilderberg Group launched its official website. Because of this, it can be claimed that this dissertation is the first academic work that thoroughly exploits data from Bilderberg Group's new homepage. As a consequence, the findings presented here are probably the most reliable.

Structure and genealogy of the dissertation

This dissertation is a collection of five essays designed as chapters of more or less same length. Each chapter is written in form of an article, in order to make it publishable in

academic journals. So far, the first and second chapters have been published (Kantor, 2016; Kantor, 2017) and other two chapters (chapter 4 and 5) are currently under external review in journals from Web of Science database. This proves that the research project was worth pursuing and that it already gained recognition (including quotations) from established scholars.

The drafting and completing of every chapter occurred at different periods between the years 2012 and 2021. The first chapters are “the oldest” and the last “the youngest”. For the sake of authenticity, the first two chapters remain in a form in which they were published, although some new information could be added.

Finally, it should be stressed that each chapter was created for different (type of) journal(s). Thus, one chapter (the first) is purely theoretical, whereas some other entirely empirical (the third). The first chapter resembles review article, the second and third discussion papers, while the fourth and especially the fifth research articles. Admittedly, all this heterogeneity has some negative impact on the overall coherence of the dissertation. On the other hand, the topic of Bilderberg Group has various aspects that could be addressed in different ways, which at least partly justifies the “polyphonic” approach in this thesis. Indeed, it shows that the topic is so rich that it allows for variable types of research strategies that can be combined.

Yet, as one reviewer recommended, the coherence of the dissertation is now strengthened by additional final comments attached to each chapter. In line with the reviewer's suggestion, these comments summarize what the given chapter tells us about various forms of power and capital. Across social sciences, many types of power and capital were identified, but only some of them are highly relevant, when it comes to Bilderberg Group. So, for obvious reasons, the comments focus on – conventionally defined – political, economic and ideational/discursive power and on political, economic, social and cultural capital. Other notions like moral capital or erotic capital are left aside. Manifestations of the selected forms of power and capital are observed both inside Bilderberg Group network (especially in chapter 2 and 4) as well as in the outside world (primarily in chapter 3).

Outline of the chapters

The first chapter serves as a theoretical introduction, which explains why the thesis chose neo-Marxism as the framework for the subsequent empirical investigation. The chapter presents all relevant variants (as well as critiques) of the neo-Marxist concept of the transnational capitalist class (TCC), which is used as the main analytical tool.

The second chapter directly connects the TCC theory with the theme of Bilderberg Group. The chapter closely explores seven Bilderberg conferences from 2010 to 2016. The chapter analyzes the composition of attendees and topics of these gatherings and highlights how these empirical findings support the claim that (Euro-Atlantic) TCC has really developed.

The third chapter tries to estimate how powerful Bilderberg Group (and by extension, TCC) is. In political science, the question of power has always been in the center. Moreover, existing views on Bilderberg Group's power are significantly diverging. Neo-Marxists assert that TCC fosters economic integration and the same is said about Bilderberg Group. Therefore, the third chapter focuses mainly on European integration and transatlantic relations. Developments in these two areas provide the most suitable background on which Bilderberg Group's power(lessness) can be demonstrated.

The fourth chapter elaborates on one argument from the third chapter, namely that for politicians, participation at Bilderberg conferences is (sometimes) associated with career benefits. This dissertation is the first scholarly work that offers extensive empirical investigation, which attempts to (dis)prove this suspicion. Neo-Marxists stress that members of TCC have common interests and identities. Thus, it makes sense to assume that there is some group solidarity between Bilderbergers. Consequently, one can reasonably ask whether Bilderbergers help each other in professional life. The chapter shows that dozens of mainly European politicians *firstly* attended Bilderberg conference(s) and (shortly) *afterwards* became key ministers, prime ministers, presidents or high representatives of international organizations like EU, NATO, IMF, World Bank or UN.

The fifth chapter looks at how Bilderberg Group is portrayed in mass media. For decades, mainstream Western press was silent about the conferences. After 2010, Bilderberg Group is no longer taboo, but the quantity and quality of the coverage of this topic varies. The chapter provides basic textual analysis of articles on Bilderberg from 2010

to 2021 that were published in three opinion-shaping European dailies – British *The Guardian*, French *Le Monde* and German *Die Welt*.

Methodology of the dissertation

On the most general level, this dissertation is a qualitative case study. It thoroughly explores Bilderberg Group, which is one of the main global or transnational elite clubs. These clubs also include Trilateral Commission, World Economic Forum (WEF) and Club of Rome.

The case selection was motivated by several considerations. First, among the above mentioned clubs, Bilderberg Group is the oldest. Second, for a Czech scholar, Bilderberg Group is the most relevant club, because it unites only Euro-Atlantic elites, including few Central and Eastern Europeans. At the same time, Bilderberg Group fosters European integration and transatlantic ties. Needless to say, developments in these two areas have direct consequences for Czech Republic.

Finally, Bilderberg Group has been also the most controversial club. Bilderberg conferences were surrounded by the greatest secrecy, which nurtured various rumors and speculations. Consequently, there are more conspiracy theories about Bilderberg Group than about WEF, although both forums have been attended by more or less same members of the political, business and intellectual elite. This is all the more paradoxical given the fact that respected sources do not offer indicia (let alone evidence) of any (evil-minded) conspiracy that was plotted at Bilderberg Group. In contrast, there is reliable information about one political conspiracy that originated at WEF (see chapter 3). Despite this, elites proudly reveal their affiliation with WEF, but are often hesitant to admit their connections to Bilderberg Group.

Limitations of the dissertation

Inevitably, this dissertation has limitations that are inherent to the topic and its hard accessibility. The biggest limitation lies in the lack of available and reliable data. Therefore, unavoidably, some of the claims and conclusions had to be more or less speculative.

As indicated above, academic literature on Bilderberg Group is quite sparse. Mainstream media reports on Bilderberg are often rather short and/or superficial (purely descriptive). And Bilderberg Group itself has never released much information. Official

website of the network contains lists of topics and participants of few latest conferences. Yet, lists related to older meetings are now no longer displayed on Bilderberg website (previously they were – in the section meetings—>latest meetings). Fortunately, they can often be found elsewhere on the internet and the author of the thesis archived them during works on chapter 2. Here, the lists on conferences from 2010 to 2016 are meant. Lists related to all Bilderberg conferences were never published on the official website. But they are stored on the website Public Intelligence, which is another primary data source.

However, Public Intelligence warns that lists related to conferences from 1954 to 2006 are unofficial “and may contain inaccuracies”, presumably in the number and/or composition of the participants. Moreover, even official lists of participants are not always complete (see chapter 5). So this is the biggest caveat of the following investigations.

Intermezzo:

Reflections on reviewers' comments

One reviewer challenged this thesis fundamentally, so his comments are addressed here in separate section before empirical chapters. Most of the comments could not be (fully) incorporated, because this would require new research and substantial reworking of the thesis, which was not possible due to time constraints. Plus, the author believes that the current approach is also justifiable. So the following passages offer defense and counterarguments to the most serious objections.

Monograph versus collection of essays

The reviewer prefers dissertations written in form of coherent monograph. Admittedly, such format could be better in many cases. But dissertations as collection of essays are also legitimate and sometimes perhaps more suitable (depending also on the topic).

The most prestigious social science department in Czech Republic is arguably the Institute of Economic Studies on Charles University. And there, many dissertations are written as collection of essays. Recent examples include “Three Essays on Corporate Financial Misconduct and Market Reactions,” “Three essays on public procurement” and “Essays in Empirical Financial Economics”. Older examples include “Three Essays on Labor Market Institutional Environment,” “Three Essays on Gravity Equation” and “Four Essays on the Economics of Migration”.

More importantly, there is already a dissertation on Bilderberg Group written as monograph – dissertation of Ian Richardson that was later published as Richardson et al., 2011. Also for this reason, the author of this thesis decided to write on Bilderberg Group differently and produce collection of essays. In course of the research, it also turned out to be more suitable, because Bilderberg Group is studied from different angles.

Last but not least, collection of essays allows for easier fulfilment of the duty to publish two chapters before defense of the whole dissertation. Therefore, the chapters are written as relatively independent pieces with different ambitions in order to make them publishable as separate articles in various kinds of journals. Still, the whole thesis is currently

under review by Dutch Assoc. Prof. Angela Wigger for possible publication as a monograph in the series Progress in Political Economy – Manchester University Press. And in this revised version of the dissertation, the chapters are better interconnected by added final passages that discuss power and capital as suggested by the second reviewer.

The problem of limited data

The reviewer criticized that the data presented in the thesis are insufficient for inferring acceptable conclusions. For instance, he wrote that the data collected in the chapter 4 were “not processed by quantitative method and are not sufficient to be the bases of scientific process”.

Here, it is necessary to stress that the data used in the thesis are all primary data that are publicly available. Yes, these data are limited and will probably always be limited given the sensitive nature of the research subject. But even with limited data it can be shown that some hypothesis (e. g. that Bilderberg Group might work as career elevator) is plausible. At the same time, the thesis admits that the conclusions are preliminary and only further research can fully validate – or disqualify – them.

This approach is legitimate even in more rigorous natural sciences. It would be valuable and worth publishing if some limited data show that using of substance X is correlated with – let's say – higher chances of curing covid (or cancer). It would still be just correlations and from patients from – let's say – only one city (or country), so further research would be needed to definitely determine whether there is also causation and substance X really helps in curing covid (or cancer). But the first results have some value and deserve to be presented even if they are preliminary and some open questions remain.

Back to Bilderberg Group: for observing correlations, the data in chapter 4 are sufficient. The chapter went through all available lists of participants of all post-Cold-War Bilderberg conclaves. Career path of each political participant was then analyzed. This is sufficient for identification of group of politicians whose career advancement is correlated with Bilderberg participation. Processing by quantitative method (in rigorous sense) is not needed here. The tables related to each individual Bilderberg conference are suitable form of data presentation, because they also show important details – when and to what function

were some political participants of Bilderberg elevated. Because the thesis argues that most suspicious are cases of rapid career jumps (like that of Édouard Philippe).

Correlation versus causation

The hypothesis that affiliation to Bilderberg Group might have impact on nominations to key international organizations is based mainly on correlations, but in several cases, it seems that the thesis also provides some indicia of causation (at least in case of von der Leyen and Wolfensohn). All key international organizations (EU, NATO, IMF, and UN) are currently chaired by Bilderbergers (and they were also chaired by Bilderbergers in the past). It is improbable that this is just a coincidence. In other words: if the correlations are so strong, this can indicate that indeed, some type of causation is at play. But this question remains open.

Other possible correlations

The reviewer suggested that the chapter 4 should not focus only on correlations between attendance at Bilderberg conference(s) and career growth. According to the reviewer, one can probably also observe other correlations. For example, that “participation at Bilderberg preceded career descent” or that “career descent preceded Bilderberg participation”. Such research questions are also legitimate, but the thesis insists that it is justifiable to focus primarily on correlations between Bilderberg attendance and career growth. The reason is threefold.

First, academics as well as journalists should primarily elucidate things that are (potentially) problematic, controversial, and not “innocent”. And it is (potentially) more problematic and controversial if someone makes (great) career after attendance at semi-secret meeting than if someone's career declines after this attendance.

Second, in public discourse (see the quote from BBC in the motto of chapter 4), there are more hints to the possibility that some politicians make careers after participation at Bilderberg conclave than that someone's career declines after such participation.

Third, the thesis is able to suggest clear mechanism (social capital accumulation and/or favoritism/patronization/lobbying) why someone can make career after attendance at Bilderberg. In other words: the possible role of Bilderberg in career jumps is quite logical

and straightforward. On the other hand, the thesis can hardly imagine clear mechanism why someone should lose career after attendance at Bilderberg. Put differently, the possible link between appearance at Bilderberg and career decline does not seem to be so logical and straightforward.

The absence of new interviews with Bilderbergers

The reviewer criticized that the author did not offer his own interviews with Bilderbergers (although interviews with Bilderbergers made by other researchers are extensively used). According to the reviewer, especially chapter 4 should have included information from the author's interviews. True, interviews could provide further added value to the chapter. But the potential contribution of interviews is not automatic and the chapter has value even without them.

First, there is already a dissertation on Bilderberg Group based (solely) on interviews (Richardson et al., 2011). Therefore, it makes sense to write dissertation on Bilderberg Group that exploits rather other sources of data. Richardson's work did not analyze lists of participants and topics of Bilderberg conferences and did not survey media coverage on these meetings. Both these data sources are exploited in this dissertation.

Importantly, Richardson apparently did not ask Bilderbergers questions that are really sensitive. He probably knew that if he asked such questions, most Bilderbergers would not grant him interviews (let alone non-anonymous). So, in Richardson's whole book, there is virtually no discussion of possible lobbying by Bilderbergers or favoritism/patronization between them. Therefore, it is likely that if the author of this dissertation himself asked these questions to Bilderbergers, they would not agree to be interviewed (let alone non-anonymously). Or they would not tell the (whole) truth. After all, (active) politicians lie (Mearsheimer, 2011), so even if some new personal testimonies were gained, their trustworthiness could be debatable.

Plus, it cannot be reasonably expected that Czech student would be able to gain access to such high-profile foreign politicians like Ursula von der Leyen, Emmanuel Macron, Bill Clinton etc. And even if such access was gained, it is improbable that these politicians would (honestly) respond to sensitive questions on possible role of Bilderberg Group in their careers.

Nonetheless, the thesis admits that interviews should be one part of future research. The author of the thesis will himself continue in the research, but other (more established) scholars are encouraged to do so as well. At the same time, it is legitimate to present first findings in this research, although they might be preliminary.

At the minimum, the chapter 4 identified group of Bilderbergers to whom it makes sense to ask questions about possible role of “factor Bilderberg” in their career advancements. Post-Cold War Bilderberg conferences were attended by hundreds of politicians and it would be impossible to try to make interviews with all of them. So, the contribution of the chapter 4 lies at least in the fact that it significantly reduced the number of Bilderbergers who are logical candidates for interviews (and/or process tracing). From hundreds of political attendees of Bilderberg conclaves, the chapter 4 identified dozens of individuals whose career jumps are most suspicious in terms of possible role of “factor Bilderberg”. Due to this, scholars now know on whom exactly the future research should focus.

Assessing influence: the problem of levels of analysis

The reviewer problematized the approach adopted in chapter 3, which tries to estimate the influence of Bilderberg Group as a whole. According to the reviewer, “a distinction should be made between the influence of individuals who happened to attend Bilderberg Group meetings and the influence of Bilderberg Group itself.” This dispute revolves around the most desirable level of analysis.

Strictly speaking, in certain sense, it would be probably more precise to estimate power/influence of individual Bilderbergers and not of Bilderberg Group as a whole. Yet similar generalizations can be found in existing literature. Agency/power is commonly accorded to organizations, although logically only certain representatives of these organizations can somehow act. For instance, Sklair (2002: 159) writes simply that „Transnational corporations engage in political activities...” and that ITT company was involved in coup against Allende (Sklair, 2002: 160). Implicitly, of course, managers and/or owners (or other representatives) of these corporations are meant.

For analytical reasons, it makes sense to resort to some generalizations (or abstractions). In other words: one can legitimately avoid specifics and speak of organizations

and their agency and influence. It is not always necessary to decompose these organizations (or other general entities) to the most basic level of analysis – to individuals. After all, the authoritative (neo)realist tradition of International Relations usually speaks only of states (high level of generalization/abstraction) and rarely bother to deal with more specific parts or representatives of states.

Van Apeldoorn (2000) attributes agency to the European Roundtable of Industrialists (ERT) as a whole and shows that this forum has been influential within EU. True, he also enlists individual members of ERT (both on level of individual corporations as well as individual representatives of these corporations) and speaks of their actions. But his primary level of analysis is ERT as a whole. He concludes that ERT was influential, without making distinction between the influence of individual members of ERT and the influence of ERT itself.

There are significant ideological and membership overlaps between ERT and Bilderberg Group (see chapter 3). So, if van Apeldoorn could attribute some agency and influence to ERT at large, this thesis does the same (albeit to lesser degree) vis-à-vis Bilderberg Group.

Unity of (transnational) capitalist class: myth or reality?

This thesis draws on neo-Marxist accounts, so it logically presupposes existence of some kind of transnational capitalist class (TCC). Yet, the reviewer considers such assumption “unrealistic”. According to him, it is hard to imagine (high degree of) unity among capitalists. The reviewer stresses inter-capitalist rivalries stemming from competition on the market, but also from other factors. In his view, corporations are divided by their domicile (“French firms can stand against German firms”) and business model (“Import competing against export oriented within each country”). Therefore, it is allegedly improbable that capitalists could find “long-term agreement on common interests”.

Neo-Marxists argue that this common interest revolves mainly around economic liberalization. Yet, the reviewer counters that some industries are likely to prefer rather protectionism than free market. The general doubt is well summarized by this reviewer's question: “what unity of interest can we expect between big tech or green deal visionaries and powerful groups in the conventional energy business?”

The dispute over capitalist unity is complex and therefore, it is addressed in several separate comments below. These comments extend and clarify arguments for the existence of TCC that are presented especially in chapter 1 and 2.

Capitalist unity in interests and identity

Owners and managers of both green deal firms and big oil most probably vote for market-friendly politicians, so right-wing politicians, not left-wing, let alone radical left-wing. This strongly suggests some unity of interest – class interest. Moreover, owners and managers of both green deal firms and big oil are probably members of same elite networks – not necessarily Bilderberg Group, but business chambers, Rotary Clubs, Aspen Institute etc.

Plus, owners and managers of both green deal firms and big oil probably share similar (luxury) lifestyles. They probably live in same neighborhoods for rich that are separated from those for poor. Plus, they probably studied at same elite (private) schools and want their children to study there as well. In short, they share privileges and common interest to reproduce them.

French and German firms may compete with one another, but that does not exclude the possibility that they can coordinate themselves in certain respects. On both national and transnational level, it is commonplace that even direct competitors are members of same sectoral associations and/or chambers of commerce (or other alliances), because they share some (business/class-wide) interests.

Inevitably, in certain sense, the TCC concept is generalization (and thus, simplification), so it cannot deal much with relative details. In any case, when neo-Marxists claim that TCC promotes economic liberalization and integration, it does not mean that support for these goals is equally strong among all members of TCC. It may be that at least sometimes, liberalization is more supported by financial than industrial capitalists.

In sum, neo-Marxists admit tensions inside TCC. They recognize that there can be and often are differences in some interests of financial and industrial capital and of more globally and less globally operating firms (van Apeldoorn, 2000: 177, note 10). But many of these differences revolve around *means*, rather than the ultimate *ends*.

Plus, if some industry would not benefit (so much) from liberalization, its dissent can be moderated or even overcome: “Even unenthusiastic industries can be incorporated in

pan-capitalist campaigns for globalizing agreements and policy changes. Such alliances are fostered by de facto state-business bargains, wherein skeptical industries agree not to object in return for concessions in the details.” (Fairbrother, 2014: 1364) NAFTA is one example: „not just export-oriented industries but even net importing industries spent money in efforts to ensure NAFTA’s passage in the U.S. Congress. (...) (...) Even business groups at risk thus supported NAFTA“ (Fairbrother, 2014: 1342)

Finally, neo-Marxists do not claim that the unity of capitalists is forever fixed on exactly same sets of ideas/actions. For instance: European Round Table of Industrialists always tried to formulate common standpoint, but in the past, this standpoint was not as neoliberal as it is now (van Apeldoorn, 2000: 168-169).

Unity of capitalists as profit/rent-seekers

Most generally, all firms – regardless of their domicile, business model and product/service – pursue commercial activities oriented towards (short-term) profit. So, in principle, all firms prefer conditions that allow maximum freedom for profit maximization. It follows that all firms generally prefer lower taxes and less or no regulation.

Maximum freedom for profit maximization requires access to foreign markets. Therefore, it is logical to claim that business elites support trade liberalization that facilitates free flow of goods and capital. That is why all (post-Cold-War) US administrations pursued foreign policy of “Open Door imperialism” (van Apeldoorn – de Graaff, 2016). This overarching foreign policy objective has been conducive – although to varying degrees – to interests of capitalists from (almost) all sectors of US economy. In other words: although (U.S.) financial and industrial capitalists do not have completely identical interests, they still can find common ground in many respects.

It may be that on domestic market, American or French firms would prefer some protectionism. But vis-à-vis foreign markets, these same firms would prefer liberalization. Therefore, Western governments and firms can collectively push for opening of the markets in Global South – for example via Western-controlled international institutions like IMF.

Example from Europe: as demonstrated by van Apeldoorn (2000), completion of European internal market – and to lesser extent also introduction of euro – was a shared goal of industrialists across Europe. Similarly, Brexit was opposed by representatives of

financial (AXA, Lazard) as well as industrial (Airbus) capital (International Business Times, 7.6.2016). This is to say that neo-Marxists are not always exaggerating when they speak of common interests of capitalists. At least sometimes, capitalists from different countries and/or different sectors can form relatively “united front”. Banerjee (2020) argues that “collective interests of large corporations” can be seen also from the fact that these corporations coordinate their responses to demands from social movements.

Unity of capitalists vis-à-vis workers

Most fundamentally, the lowest common denominator of the unity of capitalists is their collective long-term interest in preserving capitalist system characterized by structural dominance of capital over labour. Top non-Marxist academic journal published study which documents the existence of exploitation in OECD countries (Zafirovski, 2019). So, to put it straightforward, all capitalists have collective long-term interest in preserving the system that allows exploitation.

In other words: at the minimum, capitalist unity is based on opposition to organized labour. If there is erosion of social rights (Burgi, 2014) and decline in the labor/wage share of national income (Özdemir, 2019), power of organized labour must be diminishing and capitalist power/unity strengthening. If trade unionists are no longer invited to Bilderberg meetings, this must be interpreted as another sign of crumbling of the post-WWII class compromise.

Importantly, capitalists intentionally reproduce or even deepen this power imbalance: “Apart from communicating its neoliberal views..., at several critical moments the ERT (European Round Table of Industrialists – note) also intervened directly to halt the construction of ‘Social Europe’.” (van Apeldoorn, 2000: 180, note 60).

In sum, the current world is characterized by conflict (sometimes rather latent, but often open) between democracy and capitalism (Reich, 2007; Hahnel, 2009; Kuttner, 2018), or more broadly, between state(s) and market(s) (Strange, 1996; Linn, 2006; Schwartz, 2018). And it is logical to assume that all capitalists want capitalism and market to win in this conflict.

Unity in disunity: Centripetal and centrifugal forces inside TCC

Yet, of course, like any other big group (societal or inter-state), TCC too is mixture of centripetal and centrifugal forces. But this should not be seen as a proof that it is not possible to argue that to certain extent and in certain areas, TCC can be portrayed as more or less collective actor.

In short, TCC seems to be best captured by the famous buzzword “unity in disunity”. True, one might say that Marxists overplay the centripetal forces. The chapter 1 touches on this issue. But this objection can also be reversed: it might be that critics of the concept of TCC overplay centrifugal forces. If these critics were consequential, they will have to dispute the meaningfulness of other broad notions that are used for entities which also resemble “unity in disunity” – Atlantic alliance or Western civilization, for instance.

Another example of “unity in disunity” is the transnational network of freemasonry, which is mentioned in chapter 1 as historical precedent of transnational class formation. There were/are also frictions (even “sort of freemasons' cold war”) between some lodges (e.g. French vs. British, French vs. US), but at the same time, all freemasons are expected to form “brotherhood” (especially as opposed to outsiders) and to share (push through) certain ideas like universalism (cosmopolitanism) and humanism (Bauer, 2014: 21-28). So, despite centrifugal forces inside the network, various freemasons can cooperate on common objectives. One example of such successful cooperation was the establishment of League of Nations (Bauer, 2014: 27).

Business support for liberalization

The reviewer is skeptical about neo-Marxist accounts that in his view tend to portray economic liberalization “as the result of the implementation of a plan by a coherent group of business and right-wing politicians”. The reviewer suggested alternative explanation that liberalization and integration was often more complex process (not only business-driven) and that in some cases (in EU), liberalization could eventually materialize in scope and form that (almost) no one expected or planned.

Such perspective is also legitimate. Yet, if some liberalization was unforeseen and unplanned (and therefore rather random result to certain extent), it is important to ask why it survived. One possible answer: if it was not in principle preferred course of powerful

actors, it would probably be reversed or modified at least partially. In other words, even if some liberalization was initially more or less unplanned result, it must (then) have support of influential groups in order to continue.

Market and trade liberalization has been prevailing pattern of last several decades – this course could not be sustained for such a long time if it was not (constantly) supported (or even driven) by powerful actors, primarily business (capitalist) elites. This is not to say that liberalization projects were supported only by business elites, but this social group was one of the most active and purposeful. And right-wing politicians are generally more in favor of liberalization and most vast liberalization took place after the US and British conservative revolution in 1979 and global right-wing triumph in 1989.

Most fundamentally, it is possible to come up with alternative explanations for almost every research question. So, every scholar has to make some basic choices and these should be respected. As the reviewer acknowledges, in the end, it is up to each individual to choose from the variety of possible explanations. This thesis is framed by neo-Marxist approaches, so it logically prefers explanation that emphasizes the influence of corporate (capitalist) elites (and their fellows in political and intellectual spheres). And this explanation is substantiated and established in academic literature.

Consider for example the works of Dreiling (2020) and Fairbrother (2014), which portray liberalization as a largely planned, business-driven process. Dreiling shows that for decades, US corporate leaders played important (if not decisive) role in promoting liberalization projects both at domestic as well as international scene. They advanced free market/free trade agendas via business institutions (e.g. Business Roundtable, Emergency Committee for American Trade – ECAT), right-wing think-tanks (e.g. American Enterprise Institute), but also via advisory and other posts that they gained in politics. Thus, the long-term collective effort of US corporations was one of the driving forces behind GATT rounds, WTO creation, NAFTA creation and liberalization of trade with China.

In Dreiling's (2020: 990) words: „ECAT, usually with the Business Roundtable..., led every major transformation in US trade policy during the three decades prior.” NAFTA came into existence mainly thanks to campaign of “a broad business coalition... that coordinated congressional testimony, press releases, and frequent lobbying” (Dreiling, 2020: 987). Noteworthy, corporate elites proceeded tactically and expanded the free markets/free trade

universe gradually: “Just one year following the passage of NAFTA, the corporate coalition was reorganized and renamed to focus on the successful completion of the Uruguay Rounds of the GATT and the creation of the WTO.” (Dreiling, 2020: 987).

Importantly, US capitalists were eager to trade normally with Chinese communists, regardless of their crimes. And US president willingly assisted US capitalists in their attempts to exploit the opportunities of enormous Chinese market. So, in second half of 1990s, US political and economic elite joined forces and successfully pushed through trade liberalization with China. As Dreiling (2020: 989) put it: “Consider the class and state dynamics involved in the China Permanent Normal Trade Relations campaign, where a multipronged strategy involving the Clinton White House and leading corporate policy and lobbying organizations was pursued in order to swing votes in congressional districts throughout the country. Despite an energized opposition from the left and the right, the corporate campaign would ultimately outstrip its opponents in what some observers have termed the most expensive lobbying campaign in US history.”

Fairbrother goes even further and extends Dreiling's argument to Canada and even to all developed countries: “In brief, in developed countries, private sector mobilization has been central to the rise of globalization” (Fairbrother, 2014: 1326) conceived as “growing economic integration among nations via trade and direct investment” (Fairbrother, 2014: 1325).

Finally, by highlighting the role of business (capitalist) elites, this dissertation responds to the call for “bringing the corporation back to the centre of scholarly attention in the fields of IR and IPE”. (Babic – Fichtner – Heemskerk, 2017: 39)

Chapter 1

Global Elite as Transnational Capitalist Class

Abstract of the chapter

This chapter evaluates how IR grand theories can conceptualize the phenomenon of global elite. It compares and synthesizes (neo)liberalism, constructivism, feminism and neo-Marxism. Liberal approaches use the analytical tool of transnational actors or transnational networks. In constructivist's perspective, part of global elite falls into the category of epistemic community. Feminists offer the term Davos Men. Neo-Marxist conceptualization revolves around the notion of transnational capitalist class. The chapter concludes that neo-Marxist IR theory best accounts for the global elite and therefore, the debates on the transnational capitalist class are thoroughly and critically reviewed.

Introduction

Mainstream accounts of globalization often portray this crucial phenomenon in rather de-personalized manner. Globalization is said to be produced by almost anonymous forces of (Western) modernity, particularly rationalism, capitalism and technology [Held et al. 1999: 10–12; Scholte 2000: 89–108].

However, contrary to this explanation, some scholars stress the human-induced, elite-driven nature of current globalization [Sklair 2001: x; Sener 2007: 119–120]. They argue that powerful social groups shape important worldwide developments or even that globalization – far from being spontaneous automatic process (as sometimes suggested) – was caused by concrete political decisions [Santos 2006: 395].

Here, the research speaks of “global elite(s)”, as this term, loosely conceived, has been established in the journalistic [Freeland 2011; Unruh – Cabrera 2013] as well as academic [Dupuis-Déri 2007; Conti – O’Neil 2007; Rothkopf 2008; Davidson – Poor – Williams 2009; Pakulski 2010; Kakabadse – Kakabadse 2012; Hoffmann-Lange 2012; Robertson 2014; Goxe – Belhoste 2015] literature, especially in neo-Marxist [Robinson 2000; Harris 2013] and feminist [Eisenstein 2009] writings. However, in these works (with certain

exception of [Pakulski 2010]), the key expression “global elite” is not seriously conceptualized and theorized, but rather intuitively used as an easy label to denote the small cosmopolite group of the most influential businessmen, politicians, bureaucrats and opinion-makers.

Most strikingly, in the above mentioned texts (with certain exception of [Hoffmann-Lange 2012]), the whole topic is tackled without (explicit) links to International Relations (IR) discipline. Yet IR should be natural part of this pressing debate, since global elite comprises individuals from various countries who meet on different continents and influence the world politics. Moreover, in recent years, IR has undergone the so-called “sociological turn” [Lawson – Shilliam 2010]. In addition, within the field, there is a revived interest in IR (grand) theories¹⁾.

Indeed, IR theories can offer their own peculiar conceptualizations of the global elite entity. Yet, one question remains to be answered: if IR scholars are to speak about global elite, which theory should they prefer as the one best equipped to deal with this matter?

Hence, the following review aims to assess how well the relevant IR theories describe the global elite. In this regard, the chapter summarizes and compares (neo)liberalism, constructivism, feminism and neo-Marxism. These theories were selected for two reasons. First, they all represent the so-called “grand theories” [Eriksson 2014: 105] and as such, they should be able to discern and satisfactorily cover (new) “grand themes” as globalization increasingly is and – by extension, yet to a lesser degree – global elite too,²⁾ as will be argued below. Second, and most importantly, all examined theories (unlike (neo)realism, which is therefore omitted) place emphasis on non-state actors, including various (transnational) social groups. Therefore, it is legitimate to ask which of these theories recognizes the global elite and offers the most accurate³⁾, elaborated⁴⁾ and widely used⁵⁾ conceptualization for it.

When addressing global elite, liberal approaches can use their analytical framework of transnational actors or transnational networks [Nye – Keohane 1971]. If seen from constructivist’s perspective, part of global elite falls into the category of “epistemic community” [Haas 1992]. Feminists might capture the global elite with their term “Davos Men” [Beneria 1999; Danner – Young 2003]. Finally, neo-Marxist theorizing puts forward the notion of “transnational capitalist class” [Gill 2009 (1990); Sklair 1997; Robinson – Harris 2000; van Apeldoorn 2004; Carroll 2010].

After reviewing these possible conceptualizations, the chapter judges that neo-Marxism best accounts for the global elite. Though quite intuitive, this is an important finding, which corroborates the continued validity of (often overlooked) Marxist ideas, since theoretical approaches should be evaluated according to their capacity to provide an adequate grasp of crucial phenomena [Burchill et al. 2005: 23–24] as the global elite undoubtedly is. However, in post-communist countries, Marxist thinking needs to be rediscovered and revitalized, so the present chapter also wants to contribute to this task. At the same time, this chapter attempts to foster closer dialogue between IR, political science, sociology and economics, all in line with current appeals for more interdisciplinary scholarship. Finally, the chapter responds to recent calls for “a more critical investigation of who the global elite are and how they might be studied” [McKenna – Ravishankar – Weir 2015: 118].

The chapter proceeds in four main parts, dedicated successively to (neo)liberalism, constructivism, feminism and neo-Marxism. At the beginning of each part, every theory is briefly sketched out, with its origins and general basic principles. Afterwards, there is always an outline and debate of the special conceptualization that the given theory can offer for the global elite. Then, in the section entitled “discussion of the findings”, the evaluation is made and neo-Marxism vindicated because of relative superiority of its notion of transnational capitalist class. The end of the chapter provides concluding remarks on today’s relevance of Marxism and its research on transnational capitalist class.

Global elite in (neo)liberalism

Liberalism is one of the oldest and richest IR theories. Moreover, right from the beginning, this stream has been characterized by its non-state-centric profile. Instead, quite in line with neo-Marxism, liberal approaches traditionally focus primarily on individuals and social groups [Viotti – Kauppi 1999: 200–209]. Because of this ontological position, liberal accounts are often subsumed under the broader heading of “pluralism”.

At the same time, liberal perspectives generally prioritize economic over security and other considerations. It means that material prosperity is seen as more important (and desirable) goal than, for instance, (country’s) military status, political prestige or cultural self-

determination. Yet, again, this “economism” brings liberalism close to Marxism [Moravcsik 1997: 522, note 23].

However, it seems that contrary to Marxists, liberals somehow hesitate to point to capitalists as the most significant social group. This is surprising, since liberals, just like neo-Marxists, contend that states’ foreign policy basically reflects the interests of dominant domestic constituencies [Moravcsik 1997: 516–519].

That said, the leverage of capitalists can hardly be disputed. Obviously, they represent a powerful social group (“class”) that repeatedly succeeded in promoting its own cause. For example, corporate (industrial) interests managed to influence EU governance and discourse and played an important role in completing the internal market [van Apeldoorn 2000]. Similarly, to a large degree, (transnational) business agendas have been shaping all post-cold war U.S. grand strategies of “Open Door imperialism”, regardless of the actual administration in office [van Apeldoorn – de Graaff 2014: 46, 49–50].

It follows that the primary focus on capitalists is more than justified. Indeed, one stream of liberalism has been dubbed “commercial liberalism” [Moravcsik 1997: 528–530]. So, one would expect that (international) business community should be at the center of (at least) this liberal research program, but it is hard to find works of such kind.

Transnational actors: from corporations to terrorists

Although neoliberals principally submit to the key realist premise of states as the main actors [Nye – Keohane 1971: 342], they nevertheless emphasize – just like neo-Marxists – the global interconnectedness (“complex interdependence”) of almost all states as well as markets and societies. Indeed, both neoliberals and neo-Marxists believe that nation-states are increasingly challenged (weakened, bypassed) by various transnational processes [Nye – Keohane 1971: 345; Slaughter 1997: 192, 197].

In this respect, neoliberal IR theory stresses the role of “transnational relations”, which encompass intensifying multilateral interactions (flows of information, goods, people) occurring across and beyond nation states [Nye – Keohane 1971: 331]. Consequently, neoliberals introduced the term “transnational actors” [Nye – Keohane 1971: 330]. These players can operate on global or regional level, in one or more issue-areas [Risse 2002: 255].

They might have formal structures (as firms do), but not necessarily (as transnational movements show).

As already indicated, transnational actors include corporations, activists' groups (NGOs), but also churches, terrorists (and other criminal organizations) or the so-called governmental networks as coalitions of various domestic officials (bureaucrats, judges, etc.) and their respective counterparts abroad [Slaughter 1997]. However, as will be clear later on, the neoliberal notion of transnational governmental networks seems to be just a subset of a broader constructivist concept of transnational epistemic communities, since both labels denote small interlinked groups of professionals with expert knowledge in given issue-areas.

Apart from transnational actors, neoliberals also propound the almost synonymous notion of "transnational networks" [Nye – Keohane 1971: 331]. Most importantly, it is claimed that transnational actors/networks usually dispose of some autonomy. It means that they can pursue independent "private foreign policies" [Nye – Keohane 1971: 341] and even compete with the states. This might be true especially for corporations, since they often possess wealth that far exceeds that of many (developing) countries.

Interestingly, the neoliberal emphasis on corporations parallels similar obsession in neo-Marxists circles. Thus, in a sense, it can be argued that neoliberals and neo-Marxists share the same object of study, but not the approach to it.

In sum, network theories of world politics [Hafner-Burton – Kahler – Montgomery 2009] are suitable for studies of the global elite. Hence, in neoliberal analytical framework, the global elite can be conceptualized as the key transnational actor (for similar argument see [van Apeldoorn 2004: 162]) or transnational network. However, it is hard to find any publication that explicitly applies this neoliberal category on the topic of the global elite. Nevertheless, in a recent book on Bilderberg Group, the notion of transnational (elite) network is used [Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse 2011].

Global elite in constructivism

Like feminism, constructivism has entered the field of IR quite recently. In fact, both theories gained attention almost simultaneously in the 90th. Moreover, they share some general features stemming from their joint inspiration from sociology.

Feminism as well as constructivism stress that institutions are socially constructed. Accordingly, both schools of thought emphasize the role of nonmaterial (ideational) factors, especially norms, values and identities. As a consequence, many feminist and constructivist works examine the socialization processes (how men internalize masculine gender attributes or how states embrace expected patterns of interaction, for example in various “cultures of anarchy”).

Constructivism can also focus on socialization of the global elite. Nevertheless, with regard to IR theory, it would be more productive to relate the global elite to the well-developed constructivist concept of epistemic community. Two reasons justify this attempt. First, like global elite, the term “epistemic community” denotes a relatively small group of people [Haas 1992: 27] who usually form some transnational social/policy network. Second, similar to global elite, epistemic community has (potentially) great influence, since “control over knowledge and information is an important dimension of power” [Haas 1992: 2].

Neoliberal epistemic community: knowledge in service of power

Epistemic communities are said to provide expertise in specific issue-areas. In other words, epistemic community consists of specialists with common “set of normative and principled beliefs” [Haas 1992: 3]. It means that the members stick to the same values. Moreover, they have “a shared policy enterprise” [Haas 1992: 16], which practically amounts to “common interests” [Haas 1992: 18].

Politicians frequently seek epistemic communities for consultations, without which it would be difficult to successfully manage many increasingly complex problems. In addition, epistemic communities can themselves set the agendas and/or influence subsequent decision-making [Haas 1992: 4]. To this end, members of epistemic communities operate from various think tanks, universities, regulatory agencies and they maintain ties with one another through conferences, journals, research collaboration and other rather informal channels. Most importantly, there are transnational epistemic communities that work effectively across state borders. As such, these epistemic communities are examples of the above-mentioned transnational actors [Risse 2002: 256].

The involvement and impact of various epistemic communities have been documented in many different areas of both “low” (environmental protection) and “high”

(trade in services and especially nuclear arms control) politics [Haas 1992: 5]. For instance, the economic order after the WWII was influenced by epistemic community of Keynesian economists [Haas 1992: 19]. Today, similarly, many authors stress the existence of epistemic community of neoliberal economists [Chwieroth 2007: 446]. Not surprisingly, the “neoliberal epistemic community” is said to dominate in the global financial institutions like IMF, World Bank, but also in “US Treasury and ministries of finance around the world” [Hulme 2010: 22]. Some scholars use the term “neo(-)liberal epistemic community” with hyphen [Coleman – Skogstad 1995: 242], while others without it [Fisher – Gould – Houghton 2007: 990; Neubauer 2012: 2178].

More fundamentally, this group need not be composed only of economists. Other members of neoliberal epistemic community include right-wing journalists, NGO and think-tanks representatives, but also politicians and businessmen, especially those affiliated with financial sector [Fisher – Gould – Houghton 2007: 992; Neubauer 2012: 2178–2180]. Even (European) central bankers can constitute epistemic community [Verdun 1999: 323] and from neo-Marxist perspective, the same is true for the whole “transnational business elite” [van Apeldoorn 2004: 149].

Simultaneously, one might speak of “transnational neo(-)liberal epistemic community” [Drulák – Königová 2005: 157; Laursen 2010: 48]. As will be clear later on, the character and composition of (transnational) neoliberal epistemic community resembles the transnational capitalist class or at least some of its fractions (the political, technical and corporate one, according to Sklair’s classification). Both labels denote relatively small groups with overlapping membership and, most importantly, with same objective – development, legitimization and promotion of market-friendly ideas and practices. Hence, to translate it into Marxist language, the (transnational) neoliberal epistemic community plays the role of today’s organic intellectuals in the sense of Gramscian notion of hegemony.

Global elite in feminism

Although a newcomer in IR, feminism has already made significant original contributions to the discipline (as well as to the social science as a whole). One of such “value-added” is the feminist approach to the global elite, as will be argued below.

Yet, at the same time, feminism resembles (or directly draws on) some aspects of other IR theories. Most notably, the “gender turn” shares several basic outlooks with neo-Marxism. Interestingly, feminist scholars, just like Marxists, often focus primarily – and critically – on the economy and (division of) labor [Kolářová 2006: 1242, 1244], or to put it differently, on the conflicting ways how (capitalist) monetary (male) commodity production and non-monetary (feminine) social reproduction are structurally organized and asymmetrically interdependent [Acker 2004: 23–25].

In a sense, to paraphrase the famous Clausewitz’s statement, feminism (at least in its more radical forms) could be even perceived as “the continuation of Marxism by other means”. That is why conservatives usually dislike feminism. They believe that it more or less reproduces the sensitive dichotomy of oppressors and oppressed. Of course, in feminism, women (rather than workers) constitute the main oppressed social group and men are mostly the oppressors (in one way or another). Thus, simply speaking, in feminism the class struggle seems to be merely replaced by the conflict of genders and the proletarian internationalism by the “global sisterhood”.

Moreover, there are other striking parallels. Trivial yet important, the notorious Marxist observation establishes that all hitherto existing societies have been class societies. Obviously, similar conclusion can be reached from the feminist perspective: all hitherto existing societies have been patriarchal societies [Hearn 2004: 51]. It means that in (almost) every corner of the world and in any historical period, patriarchy was (and still is) the decisive feature of social realm. Yet, patriarchy might be only a diplomatic expression for male dominance and female subordination (or outright exploitation), which returns us to the notion of social antagonism (or contradictions) so important for Marxists.

One important source of women’s disadvantageous position lies in the economic sphere. Although they constitute approximately half of all world population, women own extremely little wealth. This forces them to work as (low) wage laborers, whereas men (due to assets possession) become capitalists (or political decision-makers) who control finances and the whole economy [Kolářová 2006: 1246]. As a consequence, there have been debates about the “feminization of poverty” [Gimenez 2004: 90] or “feminization of the proletariat” [Eschle 2004: 113]. So, here again, the overlap between feminist and Marxist explanations is once more evident.

In any case, no one disputes that women have been differently socialized than men. It follows that women were (and still are) not expected to play the same social roles as their male counterparts [Burchill et al. 2005: 224]. More importantly, the typical feminine social roles have been somehow inferior, in terms of accorded social status (prestigious male public vs. overlooked female private engagements) and/or material rewards (paid male public vs. unpaid female private works). Hence, all-pervasive (power) asymmetries can be found in the complex gender relations as in the relations between upper and under classes.

Thus, like neo-Marxists, feminists tend to focus on inequalities (not only gender-, but also race-, and class-based) and various forms of hierarchies. At the same time, feminists, as well as neo-Marxists, stress the possibility of fundamental change by offering their own normative visions of alternative social settings. In accordance with neo-Marxism, feminist “utopias” revolve around the demand of greater social justice – for women, but also for other non-privileged social groups [Danner – Young 2003: 87].

Furthermore, neo-Marxists claim that the existing institutions reflect the interests of the ruling (capitalist) class. From the feminist perspective, the social realm appears very similar: the decisive institutions are also more or less biased, this time in favor of men, or better to say, male gender [Burchill et al. 2005: 218–219]. Hence, one can speak of “masculine institutions” [Danner – Young 2003: 82], since both states and markets (key social institutions in today’s world) have “gendered nature” [Danner – Young 2003: 86].

As neo-Marxism with regard to capitalists, feminist streams see their key social group (men) as the “dominant collective and individual agents of social practices” [Hearn 2004: 59]. Plus, importantly, the crucial Marxist notion of class can be found in gender studies as well. Some pro-feminist authors conceptualize men “as a gender class” [Hearn 2004: 49]. Moreover, men turn out to be the ruling class [Hearn 2004: 61].

In addition, the neo-Marxist, Gramsci-inspired concept of hegemony has also been applied in gender realm. Thus, feminist scholars speak not only of “hegemonic masculinities”, but of outright “hegemony of men” [Hearn 2004: 50] or “male hegemony” [Hearn 2004: 53] – in relation to women, but also children and some other men (and perhaps nature as in ecofeminism).

Nevertheless, every hegemony (class or gender) is based not only on (overt) power/force; it also presupposes (and generates) some degree of consent (although perhaps not

reflected) on the part of the subordinated so that almost everyone thinks that the prevailing practices are “natural” or “normal” [Hearn 2004: 54] and thus, the hegemony is not challenged. To this end, mass medias are very instrumental [Hearn 2004: 54] in promoting the required norms and values – just the way it is suggested by neo-Marxist Leslie Sklair [1997] in case of consumerism as the propagated capitalist ideology.

Davos Men as the hegemonic masculinity

In a sense, male dominance and corresponding masculine bias can be traced even in the mainstream theories of globalization [Eschle 2004: 109]. So, like neo-Marxists, feminists scholars tend to emphasize that globalization is not inevitable, but rather deliberately constructed process. Men elites rule the world and they also profit most from the current order [Kolářová 2006: 1244].

Indeed, the global elite represents the perfect embodiment of patriarchy. Regardless of few notable exceptions, it has been almost exclusively composed of men, who stick to the masculine values like individualism and competitiveness [Benería 1999: 68]. Although not explicitly with reference to the global elite, feminists use the term “Davos Man” when dealing with this exclusive group of people [Danner – Young 2003: 86] who meet annually at the World Economic Forum. As Benería [1999: 68] puts it: “The Davos Man [...] includes businessmen, bankers, officials, and intellectuals who hold university degrees, work with words and numbers, speak some English and share beliefs in individualism, market economics and democracy. They control many of the world’s governments, and the bulk of its economic and military capabilities.”

Hence, Davos man is a symbol of hegemonic masculinity, since masculinity has been traditionally associated with public life [Benería 1999: 70], but also with other attributes like global, theoretical, mobile, flexible, cosmopolite or modern leaning – as opposed to femininity as something (more) local, static, traditional. Indeed, high politics and financial sphere are extremely masculinized, which means occupied by men driven by egocentrism and technical rationality.

Hegemonic masculinity might be even associated with aggressiveness or “at least” controlling [Hearn 2004: 58]. In any case, it relates to men’s propensity for (exercising) power [Hearn 2004: 51]. On the other hand, femininity can be seen as more cooperative and

empathetic – not only in romanticizing (stereotyping) idealizations, but also according to scientific experiments [Benería 1999: 71].

Resembling the notion of the transnational capitalist class, the currently dominant form of masculinity is dubbed “transnational business masculinity” [Danner – Young 2003: 87]. This “new style of elite masculinity” relates to “Davos Man” as “men who control the institutions central to economic liberalization” [Danner – Young 2003: 87]. Therefore, in line with neo-Marxists, feminists are quite critical, when it comes to corporate globalization and neo-liberalism in particular.

Yet, due to war on terrorism and associated strengthening of security apparatuses, the commerce-centered transnational business “Davos Man” masculinity is challenged by the “Big Brother” or “control-oriented military style” masculinity [Danner – Young 2003: 87]. Nevertheless, in general, one can argue that the “Davos Man” masculinity prevailed over the “Big Brother” masculinity, just like financial capital took precedence over industrial capital.

Global elite in neo-Marxism

Similarly to liberal approaches, neo-Marxism is not a state-centric IR theory. Like liberals, neo-Marxists focus more on social groups or even individuals. Of course, in neo-Marxist accounts, the most important social groups are classes. Therefore, the class analysis can be considered a distinctive feature (and a method) of almost all neo-Marxist research.

To put it simply, class consists of those members of society who have the same position on the (labor) market, particularly vis-à-vis the means of production. At the same time, the notion of class makes sense only in presence of other (antagonistic) classes. Last but not least, the class should be able to act collectively in political domain [Robinson – Harris 2000: 21]. In practice, however, this is often not the case, especially when it comes to the oppressed (manipulated) classes. Yet, even the ruling class suffers frequently from some internal splits, because in general, within one class, there are different factions (segments) with not entirely identical interests. For example, in his examinations of the (transnational) capitalist class, William Robinson distinguishes industrial vs. commercial vs. financial fraction [Robinson 2004: 37].

Obviously, such reasoning relates closely to what is called (historical) materialism as another principal neo-Marxist presupposition, which maintains that material conditions

significantly predetermine cultural and political developments. The current material conditions were shaped by capitalism, which now becomes globalized.

As a consequence, and quite in line with neoliberal assumptions, neo-Marxists believe that in recent times, the traditional role of territoriality and nation-state has diminished [Robinson – Harris 2000: 12]. This shift has profound effects, since capitalism and classes evolve beyond the institutional framework of localized states. It means that the world has entered in a new era of transnationalism. This transnationalization has been driven by the globalization of the production process and the transnational integration of the formerly national capital circuits [Robinson – Harris 2000: 18–20].

The buzzword “globalization” is explained in exactly this vein as a transition “to a new transnational phase of capitalism” [Robinson – Harris 2000: 16]. Accordingly, globalization processes brought about (or at least intensified) transnational class formation. Hence, today, the unification of dominant groups into one class occurs within transnational space. The same is true for workers, but to a much lesser extent.

Transnational capitalist class: CEOs and company

In order to concisely describe the global elite, neo-Marxists scholars can offer the notion “transnational capitalist class” (TCC). This concept has progressively developed in the intersections of several social sciences, especially sociology and (neo-Gramscian) International Political Economy (IPE) as a distinct subfield of IR.

Questions relating to the transnational class formation have been the central focus of theoretical and empirical contributions of the Marxist-inspired Amsterdam school of IR/ IPE [van Apeldoorn 2004: 143–144]. In this original research program, the processes of hegemonic elite integration are studied in longer historical perspective. In this connection, it is substantiated that among (Western and primarily Anglo-American or English speaking in general) bourgeoisie, transnational class networking was underway already before “globalization” began. This is best demonstrated by freemasonry as a high society cosmopolitan web of capitalists and other privileged segments across different countries and even regions [van der Pijl 1998: 99–100]. Importantly, many freemasons were also heavily, but informally involved in crucial (revolutionary) political developments [van der Pijl 1998: 100–106] and private or secret organizing of their lodges were more or less imitated by

future similarly exclusive transnational policy planning forums [van der Pijl 1998: 100–102], including the British imperialist Rhodes-Milner group that served as a model for Bilderberg Group and the Trilateral Commission [van der Pijl 1998: 108–109, 124, 134].

Yet, the origins of the specific notion of the TCC are associated with Robert Cox and Stephen Gill as two prominent neo-Marxist IR theorists. Already in 1981, Cox coined the term of a politically self-conscious “transnational managerial class” situated at the top of the emerging global socioeconomic hierarchy [Cox 1981: 147]. This elite group was organizing around the Trilateral Commission, World Bank, IMF and OECD. It made “a certain American business culture” hegemonic all over the world [Cox 1981: 155, note 38]. Yet, members of transnational managerial class were not only executives of multinational corporations and high staff of international agencies, but also “those who manage the internationally-oriented sectors within countries” [Cox 1981: 147–148] like finance ministry officials as an example of people whom Leslie Sklair later called “globalizing bureaucrats” (see below).

Some ten years after Cox, in his pioneering monograph on the Trilateral Commission, Gill exposed “the rising hegemony of transnational capital” and a corresponding “transnational capitalist class fraction” with shared interests and institutions linked to liberalized global production and finance [Gill 2009 (1990): 50]. This elite came from the Triad “core” countries (North America, Western Europe, Japan) and coordinated itself via private forums like the Trilateral Commission. Anticipating Sklair’s analytical differentiation of corporate and political fractions of the TCC, Gill maintained that members of transnational capitalist class fraction were big corporate executives and owners as well as leading politicians and civil servants, mostly but not exclusively from advanced capitalist states [Gill 2009 (1990): 94].

Importantly, the Trilateral Commission not only stood at the beginning of IR research on the TCC, it deservedly continues to be the subject of current neo-Marxist studies [Takase 2014].

Indeed, Marxists are the only established scholars who systematically pay attention to private elite clubs that tend to be overlooked by most other academics and overplayed or even demonized by many activists.

Nowadays, the TCC thesis is most fervently championed by two neo-Marxist sociologists – Leslie Sklair and William Robinson. However, they disagree on the precise

definition of this concept [Sprague 2009: 500–501]. Robinson (and several other Marxists) advocates a narrower view of the TCC. In his opinion, members of this class are only those from the world bourgeoisie who own and/or control transnational capital [Robinson 2004: 36, note 1] as exemplified by transnational corporations and private financial institutions (for same definition of TCC see [Harris 2012: 2; Takase 2014: 88]). In any case, the TCC should be seen as the “global ruling class” [Robinson – Harris 2000: 12], because transnational capital shapes worldwide production and society. Moreover, due to globalization, capital has gained greater power over labor [Robinson – Harris 2000: 23]. Plus, given the financialization of (Western) economies, (virtual) financial capital possesses an advantage over productive capital and the real economy as a whole.

In addition to that, the TCC has clear awareness of its own interests, or, is “class conscious”, to use the genuine Marxist parlance [Robinson – Harris 2000: 22]. The TCC has even developed consciousness of its transnational character [Robinson – Harris 2000: 22] as it is constantly incorporating more and more representatives of bourgeoisies from previously developing countries [Robinson – Harris 2000: 35–36]. In this sense, the TCC is really the *global* (not only confined to the “Euro-American civilization”) elite.

Nonetheless, more inclusive and nuanced definition of the TCC has been proposed by Leslie Sklair, who does not limit this term to big business CEOs and shareholders. From his perspective, the TCC subsumes individuals with significant financial, but also political, intellectual and symbolic capital [Sprague 2009: 504]. As a consequence, Sklair divided the TCC into four overlapping fractions [Sklair 1997: 521], which were constituted of 1) transnational corporations executives/owners (corporate fraction), 2) globalizing bureaucrats, 3) globalizing politicians and professionals and 4) consumerist (or cultural-ideological) elites like merchants and media bosses (consumerist fraction). Not surprisingly, in this structure, the greatest significance is accorded to the first fraction of the world’s biggest corporations executives [Sklair 1997: 525].

Globalizing bureaucrats usually operate in the space between state apparatuses and international institutions. Thus, these individuals can be identified among high-ranking national officials dealing with external (economic) relations, or among those directly working for IMF, WTO, OECD, but also in organizations such as the Bilderberg Group, Trilateral Commission or Rockefeller foundation.

The fraction of globalizing politicians and professionals consists of leading politicians from all major parties as well as of representatives of the influential (neoliberal) think tanks and universities. Ironically, these not so powerful members of the TCC are nevertheless the most visible ones [Sklair 1997: 529].

Finally, consumerist elites constitute the last part (in many respects similar to the corporate executives) of the TCC. This group includes mass media owners and opinion-makers, but also the capitalists of retail sector, especially with regard to shopping [Sklair 1997: 530]. In relation to the rest of society (the “masses”), this fraction has been promoting consumerist values in order to maintain the global capitalist (cultural) hegemony, since “consumerism (is) the most successful ideology of all time” [Sklair 1997: 531].

Importantly and unfortunately, in his later writings, Sklair has complicated the issue by modifying the composition of two of the above mentioned fractions. Nowadays, instead of globalizing bureaucrats, he speaks of “globalizing politicians and bureaucrats” [Sklair – Struna 2013: 751] as being one – political – fraction. At the same time, the group “globalizing politicians and professionals” was replaced by “globalizing professionals” [Sklair – Struna 2013: 751] as technical fraction. Only corporate and consumerist fractions remain the same.

On the margins of this debate, another possible delineation of the TCC has recently been suggested. Kauppinen [2013: 13] argues that while Sklair’s definition is too broad, Robinson’s is incomplete and should be supplemented by “informational fraction”, which is directly connected with the so-called new economy [Kauppinen 2013: 14], or the knowledge-intensive sectors like IT and biotechnology.

In any case, it needs to be stressed that regardless of the exact number and/or denominations of particular fractions, the internal structure of the TCC is highly permeable [Sklair 1997: 521; Sklair – Struna 2013: 751; Kauppinen 2013: 15]. This means that it is the rule rather than exception that some members of the TCC belong simultaneously to more fractions and/or that they move from one fraction to another (for instance, politicians switch to business and businessmen to politics). This is facilitated by the fact that the representatives of the TCC have some common features that relate to their shared transnational character.

In Sklair’s terms, almost every member of the TCC exhibits “outward-oriented global” tendencies [Sklair 1997: 521], or to put it simply, cosmopolitan leanings. Furthermore, these

people live similar (luxury) lifestyles (be they Russian oligarchs, American magnates, Mexican tycoons or Arab sheiks), meeting and socializing each other in elite schools and exclusive clubs [Sklair 1997: 522].

Transnational capitalist class: not just a theory

After outlining the neo-Marxist conceptualization of the global elite, it is necessary to add that this kind of theorizing has already been backed by an extensive empirical research, which documented the evolution and actions of the TCC in diverse countries around the globe.

In his well-known inquiry, van Apeldoorn [2000] critically mapped the nascent European TCC and its far-reaching impact on the neoliberal course of EU integration process. Upadhyya [2004] established that the Indian contingent of the TCC concentrates around the country's globalized software industry. Sener [2007] depicted how Turkish managers in Istanbul's branch of a multinational corporation identify themselves with the worldwide TCC. Finally, Madrid [2009] implies that through regional economic integration, the TCC has recently consolidated in El Salvador.

More fundamentally, Murray [2014] explicitly argues that the TCC has even developed as the so-called class-for-itself, because (part of) it collectively engages in politics on behalf of transnational class interests. Foreign, but transnationally embedded firms contribute (through subsidiaries) most donations to the US electoral campaigns [Murray 2014: 244, 247] as they consciously try to influence the policies of the current hegemon which sets the global agenda [Murray 2014: 237].

Most crucially, using network analysis and graphic depictions, neo-Marxist sociologist William Carroll and his collaborators [Carroll – Carson 2003; Carroll – Sapinski 2010] revealed the complex web of interlocks among influential CEOs and organizations on the world stage. Based on large datasets and timespans, these studies proved the existence of real interconnectedness between major global companies and the so-called “elite policy groups” (or transnational policy-planning groups) like the Trilateral Commission, the Bilderberg Group and the World Economic Forum.

All these elite policy groups facilitate mediation and consensus building among various (regional) segments of the TCC [Carroll – Sapinski 2010: 525–526]. As such, they link

together big business with political actors and opinion-makers [Carroll – Sapinski 2010: 503]. In so doing, the elite groups foster what might be called “political mobilization of transnational capitalists” [Carroll – Sapinski 2010: 511].

In other words, regular private gatherings at Bilderberg or Davos play an important integrative function for the global “corporate-policy network” [Carroll – Carson 2003: 49; Carroll – Sapinski 2010: 530], since they serve as unique meeting platforms for hundreds of corporate directors and public officials, which is especially true for the Trilateral Commission that unites leading European, American and Japanese businessmen [Carroll – Sapinski 2010: 526, 528].

Nonetheless, the Trilateral Commission is closely intertwined with other elite groups like the World Economic Forum or Bilderberg [Carroll – Carson 2003: 45]. To put it simply, many Bilderberg organizers/attendees are also members/hosts of the Trilateral Commission and/or the World Economic Forum [Carroll – Carson 2003: 46–47]. Thus, all these boards operate and can be regarded as “agencies of transnational capitalist class formation” [Carroll – Carson 2003: 36].

Transnational capitalist class as another clash among Marxists

It is fair to admit that not all neo-Marxists endorse the concept of the TCC. In fact, Sklair’s and especially Robinson’s contentions have been disputed on both theoretical and empirical grounds.

For instance, Huw Macartney [2009] dismisses Robinson’s and Harris’s as well as van Apeldoorn’s inferences. He refutes their alleged overplay of the (contingent) coherence of transnational capital and even more the idea of its dis-embeddedness from national contexts [2009: 452, 471–472, 479–480]. Though Macartney’s study is limited to EU level, it analyzes the finance (“circulating”) capital which is by definition the most mobile and thus – at least potentially – de-territorialized one. But even British, French and German financial capital, which all pushed for and now operates on an integrated and liberalized EU financial market, is found to be “simultaneously transnationally *oriented* and nationally *rooted*” [2009: 480]. So, according to Macartney, “there is no such thing as a global capitalist class detached from nationally oriented social forces and nationally oriented circuits of capital” [2009: 480].

In similar way, two prominent German neo-Marxists stress that classes (and hegemonies) form in the context of state [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 9, 22] and there is no real transnational state, although Robinson presumes some incipient kind of it [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 14–15]. Moreover, classes are not solely defined by their location in the economic process, but also by specific political and cultural requisites [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 9, 14–15]. Yet, although “some of the economic, political, and ideological conditions for the constitution of the transnational capitalist class exist,” they purportedly “remain unconnected” [Hirsch –Wissel 2011: 23].

Therefore, the proclamation of a unified TCC is “the product of rushed thinking” confused by the post-cold war “globalization hype” [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 28], since it is premature to posit the emergence of a genuine TCC. At best, it can be said that such entity is evolving, but so far, “the tendencies for the formation of the transnational capitalist class [...] remain weak” [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 28].

It seems that most elites continue to arise in national frameworks [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 14]. Similarly, important global companies still retain their national bases [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 11]. After all, global capitalism appears to need territorially separated political units [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 17]. Hence, the undergoing transnationalization of the capitalist class is balanced by parallel processes of (regional) fragmentations that result in creation of geographically smaller clusters [Hirsch – Wissel 2011: 21–22, 28].

This conclusion corresponds with a recent rigorous empirical investigation that also contests the thesis of the rise of the global TCC. Although ignoring politicians and elite policy groups, neo-Marxist sociologists Val Burris and Clifford Staples [2012] conduct arguably the most thorough test of available methods for measuring the robustness of transnational ties among main global firms and/or directors. On this basis, they insist that the worldwide TCC is far from realization and this is unlikely to change in the near future [Burris – Staples 2012: 339]. Nonetheless, there are clear signs of a “regional transnational capitalist class” [Burris – Staples 2012: 336], namely that located within the space of the European Union and particularly between the North-American (U. S.) and European areas [Burris – Staples 2012: 326, 339].

Yet, the modest assumption of one trans-Atlantic capitalist class was also problematized. Although he explicitly challenges only Robinson’s theory, young Greek neo-

Marxist points out that too much emphasis on transnationalism underestimates the continuing (inter-imperialist) rivalry of relatively independent national or regional capitalist centers [Oikonomou 2011: 142]. At least in certain areas of military-industrial sphere, even transatlantic elites do not pursue joint strategies. Rather, U.S. and EU defense establishments and weapons producers remain territorially bounded and in a state of mutual competition, which is evident from their diverging political-security ambitions [Oikonomou 2011: 138–139] and separate arms manufacturing [Oikonomou 2011: 141].

Finally, and most fundamentally, all work on TCC faces one difficulty: the lack of its natural counterpart – research that would prove the existence and impact of an adversarial transnational working class (TWC). This is a serious shortcoming, because, as already mentioned above, Marxists believe that classes evolve only in conflictual interaction with one another [Robinson 2004: 37]. Hence, it seems that some TWC is a necessary condition (though not sufficient one) for any conceivable TCC. Yet, compared to abundant and detailed studies on TCC, analogous research on TWC is still largely missing (for exceptions see [Struna 2009]). Robinson himself comments on TWC very briefly. He argues that TWC “is increasingly a reality”, but not yet as a class-for-itself [Robinson 2004: 43]. Nonetheless, although only a class-in-itself, the TWC too should be studied systematically. For if there is no (mature) TWC, how could Marxists consistently speak of (full-fledged) TCC?

Transnational capitalist class in action: pure capitalism everywhere and forever

As the traditional Marxist narrative goes, (modern) history is primarily a sequence of more or less overt class struggles and their outcomes. This basic understanding applies also to the era of neoliberalism that began in the late 1970s [Harvey 2007: 41]. Hence, the advent and triumph of neoliberalism has been explained as an intentional attempt to restore the dominance of the upper class that felt threatened by post-war social democratic welfare state practices which accorded a larger share of the national wealth to the labor [Harvey 2007: 28].

In this regard, one could even say that neoliberalism is something like class revenge, because “it has succeeded in channeling wealth from subordinate classes to dominant ones and from poorer to richer countries” [Harvey 2007: 22]. Not surprisingly, Chile under

Pinochet was perceived as a neoliberal laboratory [Harvey 2007: 26], from which the doctrine of the “Chicago Boys” spread to the rest of the world.

Thus, in neo-Marxist theorizing, the TCC is explicitly seen as “agency” [Robinson – Harris 2000: 12]. Correspondingly, globalization is partly “unfolding as the result of agency” [Robinson – Harris 2000: 27]. This is to say that some of the ongoing worldwide processes are not entirely spontaneous. On the contrary, globalization has been actively advanced by the TCC [Sklair 2001: 1, 5], which seeks new opportunities for accumulation by overcoming the constraints (including demands of labor) of the national level.

In this view, the TCC deliberately strives for the expansion and petrification of unregulated capitalism. This should be achieved on the global scale and that is why elites champion economic integration [Robinson – Harris 2000: 29]. Some neo-Marxists call it “the globalist project” [Robinson – Harris 2000: 26] – an effort to “convert the world into a single unified field for global capitalism” [Robinson – Harris 2000: 28–29], or, put differently, “to construct a working and stable system of global accumulation ruled over by the transnational capitalist class” [Harris 2012: 5].

Of course, market liberalization is the hallmark of this endeavor. Hence, the Washington consensus and neoliberalism should have been intentionally produced by the global elite [Robinson – Harris 2000: 28–29]. Yet, some neo-Marxists go even further – they claim that the TCC is almost behind everything. It purportedly dismantled the former welfare states and pushed the projects of EU, NAFTA or APEC [Robinson – Harris 2000: 23–24]. Indeed, all major institutions are said to serve the interests of the global ruling elite [Robinson – Harris 2000: 27–30].

Marxism as conspiracy theory?

As indicated above, it seems that for many neo-Marxists, the TCC is almost omnipresent and omnipotent. Yet, notions of such powerful groups have been typically associated with conspiracy theories, albeit in these (dis)interpretations, the supposed movers are usually somehow hidden (“behind the curtain”), which is not so much the case of the (quite visible) TCC.

But still, what is the difference, to put it straightforward, between the TCC (as an accepted scholarly concept) and the notion of (Jewish?!) “plutocrats” (as a largely discredited political slogan)?

To mention just one example: as a renowned neo-Marxist scholar, and in a top academic journal, David Harvey [2007: 30] openly states that many important world problems were deliberately staged. In this respect, he speaks of “a powerful cabal of bankers” and of actions that “amounted to a (silent) coup d’état by financial institutions against the democratically elected government”.

To be more specific, Harvey suggests that the Japanese recession might have been “engineered by financial agents in the United States to humble the Japanese economy” [Harvey 2007: 33]. He goes even further by saying that the debt crises were intentionally provoked: “Crisis creation, management, and manipulation on the world stage has evolved into the fine art of deliberate redistribution of wealth from poor countries to the rich. [...] These debt crises were orchestrated, managed, and controlled both to rationalize the system and to redistribute assets during the 1980s and 1990s” [2007: 37].

Yet, again: such allegations (with no evidence provided) are usually associated with conspiracy theorists, since proponents of these accounts always suspect that there are powerful malevolent groups which steer important world events, including various crises that serve their hidden agendas. True, most conspiracy theorists use different rhetoric and overall framing, but the core message is almost the same.

To be clear, Harvey is not the only leftist whose writings resemble some features of conspiracy theories. Stuart Shields, the editorial board member of iconic Marxist journal *Capital and Class*, made similar insinuation: “Unemployment and recession is often wittingly brought about by governments wishing to decompose labour into a more readily exploitable source of labour power [...] Therefore, recession is not simply an unfortunate outcome of neoliberal restructuring in transition and enlargement, but an integral part of the strategy” [Shields 2007: 164].

Likewise, in another context, one socialist polemic leads to general accusation that “global elites [...] are interested in *maintaining* poverty in the Third World” [Vlachou – Escudero – Garcla – Guadilla 2000: 123]. Quite paradoxically, however, similar argument was also made by a Hungarian scholar from Soros’ Open Society Institute in Budapest. Using

higher educational programs as an illustration, Voldemar Tomusk affirms that by “tricking the borrowing governments” [2002: 349], the TCC misused World Bank development loans to redirect resources from poorer (post-communist) countries to various Western overpaid “experts” and companies [Tomusk 2002: 345, 349–351].

In Marxist-humanist so-called critical pedagogy, the (transnational) capitalist class is charged with using “lies and deceptions” against the masses [McLaren 2014: 583]. In similar vein, it has been argued that for a long time, the TCC wittingly deceives white (southern) American (working-class) voters by demagogically exploiting the race issue in order to sustain electoral support for its agents from the U.S. Republican party [Patterson 2013: 673–675], who “surreptitiously” [Patterson 2013: 678] promote anti-labor capitalist globalizing objectives in the White House and Congress, and by extension, in the whole world. Moreover, in an attempt to ensure its continued political dominance in the face of intensifying unfavorable demographic changes, the TCC is purportedly tempted to resort to undemocratic measures like future voter suppressions (among citizens of color) and even installation of some kind of fascist regime [Patterson 2013: 686].

Finally, as a notable Greek radical, Takis Fotopoulos [2002] denounces the “New World Order” (NWO), which has been the terminological centerpiece (albeit with other meaning) of many (right-wing) conspiracy theories. Most importantly, Fotopoulos asserts that “in order to secure its unchallenged hegemony”, the transnational elite did not hesitate to wage “global war” [Fotopoulos 2002: 235]. The first Gulf War, the military attacks on Serbia and the global campaign against terrorism are all examples of the wars launched by transnational elite against the perceived challenges to the NWO [Fotopoulos 2002: 231], which is synonymous with the capitalist neoliberal globalization.

Interestingly, Fotopoulos rightly predicted that the next war of the transnational elite would be waged against Iraq [Fotopoulos 2002: 236, 241–242]. Yet, regardless of the target, the wars were always staged due to transnational elites, since only they really decided [Fotopoulos 2002: 214] and because these interventions furthered their (hidden) agendas.

In sum, although he rejects the notion of a “capitalist plot” [Fotopoulos 2002: 213], Fotopoulos nevertheless suggests that “the capital-controlled mass media” try to “manufacture consent around the aims of the transnational elite which manages the NWO” [Fotopoulos 2002: 225]. Moreover, the elite is said to be using (among other means) “drug

culture” in order to “push the oppressed into passivity” [Fotopoulos 2002: 225]. Yet, if this is really true, why shouldn’t we call it a (capitalist) plot?

Discussion of the findings on all theories and their conceptualizations

The present chapter argues that one must highlight the global elite, if one is to understand crucial worldwide developments and that this understanding should be theoretically grounded and linked to IR discipline. To this end, the chapter presented four IR grand theories that now merit some comparison.

In nutshell, all examined theories quite often point to same direction. They even speak about same things – but with different rigor, emphasis and phraseology. Here, the core argument is that Marxist language and viewpoint should be privileged as the one most pertinent, penetrating, and thus convincing.

More detaily, the neoliberal and constructivist concepts seem to be neutral, whereas the feminist and neo-Marxist notions have critical overtones. In addition, there are other overlaps between feminism and neo-Marxism. For instance, in feminist accounts, masculinity (or men) plays similar role as (transnational) capitalist class in neo-Marxism. The suggestion that there are (competing) fractions within the ruling capitalist class has its parallel in feminism, which claims that (two) different types of hegemonic masculinity co-exist and indeed, rival with one another.

At the same time, both neo-Marxists and feminists stress that the global elite has had a significant impact on the shape of current globalization. In other words, neo-Marxists and feminists explicitly recognize global elite as a powerful social group and they rightfully agree that its members are concentrated around the World Economic Forum (and similar bodies).

Hence, the feminist term “Davos Men” is specific and fitting, though it unnecessarily suggests that the global elite (must) consist exclusively of men and that this gender make-up is its most important feature. Yet, really decisive are ideological leanings, not personal attributes. However, the biggest shortcoming of “Davos Men” conceptualization is the absence of any internal differentiation and a small number of empirical applications (virtually only two articles).

Constructivism deserves similar criticism. The label “(transnational) neoliberal epistemic community” is quite accurate – specific enough and also fitting, because it can

subsume the right individuals (market adoring “globalists”) ranging from experts to politicians and even businessmen. In spite of this, the notion does not seem to be the most adequate expression for the global elite, since this small group is not primarily defined by any “episteme”, but rather by its structural position in the global socioeconomic system as suggested by Marxist concept of (capitalist) “class”. Moreover, “(transnational) neoliberal epistemic community” has not been internally differentiated and is not frequently mentioned in the literature, so constructivism cannot be said to provide sophisticated conceptualization with wide applications.

When it comes to (neo)liberalism, this theory fails most dramatically, which might be surprising. The key neoliberal notions of “transnational actors” or “networks” are overly broad and thus vague; as shown above, they encompass too many different entities. Hence, neoliberal analytical tools lack specific indication about the nature, composition and goals of the global elite. In this regard, all the other IR theories offer concepts (transnational capitalist class, Davos Men, and neoliberal epistemic community) that are much more concrete or even succinct. Plus, unfortunately, neither “transnational actors” nor “transnational networks” have been elaborated or directly applied on the global elite phenomenon.

Interestingly, neo-Marxism shares several outlooks with liberal approaches. Otherwise diverse streams of liberalism and neo-Marxism agree on the centrality of transnationalism, economic concerns and corporations in particular. Moreover, both schools of thought believe that states’ foreign policy reflects the needs of influential domestic groups. However, only neo-Marxists speak openly about (transnational) business community and offer a distinct terminology for it.

In sum, this chapter argues that neo-Marxist IR theory can best account for the global elite. The “transnational capitalist class” appears to be the most apt description, because it puts well the character (“class”), reach (“transnational”) and orientation (“capitalist”) of the global elite. The term also allows for internal differentiation (see Leslie Sklair’s fractions), which is not discussed in the remaining concepts. Last but not least, neo-Marxist theorizing on the transnational capitalist class has already been backed by substantial empirical research. In this regard, it should also be appreciated that neo-Marxists represent the only

academic stream that (dare to) focus systematically on important, yet otherwise overlooked private elite clubs like Trilateral Commission and Bilderberg Group.

Indeed, the multitude of TCC proponents (with different academic backgrounds) suggests that one can speak of an established “TCC school”. The fact that there are many detailed works on TCC also explains why the review of neo-Marxism was longer than the ones of remaining theories – feminism, constructivism and liberalism simply do not offer so much material to survey.

Yet, of course, the TCC concept too is imperfect and vulnerable. Even Marxists themselves sometimes do not accept it (without qualification). Thus, the previous sections were also concerned with immanent critique of the TCC, so that one can see both its pros and cons.

Concluding remarks on Marxism and TCC research

Although a “winner” in the evaluation above, neo-Marxism suffers from several flaws too. Apart from those commonly mentioned, it is necessary to point out that unfortunately, *some* neo-Marxists *occasionally* tend to see (certain members of) the global elite in a controversial way typical for conspiracy theories.

Of course, this does not imply that the whole neo-Marxism can be discarded as a dubious conspiracy theory. On the contrary, (neo)Marxism (except its vulgarized versions) is a serious and widely respected academic stream⁶). Prominent neo-Marxists are themselves well aware of the risk that leftists’ accounts of “global ruling class” may evoke the specter of conspiracy theory [Sklair 2001: x]. All the more should critical scholars either soften their sharp verdicts or buttress them with solid evidence.

Problematic is also the fact that within neo-Marxist camp, the concept of TCC is not universally embraced, let alone uniformly defined. As to the second point, the main disagreement relates to the precise composition and size of the TCC. As to the first point, TCC proponents are blamed for exaggerating the unity of capitalists and the trends toward transnationalization.

In other words, some neo-Marxists even question whether TCC has really emerged (and if so, whether on global or rather only regional – Euro-Atlantic – scale) and therefore, if

it is not a misleading notion which obscures rather than clarifies (conflicting) relations among various regionally dominant social groups.

In any case, the argument for TCC would be stronger if neo-Marxists provide more evidence of the existence and impact of some transnational working class, which is the theoretical correlate (and perhaps even prerequisite) of TCC in itself.

Yet, this lively intra-paradigmatic debate is but another proof that TCC is a highly inspiring and thought-provoking concept which deserves attention of all theorists as well as practitioners. At the present moment, the TCC propositions could be tested on the cases of CETA, TTIP and TPP free trade agreements. It is very plausible that here again, the TCC research may provide fruitful insights into the social forces that push these treaties forward and/or are likely to most benefit from them.

For sociology and the whole social science, it would be enriching if the TCC school engages in a closer dialogue with (classic as well as modern) elite theory. Within IR, TCC research could be seen as a challenge to prevailing (neo)realist preoccupations with the ongoing hegemonic transition(s). (Gramscian) Marxism always transcended the old-fashioned narrow state-centric worldview and it still reminds us that enduring popular questions of relative US decline and/or “rise of the rest” [Zakaria 2008] are of secondary relevance, since, in fact, the real hegemon remains the same – transnational capital [Gill 2009 (1990): chap. 5] with its universal discipline which subordinates all mankind to market imperative.

Lastly, existing and future research on TCC could be of great value to the wider public, or at least engaged citizens. For the symbolic “1%” slogan of recent civil protests conveys the same message (factual as well as emotional) as the Marxist notion of TCC – message that we will continue to hear because of increasing structural inequalities [OECD 2015; Oxfam 2015] that are favorable only for the global elite.

Final comments on power and capital

Each of the outlined conceptualizations can be interpreted as emphasizing different type of power and capital. This is especially true of feminism, constructivism and neo-Marxism. The feminist notion of Davos Men highlights the importance of gender power. The key source of this sort of power lies in (the hegemonic form of) masculinity. Seen from this perspective,

power operates mainly in the way of attributing greater quality to (almost) everything which is associated with masculinity. Plus, in patriarchal societies, men usually possess more economic, social as well as cultural capital. Yet, though valuable, the concepts of Davos Men, gender power and (hegemonic) masculinity are not so suitable for the purposes of the subsequent chapters.

The constructivist notion of (transnational) neoliberal epistemic community suggests that one should focus primarily on episteme or knowledge/know-how as prominent source of cultural/intellectual capital, which is the foundation of ideational and discursive power. These types of power function as determinants of what ideas/ideologies become hegemonic, what information is (not) disseminated and what discourses are (not) deemed legitimate. The significance of this form of power is highlighted in chapter 5 about Bilderberg Group, agenda-setting and mass media. Last but not least, the word “community” indicates that social capital too can play here some role. The relevancy of social capital is demonstrated mainly in chapter 4 about favoritism among Bilderbergers.

Finally, the Marxists' notion of transnational capitalist class (TCC) implies primacy of economic capital and power. This sort of power emanates from control over productive assets (including labor of others) and material resources in general. Marxists are right that economic power trumps all other forms of power. If someone is (super)rich, it does not matter whether someone is male or female, educated or uneducated, well-connected or isolated, with political office or without it.

However, as Sklair shows, the concept of TCC can subsume also individuals with political power and capital. In fact, many members of TCC have economic as well as (indirect) political influence. It even seems that big economic power *automatically* translates into political clout.

Economic power operates mainly in less visible ways that nevertheless often amount to coercion and blackmail. Corporations can deny donations, positive media coverage and future employment to un-obedient politicians. They might pay taxes or invest in other countries etc. That is why capitalists are the real rulers and economic power "is the One Ring – the ring that rules them all", to use the famous Tolkien's phrase.

Based on considerations of (only) economic power and capital, the concept of TCC can be operationalized as a group of owners and managers of the largest corporations

ranked according to some established listing (Fortune 500 or Forbes 500). However, for the purposes of this thesis, it is more suitable to use the broader Sklair's notion of TCC. Hence, in the following chapters, TCC is operationalized as a group of people who meet at elite clubs like Bilderberg Group. Thus, Bilderberg Group is taken as sort of proxy for (Euro-Atlantic) TCC. This operationalization allows for explicit inclusion of politicians. So, in this way, other forms of capital – mainly political and social capital – are also taken into account, so the resulting picture will be fuller and finer.

Endnotes

- 1) See the special issue of a top IR journal *European Journal of International Relations* 3/2013, where different views were expressed regarding the present state and the future of (grand) IR theories.
- 2) Admittedly, global elite is not a traditional “grand theme” of IR like, most notably, (inter-state) war. However, as the number and severity of inter-state wars decrease and globalization processes intensify, IR has been refocusing. Critical theorists even claim that global elite more or less drives globalization, which is now a “grand theme” of virtually all social sciences, so why should IR be an exception? Seen from (not only) neo-Marxist perspective, elites promote economic and political integration, which has rightfully been at the centre of much IR research. Moreover, as will be clear later on, global elite concentrates around institutions (the IMF, EU, the Trilateral Commission) that have also been a long standing object of many IR scholars. If only for these reasons, global elite can be considered as an increasingly salient (and perhaps already “grand”) IR topic.
- 3) Meaning specific and fitting (as opposed to vague and misleading), since only specific conceptualization yields sufficient explanatory power.
- 4) Sophisticated in terms of whether it allows for further analytical internal differentiation, which would give us a more nuanced (hierarchical) picture of the global elite.
- 5) Broad academic usage (support) alias wide (empirical) application of any concept or theory signals its quality.

6) Just consider the fact that two staunch neo-Marxists were recently elected to serve as presidents of the most prestigious sociological associations – Erik Olin Wright in American Sociological Association (2011–2012) and Immanuel Wallerstein (who has also been a highly influential figure in IR) in International Sociological Association (1994–1998). Leslie Sklair is the current president of the Global Studies Association.

Chapter 2

Bilderberg Group and Transnational Capitalist Class: Recent Trends in Global Elite Club as Vindication of neo-Marxism

Abstract of the chapter

As a contribution to several social sciences, this chapter focuses on significant, but under-researched Bilderberg Group as a prominent private network, which serves for annual meeting and coordinating of the Euro-Atlantic elites. The chapter extends the current knowledge by investigating seven Bilderberg conferences from 2010 to 2016. Based on fresh data from new official Bilderberg website, the study provides both quantitative and qualitative insights into the composition of recent Bilderberg attendees as well as into the topics discussed. These empirical findings are explained as validation of neo-Marxist theory of the transnational capitalist class as advanced by critical sociologists and members of the Amsterdam school of International Relations.

Motto

“You don't need to have a conspiracy once you have set the rules.”

Joseph Stiglitz (quoted in Rothkopf, 2008: 299)

Introduction

The Bilderberg Group was a Cold War product, but it flourished until 2019. Yet, strikingly, there is still only a minimal academic research on this important private elite club, especially as compared to numerous publications of so-called “conspiracy theorists” (Dice, 2015; Estulin, 2009; Jeffers, 2009; Tucker, 2005; Wisniewski, 2010). Among academic writings, the Bilderberg Group is systematically covered by just one recent monograph (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011) and two scholarly articles (Aubourg, 2003; Wilford, 2003) that

both nevertheless focus solely on the historical beginnings of the club. The present study is an attempt to partially fill this gap.

The chapter summarizes and interprets almost all available data from the recently launched¹⁾ and unexploited Bilderberg Group's official website²⁾. Specifically, it explores the seven Bilderberg conferences from 2010 to 2016 that were crowded by powerful European and North-American decision-makers from both public and private sectors. As a consequence, the chapter provides an answer to (at least) two rudimentary questions: who are Bilderbergers and what do they want.

The whole investigation is framed by neo-Marxist theory of the transnational capitalist class (TCC). Neo-Marxism is the only established academic stream that relatively highlights the importance of private elite clubs like the Bilderberg Group. Moreover, it is argued that the findings on Bilderberg clearly support most of the claims associated with the TCC theory, which developed in the intersections between International Relations (IR) and sociology.

This chapter aims to meet the current appeals for more interdisciplinary research. Various aspects of the paper can contribute to (critical) political economy, sociology (class analysis, elite theory), IR (global governance, transatlantic relations), European Studies and political science (informal politics).

The chapter proceeds in four main parts. The following first section is dedicated to a short literature review. The second methodological part explains how the data were collected and coded. Subsequently, the longest, third section presents the original summaries and discussions of key empirical findings. Finally, directions for future research are suggested and in the conclusion, the main message is restated and contextualized.

Neo-Marxist scholarship and the Bilderberg Group

Within neo-Marxist tradition, the Bilderberg Group is mostly studied in connection with the TCC – its formation and coordination. The TCC school has fully developed since the 1990s. In his ground-breaking book on the Trilateral Commission, Canadian neo-Marxist IR scholar Stephen Gill propounded the phrase “transnational capitalist class fraction” (Gill, 1990). More recently, the exact notion of “transnational capitalist class” was established and

advanced by members of the neo-Marxist Amsterdam school of IR, most notably by Bastiaan van Apeldoorn (2000), who exposed the existence and leverage of (West) European TCC.

Outside of IR, the TCC concept has been championed and elaborated mainly by three neo-Marxist sociologists – Leslie Sklair (2001), William Robinson (2004) and William Carroll (2010), whose account of the TCC is probably the one most empirically-grounded.

Importantly, although Robinson and Sklair disagree on the precise composition of the TCC (Robinson, 2004: 36, note 1), they both suggest that it has emerged on a global scale. However, this ambitious “hard” version of TCC theory is not so shared by Carroll, who insists that “this class continues for the most part to take the geographically specific form of an Atlantic ruling class” (Carroll, 2010: 233). Other neo-Marxist sociologists came to the same conclusion and speak about “regional transnational capitalist class” located within and between North-American and (West) European perimeter (Burriss – Staples, 2012: 326, 339). Hence, this chapter sticks to the modest “soft” account of (only) Euro-Atlantic TCC, because it is precisely the European and North-American elite that unites in Bilderberg conferences.

Interestingly, although neo-Marxists represent the only academic stream that relatively systematically focuses on the private elite clubs, even they do not pay the same attention to all of these forums and from all research perspectives. For instance, Robinson and Sklair mention Bilderberg Group rather marginally. Only Carroll (and his collaborators) can be said to have systematically investigated Bilderberg Group, albeit almost exclusively in a quantitative manner. Put simply, in his view, Bilderberg Group stands as one of the main elite “policy-planning groups” (along with the Trilateral Commission and the World Economic Forum) through which the TCC forms and coordinates itself. Yet, with this “macro-level” and comparative approach, Carroll studies mainly the extent of multilateral interconnectedness between major transnational corporations and policy-planning groups, or, put differently, the density/robustness and internal structure of the entire (global) “corporate-policy network”.

Thus, the literature still lacks “micro-level” case studies on Bilderberg Group, even within neo-Marxist scholarship, which focuses relatively more on the Trilateral Commission (Gill, 1990; Takase, 2014). Only Amsterdam school representative Kees van der Pijl explored Bilderberg Group in more depth, but he recounted distant events before the end of the Cold

War (1998: 121-125) and relied on rather conspiratorial authors/websites when he reconstructed Bilderberg meeting in Istanbul in 2007 (2010: 51-60).

In sum, the Bilderberg issue has rightfully been present in neo-Marxist research, but not sufficiently. This chapter aims to partly fill this gap. Such an attempt is all the more justified since closer look at the recent trends within Bilderberg Group provides further support for neo-Marxist TCC theory, especially in its version advanced by leading British critical sociologist Leslie Sklair.

Specifically, the chapter argues that the case of Bilderberg corroborates all Sklair's key propositions: the existence of (four) different fractions within TCC (corporate, political, technical and consumerist), the dominance of the corporate fraction, the inter-permeability of all fractions and the collective effort of TCC to promote capitalism and manage globalization processes. Hence, the findings enrich the intra-paradigmatic as well as the wider debate, because the emergence and/or cohesion of TCC is still disputed even by some neo-Marxists (Macartney, 2009; Hirsch – Wissel, 2011; Oikonomou, 2011), let alone other theorists and commentators.

Data and method

The tables are the author's own summaries of data issued on the official and publicly accessible Bilderberg Group's website. This recently launched, unexploited source offered relatively detailed information on the seven Bilderberg conferences from 2010 to 2016³). For each of these private meetings, there was a short press release, plus a list of participants and the discussed topics. All Bilderberg attendees are identified by name, (main) profession and nationality. Yet, our classification is sometimes different and thus needs to be explained here.

First of all, on the Bilderberg website, several conference participants are (regularly) labelled as “international”. For instance, this is the case of the general secretary of NATO Jens Stoltenberg (Bilderberg attendee in 2015), or former World Bank president Robert Zoellick (regular Bilderberg attendee). However, for the purposes of this chapter, the analysis avoids the “international” category and counts every Bilderberg participant as either “North American” (USA + Canada), or “West-European” (old EU-member states +

Switzerland and Norway) or “others” (usually Turks, but also East Europeans, Chinese and Israelis).

Thus, logically, Stoltenberg is counted as “West European” and Zoellick as “North American”. These classifications are made on the basis of citizenship (and to a lesser extent also place of main professional activities). Following same criterion, all “internationals” (including Viviane Reding, Christine Lagarde and José M. Barroso as prominent Bilderberg attendees in 2013 or Pascal Lamy as a prominent Bilderberg participant in 2012) are classified in Table 2.

The biggest methodological problem relates to the “coding” of Bilderberg attendees from an occupational point of view. For the sake of simplicity, the chapter uses the following distinctions: businesspeople, politicians and intellectuals. The category “businesspeople” matches the corporate fraction of the TCC. The category “politicians” corresponds to the political fraction of the TCC. The category (organic) “intellectuals” is more undetermined, but subsumes researchers, academics, journalists (newspaper publishers like Oscar Bronner are coded as “businesspeople”) as individuals with significant cultural and/or symbolic capital who play roles similar to the technical (and to a lesser extent consumerist) fraction of the TCC.

Yet, many Bilderberg participants have (subsequently or even simultaneously) worked or otherwise been involved in both politics and business. However, in the tables, all Bilderberg attendees are classified as “politicians,” “businesspeople” or “intellectuals”. The decision was made according to an evaluation of where they have left the greatest visible impact.

For example, Henry Kissinger influenced the world most (and became famous) as the US secretary of state, not as a university professor or businessman. Therefore, Kissinger is counted as a “politician”, although he is presented (e.g. on the list of participants of Bilderberg meeting in 2013) as the chairman of an international consulting firm, which would classify him as a businessman.

Similarly, Zoellick is not counted as an “intellectual” (although Bilderberg website sometimes presents him as a visiting fellow of Peterson Institute), but a “politician,” since his most influential role was that of the president of the World Bank (which is an institution of states and its head is a political appointee).

Analogically, all central bankers (Thomas Jordan, Klaas Knot) are counted as “politicians,” because no matter how nominally “independent,” central banks are institutions closely associated with individual states and central bankers are appointed by national politicians. With similar reasons, army (Philip Breedlove) and intelligence (David Petraeus) officers are treated as “politicians”, because they are instructed by governments and serve the purposes of national foreign policy.

Admittedly, in several cases, this coding is questionable. Thus, the resulting numbers might be slightly different, but not the general ratios between them. In other words, alternative classification of certain Bilderbergers would not lead to any significant change of the overall picture that is provided by the tables.

Empirical findings on Bilderberg conferences from 2010 to 2016

This section summarizes and interprets the available information about seven Bilderberg conferences from 2010 to 2016. Particular attention is paid to the composition of Bilderberg participants (the question “Who are Bilderbergers”) and the topics that they discussed (the question “What do they want”).

Table 1: Where, when and how many – overview of seven Bilderberg conferences

Year	Place	Duration	Participants	Chairman
2016 (64 th)	Dresden, Germany	9 - 12 June	124	Henri de Castries
2015 (63 rd)	Telfs-Buchen, Austria	11 - 14 June	128	Henri de Castries
2014 (62 nd)	Copenhagen, Denmark	29 May - 1 June	136	Henri de Castries
2013 (61 st)	Hertfordshire, UK	6 - 9 June	133	Henri de Castries
2012 (60 th)	Chantilly, Virginia, USA	31 May - 3 June	145	Henri de Castries

2011 (59 th)	St. Moritz, Switzerland	9 - 12 June	127	Etienne Davignon
2010 (58 th)	Sitges, Spain	3 - 6 June	123	Etienne Davignon

Source: Bilderberg Group website (calculations are of the author's)

Discussion of the findings on basic features of recent Bilderberg conferences

Usually, the Bilderberg Group meeting is held at the beginning of June and it lasts four days, which is quite a long time (all the more for such busy people as are most Bilderbergers). As compared with 2010 (the starting point of our analysis), the number of attendees is slowly rising (with the apex in 2012), which can be seen as a sign of strengthening of the (Euro-Atlantic) TCC. Yet in the years 2015 and 2016, the number of participants declined slightly, so in this respect, it is hard to discern any clear trend (Table 1).

Interestingly, the vast majority of recent Bilderberg conferences (six of seven) took place in Europe (in luxury hotels), which suggests that the European TCC is the most developed/consolidated part as indicated by van Apeldoorn (2000), but also Carroll (2010: 224, 229, 232).

As a rule, the location of the conference has some influence on the composition of the invited guests with quantitative and/or qualitative overrepresentation of the host country. So, in the last meeting in Germany, three German key ministers participated – minister of finance Wolfgang Schäuble, minister of the interior Thomas de Maizière and minister of defense Ursula von der Leyen. At the same time, minister-president of Saxony (federal state where Bilderbergers met) also took part, along with the former head of the German most famous economic institute Ifo.

To mention another example, in the 2011 Bilderberg gathering in Switzerland, 10 Swiss citizens participated, whereas at all other conferences the number of Swiss delegates has never exceeded four. Or, when Bilderbergers met in Spain in 2010, both the Spanish queen and the prime minister attended the event.

Most importantly, the last five Bilderberg meetings were chaired by Henri de Castries, Chairman and CEO of AXA Group. This fact clearly supports the general (not only

neo-Marxist) thesis that financial capital dominates and Sklair's contention that the corporate fraction is the most important segment of the TCC.

Table 2: Who is who in Bilderberg – composition of attendees of seven conferences

Year	Participants – total number	Men / women	Businesspeople / politicians / intellectuals	Western Europe / North America / others
2016	124	96 / 28	61 / 37 / 26	87 / 32 / 5
2015	128	100 / 28	65 / 40 / 23	82 / 38 / 8
2014	136	115 / 21	65 / 51 / 20	85 / 42 / 9
2013	133	116 / 17	66 / 45 / 22	88 / 38 / 7
2012	145	129 / 16	69 / 51 / 25	75 / 57 / 13
2011	127	111 / 16	62 / 48 / 17	83 / 37 / 7
2010	123	107 / 16	62 / 42 / 17	75 / 42 / 6

Source: Bilderberg Group website (calculations are of the author's)

Note: “others” include Turkey, post-communist Europe, China, Israel etc.

Discussion of the findings on the composition of Bilderbergers

Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of the participants of Bilderberg meetings are men (women comprise almost always less than 20%). This is true for both businesspeople and politicians who have attended Bilderberg conferences. Seen from a gender perspective, this means that the global elite (its Western part) continues to be extremely masculinized.

Interestingly, Bilderbergers are mostly Western Europeans (and to a lesser extent Americans), which gives further credence to van Apeldoorn's thesis that the European TCC is the most developed one.

Most importantly, in absolute numbers, businesspeople (CEOs) predominate among Bilderbergers, which validates Sklair's claim that the corporate fraction is the most important

segment of the TCC. It might be even interpreted as another proof of the (current) primacy of economy over politics and as a confirmation that today “corporations rule the world” (Korten, 1995), so we live in “business-managed democracy” (Beder, 2010).

Indeed, even non-Marxist research on Bilderberg Group concedes that “it is tempting to suggest, as some have, that elite transnational policy networks were formed, and are run, by the interests of global capital explicitly for the purpose of promoting such interests.” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 163)

Revolving doors: Inter-permeability of all TCC fractions

As already mentioned above, Sklair divides the TCC into four different fractions, while stressing that individual members of the TCC often move from one fraction to another, most frequently from the corporate fraction to the political one and/or vice versa. This claim is verified by closer scrutiny of personal biographies of various Bilderberg attendees.

Regular Bilderberg participant Henry Kissinger is a perfect example of this pattern. As is generally known, at the beginning of his career, he represented the academic elite. Then he became part of the US political establishment. However, on the list of participants of Bilderberg meeting in 2016, Kissinger is portrayed as the chairman of an international consulting firm, which suggests that his main involvement is in business. In Sklair's terms, in different periods of his public engagement, Kissinger belonged to several TCC fractions.

The same is true for many other Bilderberg attendees. For instance, another regular Bilderberg participant, Peter Sutherland, held various business (BP, Goldman Sachs) as well as political (head of WTO, EU Commissioner, UN Representative) positions. Robert Rubin, who was also present at all 2010-2015 Bilderberg conferences, has been active in politics (former Secretary of the U.S. Treasury), business (Goldman Sachs, Citigroup) and think-tanks (Co-Chairman of Council on Foreign Relations).

This and other evidence clearly documents that all TCC fractions are inter-permeable and overlapping. In short, Bilderbergers usually belong – simultaneously or subsequently – to several TCC fractions, exactly as Sklair suggests (Tables 3-6).

Table 3: Biggest stars (selection) at the 2016 Bilderberg conference

Corporations	Politicians	Intellectuals
<p>Financial giants: AXA Group Deutsche Bank AG Banco Santander HSBC Holdings KBC Group Oesterreichische Kontrollbank AG</p> <p>Industrial giants: Royal Dutch Shell Fiat Chrysler Automobiles Airbus Group Siemens AG Haldor Topsøe A/S</p> <p>IT: LinkedIn Palantir Technologies Coursera DeepMind</p> <p>Mass media: Axel Springer PRISA and El País Indigo Books & Music Inc.</p>	<p>International organizations: Lagarde, Christine (head of IMF) Georgieva, Kristalina (EU), Vice President, European Commission</p> <p>National politicians: Prime Minister of Netherlands Prime Minister of Belgium Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey Minister of Finance of Germany</p> <p>Former politicians: Barroso, José M. (former President of the European Commission) Fabius, Laurent (former Prime Minister of France)</p> <p>Central bankers: Coeuré, Benoît (member of the Executive Board of European Central Bank)</p> <p>Military and intelligence: Petraeus, David H. (ex CIA director) Breedlove, Philip M. (former Supreme Allied Commander Europe)</p> <p>EU and US insiders: Kissinger, Henry A.</p> <p>Monarchs: King of Netherlands</p>	<p>Economists: Blanchard, Olivier (ex IMF chief economist) Schwab, Klaus (chairman of World Economic Forum) Sinn, Hans-Werner (ex- head of Ifo Institute for Economic Research) Wolf, Martin H. (chief economics commentator, Financial Times) Standing, Guy (co- president of Basic Income Earth Network)</p> <p>Others: Applebaum, Anne Director of Transitions Forum, Legatum Institute Ferguson, Niall (professor of history) Bengio, Yoshua (professor in computer science)</p>

Source: Bilderberg Group website (compilations are of the author's)

Table 4: Biggest stars (selection) at 2015 Bilderberg conference

Corporations	Politicians	Intellectuals
<p>Financial giants: AXA Group Deutsche Bank AG Goldman Sachs JP Morgan HSBC Holdings plc Raiffeisen Bank Royal Bank of Canada KBC Group Banco Santander</p> <p>Industrial giants: Royal Dutch Shell Airbus Siemens AG</p> <p>IT: Google LinkedIn</p> <p>Mass media: Axel Springer</p>	<p>International organizations: Secretary General of NATO</p> <p>National politicians: Federal President of Austria Prime Minister of Belgium Prime Minister of Netherlands Minister of Finance of Britain Minister of Finance of Finland Minister of Defence of Germany</p> <p>Former politicians: Barroso, José M. Monti, Mario former Prime Minister of France former Chancellor of Austria former EU Trade Commissioner</p> <p>Ex-World Bank presidents: Wolfensohn, James D. Zoellick, Robert B.</p> <p>Central bankers: Member of the Executive Board of European Central Bank President of Central Bank of Netherlands</p> <p>Military and intelligence: Petraeus, David (ex CIA-chief) Director General of DGSI (French intelligence agency)</p> <p>EU and US insiders: Kissinger, Henry A.</p> <p>Monarchs: Princess of Netherlands</p>	<p>Economists: Feldstein, Martin S. President Emeritus, NBER, Professor of Economics, Harvard</p> <p>Editor-in-Chief of the Economist</p> <p>Political scientists: Applebaum, Anne Director of Transitions Forum, Legatum Institute</p> <p>Kepel, Gilles Sciences Po</p>

Source: Bilderberg Group website (compilations are of the author's)

Table 5: Biggest stars (selection) at 2014 Bilderberg conference

Corporations	Politicians	Intellectuals
<p>Financial giants: AXA Group Deutsche Bank AG Goldman Sachs HSBC Holdings plc</p> <p>Industrial giants: British Petroleum Royal Dutch Shell Airbus</p> <p>IT: Microsoft Google Nokia</p>	<p>International organizations: Lagarde, Christine (IMF) Rasmussen, Anders F. (NATO) Reding, Viviane (EU)</p> <p>National politicians: Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden Minister of Foreign Affairs of Spain</p> <p>Former politicians: Mandelson, Peter Monti, Mario</p> <p>Ex-World Bank presidents: Wolfensohn, James D. Zoellick, Robert B.</p>	<p>Economists: Spence, Michael A. (Nobel Prize awarded economist)</p> <p>Editor-in-Chief of the Economist</p>

Source: Bilderberg Group website (compilations are of the author's)

Table 6: Biggest stars (selection) at 2013 Bilderberg conference

Corporations	Politicians	Intellectuals
<p>Financial giants: AXA Group Barclays plc Deutsche Bank AG Goldman Sachs HSBC Holdings plc KBC Group</p> <p>Industrial giants: British Petroleum Royal Dutch Shell BAE Systems EADS Rolls-Royce</p> <p>IT: Amazon.com Google Inc.</p> <p>Pharmacy: Novartis</p>	<p>International organizations: Lagarde, Christine (IMF) Barroso, José M. (EU) Reding, Viviane (EU)</p> <p>National politicians: Cameron, David (GB) Monti, Mario (IT) Fillon, François (FR)</p> <p>Central bankers: Chairman of Swiss National Bank</p> <p>Ex-World Bank presidents: Wolfensohn, James D. Zoellick, Robert B.</p> <p>EU and US insiders: Kissinger, Henry A. Davignon, Etienne</p>	<p>Economists: Editor-in-Chief of the Economist</p> <p>Political scientists: Kaplan, Robert D. Chief Geopolitical Analyst, Stratfor</p> <p>Mathews, Jessica T. President, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace</p> <p>Montbrial, Thierry President, IFRI</p> <p>Slaughter, Anne-Marie, Princeton University</p>

Source: Bilderberg Group website (compilations are of the author's)

Discussion of the findings on the most prominent Bilderbergers

During the seven conferences from 2010 to 2016, Bilderberg Group hosted very prestigious delegates from all power centers. As participants appeared the heads of all most important international organizations (EU, NATO, WTO, IMF, World Bank). Heads of influential national governments (David Cameron from the UK, Mark Rutte from Netherlands, Charles Michel from Belgium, Werner Faymann from Austria, José Luis Zapatero from Spain), former prime ministers (of both France and Italy in 2013), presidents (Heinz Fischer from Austria), members of European royalty (queens of both Netherlands and Spain in 2010), chiefs/directors of secret services (Keith B. Alexander from American NSA, John Sawers from British SIS, Patrick Calvar from French DGSI) as well as central bankers (three in 2014, in 2011 president of European Central Bank) were also among the attendees.

Most importantly, each time, Bilderberg meetings were crowded by dozens of CEOs/chairmen of the (same) largest corporations from all sectors of economy, particularly financial (AXA, Deutsche Bank, Goldman Sachs, HSBC, Barclays, TD Bank, Oesterreichische Kontrollbank), industrial (Siemens, British Petroleum, Royal Dutch Shell, Airbus, Fiat, Koç Holding A.Ş.), electronics, IT, telecommunications (Microsoft, Google, Telecom), media (Axel Springer SE, Standard Verlagsgesellschaft, Indigo Books & Music Inc.) and pharmaceutical (Novartis) companies.

Finally, few notable (organic) intellectuals (especially economists like Martin Feldstein) – usually from prominent right-wing think-tanks (American Enterprise Institute, Hudson Institute) and journals (the *Financial Times*, the *Economist*) – have also been regularly present. Several intellectuals belong to loyal “stammgasts” – particularly presidents of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the French Institute for International Relations and the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy. The authoritative US Council on Foreign Relations was represented by its co-chairman in all 2010-2015 Bilderberg conferences.

Interestingly, some corporations are represented by more than one high delegate (this was the case of Deutsche Bank in 2016 Bilderberg conference, where both the CEO and chairman of the supervisory board took part or the case of Microsoft in 2010 Bilderberg gathering, where both chairman and chief research and strategy officer participated or the case of Royal Dutch Shell in 2012).

The same is true of some countries (in the 2016 Bilderberg meeting, Netherlands was represented by both prime minister and the king; in the 2012 Bilderberg conference, Netherlands was again represented by prime minister and the queen; and in the 2010 Bilderberg gathering, Spain was represented by prime minister and the queen) and think-tanks (in the 2015 Bilderberg conference, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace was represented by three different persons – president, distinguished fellow and senior associate). The EU is regularly represented by two or even more high officials (for instance, in the 2010 Bilderberg meeting, three commissioners took part – Joaquín Almunia, Karel de Gucht and Neelie Kroes).

Table 7: Bilderberg stammgasts – the hard core of Euro-Atlantic TCC

Years of Bilderberg conferences	Number of same attendees
2015 and 2016	56
2014 and 2015	51
2013 and 2014	59
2012 and 2013	59
2011 and 2012	63
2010 and 2011	63

Source: Bilderberg Group website (calculations are of the author's)

Table 8: Bilderberg biggest stammgasts – participants of all 2010–2016 conferences

Name	Country	Affiliation
Agius, Marcus	Great Britain	PA Consulting Group / Barclays plc
Altman, Roger C.	USA	Evercore Partners Inc.
Bernabè, Franco	Italy	FB Group SRL / Telecom Italy
Cebrián, Juan Luis	Spain	Grupo PRISA
Enders, Thomas	Germany	Airbus Group / EADS
Federspiel, Ulrik	Denmark	Haldor Topsøe A/S
Halberstadt, Victor	Netherlands	Leiden University; Former Honorary Secretary General of Bilderberg Meetings
Johnson, James A.	USA	Perseus, LLC / Johnson Capital Partners
Kerr, John	Great Britain	House of Lords / Royal Dutch Shell
Kissinger, Henry	USA	former Secretary of State / Kissinger Associates, Inc.
Kleinfeld, Klaus	USA	Alcoa
Kravis, Henry R.	USA	Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co.
Kravis, Marie-Josée	USA	Hudson Institute
Micklethwait, John	Great Britain	The Economist / Bloomberg
Mundie, Craig J.	USA	Microsoft / Mundie & Associates
Reisman, Heather M.	Canada	Indigo Books & Music Inc.
Schmidt, Eric E.	USA	Google Inc.
Scholten, Rudolf	Austria	Oesterreichische Kontrollbank AG
Thiel, Peter A.	USA	Clarium / Thiel Capital
Wallenberg, Jacob	Sweden	Investor AB

Source: Bilderberg Group website (compilations are of the author's)

Discussion of the findings on regular attendees at Bilderberg conferences

Comparison of the lists of participants reveals that the same 56 people (approximately one-third) attended both 2015 and 2016 Bilderberg conferences. A similar number is reached when we compare the guests of 2014 and 2015 or 2013 and 2014 Bilderberg meetings.

Many of these “stammgasts” are from Bilderberg Group's 31-member Steering Committee. Indeed, the same 20 individuals (most of them businessmen) participated in all seven Bilderberg conferences from 2010 to 2016. Meetings from 2010 to 2015 were attended by the same 29 persons (people mentioned in Table 8 plus Francisco Balsemão, Oscar Bronner, Edmund Clark, Mustafa Koç, Richard Perle, Robert Rubin, Peter Sutherland, James Wolfensohn and Robert Zoellick).

These findings have clear implications for neo-Marxist theory – the repeated presence of dozens of the same people at Bilderberg gatherings supports the thesis of an established and stable (core of) TCC.

Existing research on Bilderberg Group hints at “central members of the network” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 176), but does not provide even a tentative list of them. This chapter suggests that the individuals in Table 8 belong to this group along with all nine men mentioned above. These people probably have greater clout among their fellow Bilderbergers, since “longevity of membership is clearly associated with perceived influence within the elite network” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 182).

At the same time, these findings contradict the official explanation on Bilderberg website regarding the selection of attendees for individual conferences. In the FAQ section, the Bilderberg homepage asserts that “Participants are invited because they can bring different points of view.” Yet this statement cannot be taken seriously. As no real dissidents (people like Noam Chomsky) are invited, attendees of Bilderberg conferences hardly ever hear any significantly different point of view.

As a rule, none of the more radical left-wingers appear at Bilderberg meetings. Trade unionists are also conspicuously absent (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 82). The same is true for Euro-sceptics (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 109-110). Guests outside of Western civilization are also extremely rare.

This proves the (triple) bias inside Bilderberg Group (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 148) – class, ideological and even cultural (Richardson – Kakabadse –

Kakabadse, 2011: 53-54, 112-114). Such bias helps to ensure that concerns of labor are overlooked (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 82) and the interests of capital privileged. It also guarantees that the issues are discussed from a Western perspective (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 114).

Moreover, as shown in Table 7, dozens of attendees participate at Bilderberg gatherings repeatedly (often two years successively), so it is to be expected that these “stammgasts” express each time the same opinions, not “different points of view”. To mention just one example, Kissinger was present at all seven conferences and he most probably always advocated identical ideas and actions.

In sum, Bilderberg organizers tend to invite a relatively stable set of people formed of like-minded individuals with similar backgrounds (and personal, commercial and other connections with one another), who often see themselves as a kind of “community” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 128) or a “group of friends” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 172).

Yet they can also be regarded as a special interest group or as a transnational (capitalist) class, as suggested even by non-Marxist literature: “These issues of selection and membership are hardly new observations of elite networks, but the fact that they are being played out in a transnational setting is of considerable significance. After all, they provide further evidence of elite homogeneity and possible class formation.” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 83).

Table 9: Bilderberg novices – “non-Western” guests as an extension of TCC

Bilderberg conference	Non-Western guests	Country of origin
2016	1	1 Polish
2015	1	1 Russian
2014	3	2 Chinese, 1 Hungarian
2013	1	1 Polish
2012	8	1 Chinese, 3 Russians, 1 Polish, 2 Israelis, 1 Syrian
2011	3	2 Chinese, 1 Russian
2010	1	1 Zambian-born

Source: Bilderberg Group website (calculations are of the author's)

Note: “non-Western” means here other than Turks

Table 10: Biggest stars among “non-Western” guests of Bilderberg conferences

Conference	Name	Country	Affiliation
2016	Sikorski, Radoslaw	Poland	Former Minister of Foreign Affairs
2015	Guriev, Sergei	Russia	economist, Sciences Po
2014	Liu, He	China	Office of the Central Leading Group on Financial and Economic Affairs
	Bajnai, Gordon	Hungary	ex-Prime Minister
2013	Rostowski, Jacek	Poland	Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister
2012	Kasparov, Garri	Russia	Chairman, United Civil Front of Russia
	Chubais, Anatoly	Russia	ex-Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, responsible for privatization
	Ivanov, Igor	Russia	ex-Foreign Minister of Russia
	Fu, Ying	China	Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs
	Rabinovich, Itamar	Israel	ex-Israel's Ambassador in USA
	Kodmani, Bassma	Syria	Head of Foreign Affairs, Syrian National Council
2011	Fu, Ying	China	Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs
	Mordashov, Alexey	Russia	CEO of Severstal
2010	Moyo, Dambisa	Zambian-born	economist

Source: Bilderberg Group website (compilations are of the author's)

Discussion of the findings on non-Western guests at Bilderberg conferences

When focusing on participants of the isolated 2007 Bilderberg conference, van der Pijl (2010) stressed that the Bilderberg Group remains extremely “West”, in spite of NATO and EU enlargement to the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region. However, if the analysis looks at the whole series of 2010-2016 Bilderberg meetings, it always finds at least one high-ranking “Non-Westerner” exactly from CEE countries and also from newly emerging (BRIC)

powers, especially Russia and China. Although very weak, this might be seen as evidence that globalizing tendencies have had some impact on the Bilderberg Group.

Indeed, for a long time, there were “non-Westerners” among Bilderberg attendees – Turks. Yet, after the Cold War, Bilderberg Group opened itself up more and slowly expanded by inviting new guests mainly from post-communist European countries as these states have been drawn into global capitalist system and Atlanticist coalition.

Bilderbergers themselves suggest that they wanted to invite even more East Europeans, but abandoned such efforts because the total number of participants would rise too much (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 54). Yet this explanation need not be the whole truth. From Table 1, it seems clear that, with the exception of 2012 gathering, all the six conferences could have taken on at least two more delegates from CEE region (and/or BRIC coalition) without any problems in terms of overcrowding.

In any case, no matter how small, the repeated presence of East Europeans and Chinese at the latest Bilderberg meetings suggests that even the Euro-Atlantic (branch of) TCC has been incorporating new members, thus becoming more and more globalized.

On the other hand, this thesis fully subscribes to the hierarchy claim that, among Bilderbergers, one should distinguish between “those at the heart of the network, those who are aspirant members of the network, and those at the periphery, who probably fall into the category of invited guest” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 80). Hence, all people in Tables 9 and 10 are certainly peripheral members, or perhaps most often just guests of the other much more established Bilderbergers (Table 8, Tables 11–14).

Table 11: Key political-economic topics of 2016 Bilderberg conference

Key topics	Relevant attendees	Associated events
Russia	Breedlove, Philip (former Supreme Allied Commander Europe) Burns, William (ex US ambassador to Russia) Sikorski, Radoslaw (former Polish foreign minister)	Crimea/Ukraine (sanctions) Russia's involvement in Syria Nord Stream 2 cyber attacks

Europe (migration, growth, reform, vision, unity)	Georgieva, Kristalina (vice President of European Commission) Barroso, José M. (former President of the European Commission) Coeuré, Benoît (member of the Executive Board of European Central Bank) Maizière, Thomas de (German minister of the interior)	migration eurocrisis brexit TTIP/CETA
Middle East	Turkish deputy prime minister Petraeus, David (ex- commander of coalition forces in Iraq)	Syria / Iraq / ISIS Arab Spring aftermath developments in Turkey
China	Breden, Børge (Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs)? Fabius, Laurent (French ex minister of Foreign Affairs)?	China's rise (Asian century) New Silk Road dumping
US (political landscape, economy: growth, debt, reform)	Niall Ferguson (author of Colossus) Thiel, Peter (Trump's supporter)	Trump TTIP trade deficit
Precariat and middle class	Standing, Guy (advocate of basic income)	decline of Western middle classes
Cyber security	Karp, Alex (CEO of Palantir)	Russian/Chinese cyber attacks
Geo-politics of energy and commodity prices	Beurden, Ben van (CEO of Royal Dutch Shell)	Nord Stream 2 falling oil prices

Source: Bilderberg Group website (compilations are of the author's)

Table 12: Key political-economic topics of 2015 Bilderberg conference

Key topics	Relevant attendees	Associated events
Current economic issues	Feldstein, Martin S., NBER Editor of the Economist Minister of Finance of Britain Member of the Executive Board of European Central Bank	Slow recovery Euro crisis Currency wars TTIP/CETA
European strategy	President of Austria German Defence Minister José M. Barroso	Migration Euro crisis Ukrainian conflict TTIP/CETA
Globalization	Ex-World Bank presidents De Gucht, Karel (former EU Trade Commissioner)	Interdependence Migration TTIP/CETA
Greece	Honorary President of The Hellenic Council of State President of Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy	Greek debt crisis Migration
Iran	Beurden, Ben van (CEO, Royal Dutch Shell plc) hosts from Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	Nuclear deal End of sanctions (= new contracts)
Russia	Secretary General of NATO Chairman of Munich Security Conference Applebaum, Anne (Director of Transitions Forum)	Future of sanctions Future of Ukraine Future of NATO-Russia consultations
United Kingdom	Osborne, George (finance minister) Balls, Edward M. (former shadow finance minister) Editor-in-Chief of The Economist	Brexit
US elections	Kissinger, Henry A.	Trump

Source: Bilderberg Group website (compilations are of the author's)

Table 13: Key political-economic topics of 2014 Bilderberg conference

Key topics	Relevant attendees	Associated events
Ukraine	General Secretary of NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe	War in Ukraine
What next for Europe?	Reding, Viviane (EU) Davignon, Etienne Member of Executive Board of European Central Bank	EU parliament election New EU Commission Eurocrisis
The new architecture of the Middle East	5 Turks Kissinger, Henry	Arab Spring aftermath
China's political and economic outlook	Director, John L.Thornton China Center, The Brookings Professor of Economics, Peking University	Rise of China
How special is the relationship in intelligence sharing?	Former Commander, U.S. Cyber Command; Former Director, NSA Chief, Secret Intelligence Service	NSA spying
Is the economic recovery sustainable?	Lagarde, Christine (IMF) Editor of The Economist	Global recession

Source: Bilderberg Group website (compilations are of the author's)

Table 14: Key political-economic topics of 2013 Bilderberg conference

Key topics	Relevant attendees	Associated events
Can the US and Europe grow faster and create jobs?	Lagarde, Christine (IMF) Feldstein, Martin S. (NBER) Austrian state secretary of finance	slow recovery (youth) unemployment
Nationalism and populism	Lindner, Christian (Party Leader of the liberal German Free Democratic Party)	nationalist vawe in Europe
US foreign policy	Kaplan, Robert D. (Chief Geopolitical Analyst, Stratfor)	Middle East, Libya, China
Africa's challenges	Bavinchove, Olivier de (Commander, Eurocorps) Montbrial, Thierry de (President, French Institute for International Relations)	conflicts migration ebola
Cyber warfare and the proliferation of asymmetric threats	Karp, Alex (Founder and CEO, Palantir Technologies) Omand, David (Visiting Professor, King's College London)	(Chinese/Russian) cyber-attacks on Western targets WikiLeaks
Politics of the EU	Barroso, José M. (President, EU Commission)	Euro and debt crises Brexit Eastern neighbourhood
Developments in the Middle East	Turkish attendees – Babacan, Ali (Deputy Prime Minister for Economic and Financial Affairs) Özel, Soli (Senior Lecturer, Kadir Has University)	Islamic State Syria Iran Iraq

Source: Bilderberg Group website (compilations are of the author's)

Discussion of the findings on debates at Bilderberg conferences

Bilderberg conferences are dedicated to several „key topics for discussion“, related to important current events, but also megatrends (demography, loss of privacy, artificial intelligence). Many topics repeatedly revolve around EU, transatlantic relations, Western economic condition and the overall situation in strategic regions and countries (Middle East, China, Russia). Each topic seems to be covered by high-profile insiders who could reveal valuable (not publicly available) information (and give recommendations).

Bilderberg critics suspect that these private meetings are never only about innocent “discussion”. Existing research raised similar doubts as it concludes that elite policy networks are “a fundamental part of policymaking machinery” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 164).

The official Bilderberg Group's website itself states that this “off-the-record international forum” is a place where “different viewpoints can be expressed and mutual understanding enhanced”. Yet, as shown above, the proclamation about “different viewpoints” cannot be taken seriously, since no real dissidents are invited and most Bilderbergers are market-friendly Europhiles and Atlanticists or even so-called „globalists“.

Therefore, it is legitimate to argue that, in fact, Bilderberg gatherings primarily serve to “enhance mutual understanding” among members of the (Euro-Atlantic) TCC. In other words, elite consensus building is promoted there. Finally, given the (same) political orientation of the participants and the conference (recurrent) topics, it is almost certain that Bilderberg Group – just like the TCC as a whole – promotes capitalism and integration.

As far as theory is concerned, this has to be seen as evidence (although perhaps indirect) for Sklair's (and neo-Marxist in general) thesis that the TCC strives for promotion of capitalism (and economic integration) and that the exclusive clubs like Bilderberg serve for elite consensus building around these objectives.

Such inferences are completely in line with non-Marxist research, which also suggests that Bilderberg meetings are not as much about elite consensus building as consensus *reinforcement* (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 110 (emphasis added)). Among its (generally already convinced) members and via them to outsiders, Bilderberg (like other similar forums) bolsters three broad and far-reaching worldviews.

The first is called “internationalist consensus” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 198-199, see also 104) as a preference for global governance (at the expense of national sovereignty), regional collaboration and integration and, in a certain sense, even a “homogeneous transnational community” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 74).

This belief is most pronounced, when it comes to the second “European consensus” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 182). Bilderberg Group has been an assembly of “Europhiles” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 108) and at least some of them probably purposefully support “the ever closer union of Europe” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 182). Drawing on Bilderberg's mastermind Etienne Davignon, existing research even suggests that the Group's gatherings “facilitated creation of the euro” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 195).

Last but not least, even non-Marxist analysts highlight that Bilderbergers share and disseminate “free trade/free markets stance” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 171). In other words, elite networks are instrumental in cementing the third consensus, which this thesis would dub the “market consensus”. This means not only that the desirability of market economy (and liberal democracy) is taken as sacrosanct (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 76-78, 92, 104). What is also rarely questioned is the all-penetrating interweave between politics and economics (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 76, 84, 91, 164) and legitimacy of elite power (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 147) and thus, in the end, the hegemony of TCC.

Counterintuitive findings on Bilderberg Group

In 2013, an investigative journalist was present at Bilderberg conference (Alexis Papahelas or Papachelas from Greece). This seems to contradict the conspiracy theories that portray Bilderberg Group as a highly secret “world shadow government” (Rothkopf, 2008: 276-277) with hidden evil agendas.

More importantly, some (moderate) leftists have also attended Bilderberg conferences. In the last Bilderberg meeting in 2016, four prominent left-wing politicians took part: Laurent Fabius (French socialist ex-Prime Minister), Maria Luís Albuquerque (Portuguese social democratic ex-minister of finance), Andreas Schieder (chairman of social

democratic group in Austrian parliament) and Helen Goodman (Labour Party member of British parliament and member of the Christian Socialist Movement).

To mention another example, in 2013 Bilderberg gathering, the party leader of the Swedish Social Democratic party and secretary general of Portuguese Socialist Party were present, although these meetings have been populated mostly by right-wingers. Yet this is also in line with Sklair, since in his view, the political fraction of TCC comprises leading politicians from all major established (parliamentary) parties, including social democrats.

Right-wingers prevail also among invited intellectuals and therefore it is interesting to note that in the 2016 Bilderberg conference, Guy Standing took part and probably even chaired one of the panels. This British left-leaning economist denounces the triumph of rentier capitalism (Standing, 2016) and the rise of socially insecure precariat (Standing, 2011) – all as a consequence of neoliberal restructuring that was/is advocated by many Bilderbergers, who also profit(ed) from it. At the same time, Standing champions the left-libertarian concept of the basic income. He co-founded and served as honorary co-president of the Basic Income European Network – along with neo-Marxist sociologist Claus Offe.

Surprisingly, the often demonized US “military-industrial complex” is minimally represented, because the bosses of firms like Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman or Raytheon have not (regularly) participated at the surveyed seven Bilderberg meetings.

Finally, the prominent, recent, long-debated issue of TTIP and CETA has never been explicitly mentioned on the lists of topics of individual Bilderberg conferences from 2010 to 2016, which is striking, because Bilderberg meetings were designed and always served exactly for enhancing (geo)political and economic rapprochement between Europe and North America.

Directions for future research

The Bilderberg Group deserves more analysis than it has received and that can be provided in this chapter. Established scholars might unite and try to gain further information from Bilderberg webmasters/Steering Committee. For example, the current Bilderberg homepage does not tell anything about the time and energy dedicated to different topics of a given conference (how long, how ardently – and ideally also by whom – each individual topic was discussed, who chaired which panels etc.). At the same time, the Bilderberg homepage does

not contain official lists of participants (topics have already been released) of the older Bilderberg conferences (2009, 2008, 2007 etc.).

Of course, additional in-depth and ideally non-anonymous interviews with different Bilderbergers could be of great value. Plus, there is a need for up-to-date comparative studies that would situate the Bilderberg Group in relation to the Trilateral Commission and the World Economic Forum.

Research on activism and (new) social movements can benefit from closer scrutiny of the groups that regularly protest against Bilderberg meetings (“Occupy Bilderberg”). For their part, political theorists might illuminate the apparent conflict between private elite clubs (for VIP consensus building) and ideals of (participatory) democracy.

Furthermore, there is much room for content and discourse analysis, since Bilderberg conferences have fully appeared in (Western) mass media only recently and it seems interesting to examine the media coverage of this previously taboo topic.

Last but not least, future research should try to establish the (potential) impact of individual Bilderberg meetings on some of the subsequent events. In a sense, this amounts to testing whether (some of) the conspiracy theories are (at least partially) right. Both interviews and process-tracing method could help here, although the pitfalls of such research design are obvious, so any conclusions would probably always be somehow speculative.

Conclusion

After the Cold War, and most intensely in recent decade, the Bilderberg Group has eventually emerged as a regular topic in Western mainstream mass media and to a lesser extent also in academic writing. For a long time, this was not the case, as many critics and/or conspiracy theorists (over)emphasized. Most importantly, the Bilderberg Group itself has taken some steps to come out of secrecy and launched its own website, which can be used as a primary source for scholarly investigations.

Yet, despite all these positive changes in terms of transparency, the Bilderberg Group is still highly under-researched in academic circles. This is true even for neo-Marxists, although they focus on (other) private elite clubs relatively extensively. Trying to fill this gap, the present chapter is an attempt to directly gather and interpret all available information

from the Bilderberg Group's official homepage. Furthermore, it is demonstrated that these original data have some theoretical value – they reinforce the neo-Marxist scholarship and specifically the thesis of the (Euro-Atlantic) TCC.

In particular, the empirical findings on the seven Bilderberg conferences strongly support Sklair's contentions about the internal structure and goals of the TCC, but not (yet) of its scale. We confirm that the TCC is divided into inter-permeable fractions, with the corporate fraction as the most important one. There is also (indirect) evidence that the TCC promotes capitalism and integration.

However, recent Bilderberg meetings do not conform to the claim that the TCC has already evolved on a global scale, although there is a trend of inviting new “non-Western” guests. Nonetheless, the vast majority of Bilderbergers show that the TCC is still mostly developed only within (West) European and Euro-Atlantic perimeter, as suggested by van Apeldoorn and Carroll.

In sum, there appears to be an interesting tension. On the one hand, the Bilderberg Group flourished, since powerful figures still attended the conferences, the club even started to care about its image and became active in PR and the meetings began to attract much more public attention.

On the other hand, the Bilderberg Group might be rather losing relative importance (vis-à-vis the Trilateral Commission and the World Economic Forum), since it has not really incorporated the newly emerging “non-Western” elites. Similarly to other (unofficial) institutions of global governance, the Bilderberg Group did not reflect adequately the rapidly changing distributions of global economic and (geo)political power.

Only the future will tell us how this tension ends up and with what consequences – for both the Bilderberg Group and the whole Euro-Atlantic bloc as the hitherto dominant pole of the capitalist world economy.

Final comments on power and capital

This chapter unveils power realities *inside* Bilderberg Group and by extension, Euro-Atlantic TCC. The empirical findings suggest that within Euro-Atlantic TCC, the European part is the most consolidated, developed – and influential – segment. This conclusion can be supported by three observations: 1) the dominance of Europeans among participants and chairmen of

Bilderberg conferences, 2) the dominance of European countries among locations of the conferences and 3) the amount of attention dedicated to topics related to European affairs.

The first point indicates that there is greater social capital (in terms of mutual ties) among European Bilderbergers (members of TCC) than among European and U.S./Canadian, let alone Turkish Bilderbergers. The second point relates more to economic capital. It was always quite expensive and demanding (in terms of logistics, time plans etc.) to secure suitable hotel and enough high-profile participants, so that Bilderberg conference could be convened. The organizers from the chosen country had to collect a lot of money, usually donated by corporations involved in Bilderberg network. The third point revolves around ideational and discursive power. This form of power is mainly in the hands of Bilderberg Group's steering committee, which selects the topics of the conferences and (also according to these topics), the participants.

Members of the committee are the central and most powerful individuals inside Bilderberg network. Their influence is rooted mainly in social capital – conceived as contacts, but also reputation, thrust and informal authority emanating from special status within the community. Their power is exercised primarily through gatekeeping – deciding who would (not) be invited and thus allowed to amass social capital via networking with high society.

Most intellectual celebrities (but also central bankers) invited to Bilderberg gatherings can be subsumed under the constructivist notion of neoliberal epistemic community. These individuals have ideational and discursive power, which they use for promotion of what was dubbed as “market consensus”. From another angle, the ideational and discursive power – towards outside world – is discussed in chapter 5.

Finally, the significance or even primacy of economic power and capital can be seen from the fact that corporate fraction dominates within Bilderberg Group and (Euro-Atlantic) TCC in general. Nonetheless, the “revolving door” alias “inter-permeability of all fractions” phenomenon shows that economic capital is easily convertible into (not only) political power and vice versa. The subsequent chapter 3 outlines (possible) manifestations of Bilderberg Group's power in political domain, namely in the sphere of European and transatlantic integration.

Endnotes

- 1) In 2008, Rothkopf stated that “there is no official Bilderberg website” (2008: 277). In 2011, Richardson et al.’s pioneering monograph did not mention Bilderberg’s website. Therefore, it must have been launched afterwards, probably some when in 2012.
- 2) <https://bilderbergmeetings.org/>
- 3) Lists of participants of 2010–2013 conferences are now no longer displayed on Bilderberg website (previously they were in the section meetings—latest meetings), but are archived by the author (who will send them upon request) and can often be found elsewhere on the internet.

Chapter 3

From Euro facilitation to Brexit impotence:

Decline of Bilderberg Group's power

Abstract of the chapter

This chapter is the first preliminary estimate of post-Cold War political power of Bilderberg Group. The chapter argues that this private network of Euro-Atlantic elites has had some influence, but only indirect and limited. Most importantly, the meetings facilitated the introduction of Euro. Plus, some politicians and bankers made international careers probably also due to their attendance at Bilderberg conferences. On the other hand, the club has been unable to stop Brexit, push TTIP and reverse the alienation of Turkey. Thus, the chapter concludes that political power of Bilderberg Group has declined. This assertion problematizes neo-Marxist research on elite networks and transnational capitalist class.

Motto

“Of course, given the fact that over the years the Bilderberg meetings consistently attracted high-level participants, in many cases the discussions indeed had an impact on policy-making.” (Gijswijt, 2007: 2)

“While furiously denying that they secretly ruled the world, my Bilderberg interviewees did admit to me that international affairs had, from time to time, been influenced by these sessions.” (The Guardian, 10.3.2001)

Introduction

There have been diverging views on Bilderberg Group, especially when it comes to its power and intentions. Critics and conspiracy theorists (Dice, 2015; Estulin, 2009; Jeffers, 2009; Tucker, 2005; Wisnewski, 2010) tend to exaggerate the club's influence and alleged evil-mindedness. On the other hand, some Bilderbergers overly downplay the importance and dark sides of their enterprise. This chapter refutes both these extreme standpoints as not

corresponding with available evidence and basic logic. Instead, it claims that in few areas Bilderberg Group has had some impact, but limited, indirect and not (so) negative.

First of all, the confidential annual conferences of Euro-Atlantic political and economic elites contributed to the creation of European monetary union. In addition, they probably helped careers of some mainly European politicians and bankers who attended the gatherings and later got promoted into top positions in international institutions like EU, NATO, or IMF.

Yet, paradoxically, the European integration is also the realm where the powerlessness of Bilderberg Group can be best demonstrated. The club has been unable to avert Brexit that undermines its chief goal to cement the EU.

Moreover, Bilderberg Group's another key objective – strengthening of transatlantic ties – is challenged too. Just consider the failure of negotiations about the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the US-EU tariff war.

In this way, the chapter summarizes and assesses recent examples of Bilderberg Group's (absent) influence. Such systematic and synthesizing examination cannot be found in existing academic literature (Aubourg, 2003; Gijswijt, 2018; Kantor, 2017; Martín Jiménez, 2017; Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011; Rothkopf, 2008; van der Pijl, 2010; Wendt, 2016; Wendt et al., 2016; Wilford, 2003; Zieliński, 2017).

This chapter builds on and extends neo-Marxist scholarship on elite networks (van Apeldoorn – de Graaff, 2016) and forums (van Apeldoorn, 2000) around which transnational capitalist class (TCC) develops and coordinates itself. Or more precisely: European capitalist class as in the case of European Round Table of Industrialists (van Apeldoorn, 2014) and Euro-Atlantic capitalist class as in the case of Bilderberg Group (see chapter 2). However, the present chapter also problematizes this scholarship. Neo-Marxists tend to ascribe quite significant power to TCC (see chapter 1), but the following investigation suggests surprising ineffectiveness of this influence. Bilderberg Group (and by extension, TCC) was not able to preserve European integration and deepen transatlantic ties, which is its main goal.

The chapter also extends groundbreaking research conducted by critical sociologist Wendt, who surveyed how different actors construct knowledge and discourse about Bilderberg Group and its power(lessness). Most importantly, he showed how mainstream journalists and politicians (mis)represent Bilderberg Group's influence (Wendt, 2016: 55-83).

To lesser extent, the chapter adds to scholarship on the impact of other transnational elite clubs, namely Trilateral Commission (Gill, 1990; Knudsen, 2016) and World Economic Forum (Graz, 2003; Garsten – Sörbom, 2018). More generally, the chapter contributes to interdisciplinary inquiries on global elite (Sklair, 2001; Freeland, 2012; Phillips, 2018) and informal governance (Christiansen – Neuhold, 2012; Westerwinter – Abbott – Biersteker, 2020). Plus, it also enriches the broad debates on EU, transatlantic relations and the entanglement of politics and business. Last but not least, the chapter might have policy and public relevance, because it helps to cultivate discussion on Bilderberg Group and hopefully, by extension, on other sensitive and controversial topics.

The remainder of the chapter proceeds as follows. The next part briefly outlines the main argument, approach and sources. Subsequent section comments on how Bilderbergers themselves assess the impact of their club. Following big part explores areas, in which Bilderberg Group demonstrated some political power. Then, as counterargument, it is shown what the club has not been able to influence. Finally, the conclusion sums up the conflicting evidence and infers that Bilderberg Group has had power which however decreases. At the same time, possible directions for future research are suggested.

Main argument: powerful are powerless more often than expected

(Political) power can be conceptualized in many different ways (Haugaard, 2020; Clegg – Haugaard, 2013; Goverde – Cerny – Haugaard – Lentner, 2000). For the sake of simplicity, this chapter understands power and influence synonymously. Powerful are those actors that influence something important – be it foreign policy (integration process) or political nominations. Yet, in social science, tracing and measuring influence has always been very difficult task. In case of Bilderberg Group, the issue is even more complicated, mainly due to lack of reliable information. Therefore, this is not a rigorous analysis, but rather a discussion piece.

In other words, the chapter does not search for any causality, because there is most probably no such thing. At best, Bilderberg conferences influence some of subsequent developments in indirect way. For analytical purposes, some agency is attributed to Bilderberg Group. Yet, that does not mean that the club is always a monolithic entity. On the

other hand, most (if not all) Bilderbergers share one core belief – that ties between EU, US and Turkey should be preserved and even deepened.

However, the chapter does not claim that Bilderberg Group is the only relevant player – either in the sphere of integration processes or in the personnel policy. Goals pursued by Bilderbergers are simultaneously advanced by other actors, who might be (sometimes) more coordinated and/or powerful.

For instance, European Round Table of Industrialists (ERT) also promoted European economic – including monetary – integration (van Apeldoorn, 2000). Yet, it should be noted that there were – and still are – significant personal overlaps between ERT and Bilderberg Group. Van Apeldoorn did not say this, but many corporations associated in ERT (Volvo, Fiat, Philips, Siemens, Unilever, Shell, British Petroleum, Investor AB, Lafarge, ThyssenKrupp, Norsk Hydro, Nokia, DaimlerChrysler) were/are also involved in Bilderberg meetings. ERT and Bilderberg Group had also been interconnected via former EU commissioners Etienne Davignon (see below) and Peter Sutherland.

Due to these ideological and membership overlaps, it seems legitimate to make parallels between ERT and Bilderberg Group (although the first is a more formal institution). Van Apeldoorn attributes some agency and influence to ERT *as a whole*, so this chapter does the same (albeit to lesser degree) *vis-à-vis* Bilderberg Group. This step is all the more justified, since van Apeldoorn explicitly includes Bilderberg Group in his recent book (van Apeldoorn – de Graaff, 2016), which highlights impact of elite networks on (US) foreign policy.

In sum, the chapter makes the following argument: Bilderberg Group was able to co-influence European integration, namely to move it in the direction to “ever closer union”. Yet, recently, the network did not have enough power to stop Brexit. At the same time, Bilderberg Group could not prevent alienation between EU and US and EU-US and Turkey. Therefore, in integration processes, the power of Bilderberg Group seemed to decrease.

On the other hand, the network probably retained some influence over political nominations to international organizations like EU, NATO or IMF. Or, at the very least: participation at Bilderberg conclaves continued to be positively correlated with promotions to positions of power. In general, meetings at Bilderberg still served as opportunities to increase (individual) power by gaining contacts, information and probably also backing. So,

in this domain, Bilderberg does not appear to lose (much) impact. Yet, even here the significance of Bilderberg can fade away, because in last two years, no Bilderberg conference took place, which is unprecedented.

This chapter draws on interviews with Bilderbergers that were gathered in two seminal books (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011; Rothkopf, 2008). Plus, data from lists of participants and topics of individual Bilderberg Group's conferences are newly scrutinized. Mainstream media are another source for this chapter, which also resorts to analogies and compares Bilderberg Group with World Economic Forum (WEF).

Yet, given its limitations and pioneering nature, this chapter presents just an incomplete preliminary appraisal. Further research will be needed to thoroughly examine Bilderberg Group's influence – the real as well as the potential one.

Bilderbergers disagree on power of their club

The power(lessness) of Bilderberg Group is worth investigating, because it is a matter of dispute even among Bilderbergers themselves. It would not be surprising if attendees of these controversial meetings downplay their relevance, as they often do. But some Bilderbergers go even further and claim that their conferences are entirely useless.

As one anonymous former senior U.S. official put it: “There is nothing that happens at Bilderberg that affects events after Bilderberg” (Rothkopf, 2008: 278). Yet, this same person regularly attended Bilderberg Group “for more than a decade”. The apparent contradiction is not explained. Why would someone repeatedly travel to a conclave which purportedly has no influence at all?

Another anonymous Bilderberger assesses his club in a way that amounts to disparagement and mockery. “I've been to most of the last twelve [meetings]. It's nothing. It's a group of 120 very senior people. By senior I mean old. (...) (...) Bilderberg and the Trilateral Commission are absolutely meaningless except as individual network opportunities. Oprah Winfrey has more influence than anyone who goes to Bilderberg at this point.” (Rothkopf, 2008: 279) Again, paradoxically, this condemnation is pronounced by someone who attended numerous Bilderberg conferences.

Rothkopf did not comment on the quoted testimonies. Yet common sense strongly suggests that they cannot mirror the (whole) reality. Rothkopf should have asked one

obvious question: if Bilderberg conferences were really worthless, why would so many important people bother to (repeatedly) attend them?

Rothkopf (2008: 42) rightly observes that for members of the superclass, time is very precious. Yet, Bilderberg conferences usually last three days, which is a long duration, especially for such busy people as Bilderbergers. Hence, to believe the cited statements requires tacit acceptance of a ridiculous assumption that CEOs of prominent companies are such bad time managers that they repeatedly attend event that has minimum or even no added value.

Moreover, the comparison with Oprah Winfrey is blatantly flawed. True, the U.S. celebrity had great power, but mainly soft or symbolic. She did not decide about budgets, investments, jobs, legislative, interstate relations or technological innovations. Such hard power remains in the hands of leading businessmen, politicians and scientists, who are therefore much more influential. And Bilderberg Group has each year attracted some of those businessmen, politicians or scientists (see chapter 2), whereas Winfrey never appeared on the lists of participants.

Importantly, there are also other Bilderbergers who do not pretend that their club is "absolutely meaningless". Trustworthy insight into Bilderberg Group was provided by former deputy secretary of the U.S. Treasury Robert Kimmitt: "I have participated in almost every one of those events, and I find they are very, very useful settings for relationship building, for setting up bilateral meetings (...) The intersection between public and private sector at these events can be important... At Davos or Bilderberg and some of the others where people from both worlds get together... sometimes we can use those settings to help get things done, to help get the message across." (Rothkopf, 2008: 275)

Rothkopf (2008: 282-283) concludes that transnational elite clubs have been instrumental for networking, agenda setting, deals and promotion of common interests: "... all these meetings are important nodes for connections, for sharing views, for shaping views, for setting agendas, and for making the connections that lead to deals or stronger coalitions to support their interests." This chapter sticks to this moderate assessment, which is buttressed by the following parts.

Powerful Bilderberg Group: place where insider's information is shared

Each Bilderberg conference was attended by approximately 130 high-ranking people, including dozens of decision-makers from both big business and big politics. These individuals have plenty of valuable insider's information which they can exchange and then use for various purposes. Even if only in this way, every Bilderberg gathering influences subsequent developments, including policy-making as the above motto claims.

In the same manner, the discussions also affect business. One anonymous manager and/or entrepreneur acknowledged that insights he gained at Bilderberg conclave had direct influence on his company: "I was at the Bilderberg conference outside Washington to talk about Afghanistan, Palestine, Georgia, and many other things, in a confidential group where you have politicians, academics, business people, and media people. It opens a lot of new aspects and avenues. And that has, implicitly of course, an impact on how you run your business or how you formulate your strategy. So in that sense, I think, it is very direct." (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 203)

Presentations and conversations at Bilderberg meetings are strictly off-record in order to make the participants speak as frankly as possible. One anonymous "established Bilderberg attendee" admitted that among themselves, Bilderbergers reveal more than they say in public: "[On a debate related to oil and energy], Lord Brown and Jeroen van der Veer could never have been that open in public. On the European economy, Trichet was absolutely scathing about European structural rigidity. Now he could never have been so open in front of the media or his own constituents." (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 174)

Richardson does not elaborate on the problematic implication of this testimony, which could even reinforce the appeal of conspiracy theories. The problem is simple: In their highly exclusive club, Bilderbergers exchange information and views that they (sometimes) do not share with public. Put differently, by their very design, Bilderberg conclaves widen the information (and thus power) asymmetry between elites and masses. This proves that members of the transatlantic capitalist class have bigger affinity to one another than to their average co-citizens.

Powerful Bilderberg Group: place where business and politics merge

Political developments after Bilderberg conferences can be affected by lobbying, since Bilderberg conclaves are rare occasions, when crowds of leaders of private and public sector regularly meet in non-transparent conditions behind closed doors. For businessmen, this creates room for more or less open lobbying. Yet, strikingly, this question is not directly addressed in the existing literature. Neither Richardson (2011) nor Rothkopf (2008) asked any of the interviewed Bilderbergers, whether lobbying occurred at their gatherings.

Zieliński (2017: 127) hints to possible lobbying, when he reflects on Bilderberg conference in 2015 in Austria. This event was attended by Thomas Enders, CEO of major European defense contractor Airbus and member of Bilderberg Group's steering committee, who participated in numerous Bilderberg conclaves. Other attendees at Bilderberg meeting in 2015 included NATO's secretary general Jens Stoltenberg and German minister of defense Ursula von der Leyen.

Zieliński stresses that two weeks after Bilderberg gathering, Stoltenberg and von der Leyen “announced that NATO needed more funds and that the German government would override their previous decision not to increase the defense budget.” Of course, higher defense expenditures promise greater revenue for defense contractors. Thus, Zieliński plausibly concludes that “It does not seem far-fetched to assume that the discussions at the Bilderberg Conference in Austria influenced von der Leyen's decision.”

Powerful Bilderberg Group: place where deals are struck

Events after Bilderberg meetings might also be affected by agreements that are probably sometimes made among participating businessmen. As Gijswijt (2007: 302) put it: “we can assume that on the sidelines of the Bilderberg conferences many new business opportunities were created.” The same applies for possible deals among participating politicians. Presumably, their agreements are also struck on the sidelines of the conclave, perhaps in the bars or rooms in the luxury hotel, where Bilderberg attendees are accommodated.

In any case, it is fair to admit that these deals need not be (so) evil and conspiratorial. After all, even mainstream media occasionally report on them. Take for instance Czech daily *Právo* (10.6.2008), which briefly wrote about Bilderberg conference in Chantilly in U.S.,

where Czech foreign minister Karel Schwarzenberg met his American counterpart Condoleezza Rice.

In Chantilly, Schwarzenberg and Rice fixed the place and time for the signature of the controversial treaty on US missile defense radar in the Czech Republic. Schwarzenberg said that at Bilderberg, Rice confirmed that she would come to Czech capital Prague at the beginning of July. However, this was already expected, so the meeting in Chantilly brought no real breakthrough. Nonetheless, it cannot be ruled out that the two politicians also discussed (and agreed on?) other aspects which were not disclosed. The radar topic was sensitive both internationally (critic and threats from Russia) as well as on Czech scene.

Bilderberg conference in Chantilly took place from 5th to 8th of June 2008, and the radar treaty was signed after a month in Prague on 8th of July. Yet, the majority of Czechs opposed the military installation and later, new US president Barack Obama cancelled the plan. So, agreements from Bilderberg Group are not irreversible and they could even end up in vanity.

The assumption that deals are made at Bilderberg Group can also be indirectly supported by argument by analogy, because there is public information on one highly important agreement that was concluded on the sidelines of WEF in 1996. So, if deals were struck at WEF, it is all the more plausible that the same happened also at other transnational elite clubs, including Bilderberg Group.

Like it or not, the agreement from WEF could amount to real conspiracy, because Russian oligarchs joined forces to orchestrate behind-the-scenes political intervention, in order to prevent victory of communist presidential candidate Gennady Zyuganov (Rothkopf, 2008: 268).

The oligarchs Boris Berezovsky, Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky were present at Davos along with Russian right-wing politician Anatoly Chubais. Yet, Zyuganov also came to WEF and he received warm welcome. Other attendees including top US and European businessmen began networking with Zyuganov, because he was expected to win the presidential race. At that time, the oligarchs decided to keep Boris Yeltsin in Kremlin.

As Rothkopf (2008: 268) put it: "The oligarchs set aside differences and held several private meetings in Davos hotel rooms, where they strategized over how to defeat the Zyuganov threat. The result was the "Davos Pact": an agreement between Chubais and the

oligarchs that he would lead the anti-Communist campaign and they would fund it—and him—generously.”

The oligarchs owned the main Russian televisions and newspapers and misused them against Zyuganov. Rothkopf (2008: 268) speaks about “massive media offensive”, which included “bribing journalists”. In the end, these dishonest measures triumphed. As Rothkopf (2008: 268) concludes: “Yeltsin's subsequent victory over Zyuganov later that summer changed the course of Russia and can be traced back in part to the events that took place in an otherwise sleepy alpine village (Davos – note) that February. The connections made or fortified at Davos help make things happen later on.”

Powerful Bilderberg Group: place where European integration is catalyzed

Bilderberg Group conferences contributed to at least two deals regarding European integration. Right from its inception in 1952, Bilderberg Group championed European unity, which became one of its key goals. Bilderberg Group's initiator and early organizer Joseph Retinger was eurofederalist (Gijswijt, 2007: 8-10). Retinger's contribution to European integration led one scholar to dub him as “patriarch of European Union” (Biskupski, 1998).

In March 1957, France, West Germany, Italy and Benelux countries signed the Treaty of Rome. This document has been seen as foundation of full-fledged European integration. However, it is usually overlooked that people behind the treaty were participants of Bilderberg conclaves (Gijswijt, 2007: 300).

Before March 1957, five Bilderberg conferences took place. The first was held in 1954 in Netherlands. In 1955, Bilderbergers met twice – first in France (in Barbizon) and then in West Germany (in Garmisch-Partenkirchen). These rival states had to be reconciled; otherwise European integration could not succeed. In 1956 the conference took place in Denmark and in February 1957 in the USA.

All these gatherings helped pave the way for the Treaty of Rome as acknowledged by George McGhee. This ex-member of Bilderberg Group's steering committee and former senior US State Department official put it as follows: “I believe you could say the [1957] Treaty of Rome which brought the Common Market into being, was nurtured at these meetings.” (Thompson, 1980: 170)

Special credit goes to conference in Garmisch, which helped to relaunch the European integration process after the plan for European Defence Community collapsed (van der Pijl, 1998: 121). The conclave in France was also very important. As Gijswijt (2007: 79) points out: “The French newspaper L’Express was not too far off the mark when it decried the “Secret of Barbizon” as a plot to bring about a pro-European course in France.”

In the 1990s, Bilderberg gatherings “facilitated creation of the euro” as admitted by Etienne Davignon (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 195). Unfortunately, this former EU commissioner and Bilderberg Group's long-time chairman did not disclose any details.

Nevertheless, it is well known that Davignon served on the governing board of the Association for Monetary Union of Europe (AMUE). Other prominent Bilderbergers Giovanni Agnelli and André Leysen were also members of this board (van Apeldoorn, 2000: 170). Some of the companies (Fiat, Philips, Siemens, etc.) associated in ERT – and Bilderberg Group – belonged to AMUE.

Traces also lead to Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa, who was one of the architects of the European single currency (Maes, 2012). This Italian economist served as Director-General for Economic and Financial Affairs at the European Commission (1979-83) and member of the executive board of the European Central Bank (1998-2005). Padoa-Schioppa attended Bilderberg conferences in the years 1986, 1998-2006 and 2008-2010. He even belonged to Bilderberg Group's steering committee.

Before they were nominated for the office, all presidents of the European Central Bank (ECB) appeared at Bilderberg gatherings, which can hardly be mere coincidence. As Zieliński (2017: 120) pointed out five years ago: “Another supranational financial institution with very close ties to the Bilderberg network is the European Central Bank. All three of its presidents have previously been regular participants in the Bilderberg Conferences: Wim Duisenberg, Jean-Claude Trichet and the current president, Mario Draghi.” Moreover, the first president of the ECB Duisenberg was prominent Bilderberger – he belonged to Bilderberg Group's steering committee and served as the network's honorary treasurer (from 1981 to 1983).

From 2019, ECB is headed by another regular Bilderberger Christine Lagarde. She first appeared at Bilderberg Group in 2009, at that time as French minister for economy, industry

and employment. Later, in 2013-2014 and 2016-2017, Lagarde participated at Bilderberg meetings as the Managing Director of International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Topics of individual Bilderberg conferences also suggest that Davignon was right. In one way or another, each conclave dealt with European affairs. The conference in 1995 had among its topics the following (rhetorical) question: "Should the European Union integrate further, and why?" "European monetary union" is explicitly mentioned on the list of topics of Bilderberg conference in 1998. In 1999, euro was introduced in the form of cashless currency. In 2002, euro banknotes and coins began circulating and replaced the national currencies.

So, even if nothing else, Treaty of Rome and euro came to existence also thanks to Bilderbergers. Hence, these two cases from distant epochs prove that in the European realm, Bilderberg Group had (significant) influence. Yet, should this raise concerns?

No matter how one judges the performance and consequences of EU common currency, it was a major breakthrough that advanced European integration to a higher level of monetary union. Indeed, the whole European integration is a unique phenomenon that transcended the anarchic and conflictual nature of international relations (Sørensen, 2001: 87-91, 126-144). For this reason, European integration has been emulated in other parts of the world.

Seen in this perspective, the influence of Bilderberg Group should not be demonized, but rather applauded, because the club repeatedly contributed to a project that brought stability and prosperity to nations that previously suffered enormously from two wars. As Steven Lukes (2005: 83) argues: "there is really no reason for supposing that the powerful always threaten, rather than sometimes advance, the interests of others; sometimes, indeed, the use of power can benefit all, albeit usually unequally."

On the other hand, the democratic legitimacy of EU project is questioned when crucial steps are negotiated also at (semi)secret Bilderberg conferences. This exacerbates the split between elites and alienated – and thus distrustful – masses. Moreover, although European integration is desirable, problematic is the current neoliberal course of this process (van Apeldoorn – Drahoukoupil – Horn, 2009; Schmidt – Thatcher, 2014; Wigger, 2019).

Powerful Bilderberg Group: place where careers are advanced

ECB is not the only international institution that has personal links to Bilderberg Group. Members of the network also became heads of EU, NATO, WTO, IMF, World Bank and UN. Therefore, it is hard to escape the conclusion that affiliation with Bilderberg Group increases career chances of (some of) the involved politicians.

The case of NATO is extremely telling, because *prior* to their appointment, all post-cold war general secretaries of NATO appeared at Bilderberg conference(s). This finding is documented by the following table, which omits only Sergio Balanzino and Alessandro Minuto-Rizzo, since both these interim general secretaries served just a while.

Table 1: General Secretaries of NATO at Bilderberg Group's conference

General Secretary	In office	First time at Bilderberg
Manfred Wörner	1988-1994	1985 as defense minister
Willy Claes	1994-1995	1994 as foreign minister
Javier Solana	1995-1999	1985 as minister of culture
George Robertson	1999-2003	1998 as defense minister
Jaap de Hoop Scheffer	2004-2009	2003 as foreign minister
Anders Fogh Rasmussen	2009-2014	2000 as deputy/party leader
Jens Stoltenberg	2014-until now	2002 as deputy/party leader

Source: website Public Intelligence (compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/bilderberg/> (various participant lists)

Nominations to highest positions in UN and EU were on Bilderberg Group's agenda in 2009 and 2016. In 2009, the first full-time European Council president had to be chosen. Belgian Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy was a top candidate. He “hosted a Bilderberg event in Brussels, in order to secure his appointment” (Euractiv.com, 10.6.2016).

On 12.11.2009, Van Rompuy had a dinner with several leading Bilderbergers, including Etienne Davignon, at that time chairman of Bilderberg conferences. Former US secretary of state and (ex-)member of Bilderberg Group's steering committee Henry Kissinger was also present (Euobserver.com, 16.11.2009). On 19.11.2009, EU leaders met in Brussels and selected Van Rompuy as the European Council president. Nonetheless, it is hard

to prove that this decision was really (co-)influenced by “factor Bilderberg”. Van Rompuy would probably win even without the above mentioned dinner, where he proposed new EU tax.

At Bilderberg conference in 2016 in Dresden, EU commissioner Kristalina Georgieva was present along with former president of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso. This Portugal politician attended Bilderberg conferences in the years 1994, 2003, 2005, 2013 and 2015-2019. Between 2004 and 2014, he led the European Commission. Afterwards, Barroso joined the bank Goldman Sachs and Bilderberg Group's steering committee.

In Dresden, he purportedly tried to gain support for Georgieva's candidacy to the highest post at UN: “According to information obtained by Euractiv, Barroso organised the Bilderberg gathering to lobby for Georgieva's nomination as a candidate for UN Secretary-General.” (Euractiv.com, 10.6.2016)

However, in the end, Barroso's effort proved futile, since Georgieva was not selected. So Bilderberg Group's power should not be overestimated, because the club is not always able to reach consensus and/or push it through. On the other hand, it is striking that the 2016 race was won by another Bilderberger Antonio Guterres. This Portugal politician is the head of UN until now. He attended Bilderberg conferences in the years 1990 and 2005.

Moreover, Georgieva was appointed to another prestigious job. In 2017, she became chief executive of the World Bank. In 2019, she even served as interim head of World Bank. This is surprising, because according to unwritten rule, the top position at World Bank always belonged to US citizens. Georgieva comes from Bulgaria, post-communist country with problematic reputation and little leverage in international politics. This is another reason to assume that "factor Bilderberg" could have helped Georgieva in her impressive career – now she leads IMF.

Table 2: Managing Directors of IMF at Bilderberg Group's conference

Managing Director	In office	First time at Bilderberg
Michel Camdessus	1987-2000	
Horst Köhler	2000-2004	
Rodrigo Rato	2004-2007	1992 as MP and party leader
Dominique Strauss-Kahn	2007-2011	2000 as finance ex-minister
Christine Lagarde	2011-2019	2009 as minister of economy
Kristalina Georgieva	2019-until now	2016 as EU commissioner

Source: website Public Intelligence (compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/bilderberg/> (various participant lists)

Table 3: Presidents of World Bank at Bilderberg Group's conference

President	In office	First time at Bilderberg
Barber Conable	1986-1991	1978 as congressman
Lewis T. Preston	1991-1995	
James Wolfensohn	1995-2005	1985 as businessman
Paul Wolfowitz	2005-2007	1990 as defense official
Robert Zoellick	2007-2012	2003 as president advisor
Jim Yong Kim	2012-2019	
Kristalina Georgieva	2019 (acting)	2016 as EU commissioner
David Malpass	2019-until now	

Source: website Public Intelligence (compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/bilderberg/> (various participant lists)

World Bank provides some evidence as to how Bilderbergers can influence nominations to international organizations. Wolfensohn attended Bilderberg conclave for the first time in 1985. Another American participant at that gathering was Vernon Jordan, a member of Bilderberg Group's steering committee. Afterwards, both men met again at numerous following Bilderberg conferences.

In 1991, Wolfensohn and Jordan attended Bilderberg gathering along with Bill Clinton, the next US president. Jordan was "Clinton's close friend, his unelected unofficial

adviser and golfing partner” (The Guardian, 10.3.2001). And Jordan secured that Wolfensohn would become Clinton's nominee for World Bank. As The Guardian (10.3.2001) put it, Jordan “is widely credited with pulling strings to get Wolfensohn his job as president of the World Bank.” This is one way how Bilderbergers can help each other in gaining positions of power.

Back to Europe: Barroso is not the only Bilderberger who was selected for the post of the president of the European Commission. This position is currently held by another Bilderberger von der Leyen, which raises suspicion.

Originally, the leader of the winning party in the 2019 election to the European Parliament should become the new head of the European Commission. This was promised to European masses in order to increase their participation in the election. The contest was won by European People's Party led by Manfred Weber. Yet, in the end, elites decided not to appoint Weber, but von der Leyen. True, she belongs to the same party (and also comes from Germany), but nonetheless, her appointment has not full democratic legitimacy.

So why did von der Leyen prevail? Main reason lies in her personal contacts. She attended Bilderberg conferences in 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2019. She served on the WEF board of trustees. That outweighed her problematic domestic political record. As key news outlet on EU put it: “Bilderberg. Davos. Munich. (...) Ursula von der Leyen (...) has quietly built an extensive international network in politics and business — connections that won her the nod for the EU’s top job (...) (...) It’s thanks to her international network that her political career is still alive.” (Politico, 11.7.2019)

Table 4: Presidents of the European Commission at Bilderberg Group's conference

President	In office	First time at Bilderberg
Jacques Delors	1985-1995	
Jacques Santer	1995-1999	
Romano Prodi	1999-2004	1990 as NOMISMA chairman
José Manuel Barroso	2004-2014	1994 as foreign minister
Jean-Claude Juncker	2014-2019	
Ursula von der Leyen	2019-until now	2015 as defense minister

Source: website Public Intelligence (compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/bilderberg/> (various participant lists)

When GATT was transformed into WTO in 1995, the first two WTO Director-Generals were Bilderbergers Peter Sutherland and Renato Ruggiero. From 2005 to 2013, another member of the network Pascal Lamy led WTO.

Table 5: Director-Generals of WTO at Bilderberg Group's conference

Director-General	In office	First time at Bilderberg
Peter Sutherland	1993-1995 (GATT/WTO)	1989 as ex-EU commissioner
Renato Ruggiero	1995-1999	1990 as minister of trade
Mike Moore	1999-2002	2000 as WTO director
Supachai Panitchpakdi	2002-2005	
Pascal Lamy	2005-2013	2000 as EU commissioner
Roberto Azevedo	2013-2020	

Source: website Public Intelligence (compilations are the author's)
<https://publicintelligence.net/bilderberg/> (various participant lists)

In sum, there are indications that participation at Bilderberg conference(s) is associated with career benefits. Yet, it must be stressed that this chapter finds correlation, not causation. Thus, nobody should fall into the interpretational trap of *post hoc, propter hoc* reasoning. Put simply, without further evidence, one cannot claim that prior attendance at Bilderberg gathering is the main explanation for later appointment to some function in NATO, EU, or IMF. Yet, despite these reservations, it really seems that “factor Bilderberg” does play some role, albeit probably not the decisive one.

In other words, the correlations suggest at least that affiliation with Bilderberg Group is one of variables that influence the selection of heads of NATO, EU, or IMF. In this regard, Bilderberg Group seems to be powerful. Yet, this assessment can be delusive. It has not taken into account that Bilderberg organizers usually invite already successful or perspective politicians, who are likely to be elevated in any case, sooner or later (leaders of opposition, key ministers, and hot candidates for international positions). So the supposed contribution of Bilderberg Group to their careers can be smaller than suspected. This is complex question which is elaborated more thoroughly (on larger empirical dataset) in the next chapter.

Powerless Bilderberg Group: Brexit as fatal antithesis

As mentioned above, in the past, Bilderberg Group was successful in advancing European integration. Recently, however, the club has been unable to counter the anti-EU backlash that culminated in Brexit.

As British Prime Minister, David Cameron attended Bilderberg conference in 2013, but it did not prevent him from flirting with the idea of leaving the EU. In June 2016, Cameron allowed the nationwide referendum, in which slight majority of voters decided that Britain would depart from the EU.

Already in 2016, a lot of Bilderbergers expressed their dislike of Brexit. Charlie Skelton, one of few experts on Bilderberg Group among journalists, put it as follows: “Many of the participants at this year’s Bilderberg have spoken out publicly against it (*Brexit – note*). (...) Since it began back in the 1950s, Bilderberg has been pushing for the unity of Europe, and it’s not about to stop now.” (The Guardian, 8.6.2016b) Skelton maintained that Bilderbergers were going to lobby against Brexit: “Whatever happens in the days leading up to the referendum, you can be sure Bilderberg will be lobbying hard. After all, it’s what they do best.” Elsewhere, Skelton wrote that the public campaign of Brexit opponents was co-sponsored by US bank Goldman Sachs, whose representatives belonged to Bilderberg Group's steering committee (International Business Times, 7.6.2016). It is probable that Bilderbergers also lobbied via other channels and not only in 2016, but also afterwards, though this cannot be proved by publicly available information.

Yet, in retrospect, it is clear that Bilderberg's lobbying was futile. So, if lobbying is “what Bilderberg do best”, then nobody should be afraid of Bilderberg. Because Bilderberg's lobbying failed even in the sphere of European integration, about which the network cares most. Moreover, Bilderberg's lobbying was ineffective on two different levels. First, Bilderbergers did not manage to dissuade their “fellow” Cameron from playing the political card of referendum. And second, Bilderbergers were not able to persuade British masses to reject Brexit in the referendum – or in the elections in 2019.

Brexit is explicitly mentioned on the official list of topics of Bilderberg conference in 2019. However, the issue was certainly discussed before as well. In any case, it is probably no coincidence that EU chief negotiator for Brexit Michel Barnier is Bilderberger. He attended Bilderberg conferences in the years 2006 and 2007.

To be sure, Brexit amounts to a paradigm shift, because so far, no country rescinded its membership in the EU. Moreover, the divorce was all the more important, since Britain is a big and rich state, which paid a lot to the EU budget. So Brexit will have far-reaching impact on both Britain and the EU.

For all these reasons, Brexit discredits any allegations of Bilderberg Group's supposed superpower. Brexit clearly goes against the interests of Bilderbergers. Yet the club has not been able to reverse this process that weakens both the EU and Britain.

How could such reversal look like? Many called for second referendum, which was not staged. But new general elections were organized in 2019. Yet, Brexit advocate Boris Johnson won this contest convincingly. So Brexit proceeded until its fulfillment in January 2021. For all this time, Bilderberg Group seemed to be helpless.

Powerless Bilderberg Group: TTIP stalemate

Fair evaluation of influence of any social actor should be undertaken in areas about which the given actor most cares. Since its inception in 1952, Bilderberg Group sought to strengthen transatlantic ties, primarily (geo)political, but also (socio)economic and cultural. This is its stated objective, as acknowledged on Bilderberg Group's official website (section about us). Therefore, the following part examines the recent state of U.S-EU relations.

For years, the most important issue in transatlantic alliance had been the TTIP. This free trade agreement would contribute to commercial, but also geopolitical (Hamilton, 2014) rapprochement between U.S and EU. Therefore, it is almost certain that Bilderberg Group strongly championed TTIP, although the treaty was never explicitly mentioned on the lists of topics of individual conferences.

Skelton inferred that TTIP was discussed at Bilderberg gathering in 2015 in Austria. This meeting hosted many TTIP advocates, including Jacob Wallenberg (the chairman of the industrial conglomerate Investor AB) and Carl-Henric Svanberg (chairman of Volvo): "Wallenberg and Svanberg, along with five fellow Bilderberg participants, are members of the influential European Round Table of Industrialists. And the ERT is a member of "the European Business Alliance for TTIP". Layer upon layer of lobbying. And this is still just a fraction of the big business pro-TTIP influence at Bilderberg." (The Guardian, 14.6.2015)

Official negotiations on TTIP started in 2013 and ended without agreement in 2016. TTIP faced opposition from parts of European civil society and to a lesser degree from American president Donald Trump. Nowadays, TTIP is blocked or even dead and Bilderberg Group has not been able to prevent or break this stalemate. This should be seen as clear evidence that the current influence of Bilderberg Group gets weaker.

Of course, the failure of TTIP is partially counterweighted by the success of the Comprehensive and Economic Trade Agreement (CETA). This free trade deal between the EU and Canada signed in 2016 is also in line with Bilderberg Group's orientation. Last but not least, it is possible that TTIP will be achieved later, by Trump's successor Joe Biden. But the mere fact that the realization of this crucial deal has been so complicated, protracted and uncertain suggests that Bilderberg Group is far less powerful than its critics believe.

This conclusion is supported by other signs of U.S.-EU disharmony, particularly the tariff war. It started in 2018 with US tariffs on EU's steel and aluminum. Brussels responded with counter-tariffs that targeted American jeans, whiskey and motorcycles. In 2019, Washington imposed further tariffs on imports from EU and Brussels retaliated in 2020. This last round of tariffs and counter-tariffs hit US and EU airplanes, but also various other items including EU cheese, wine and olives plus American tractors, suitcases, fitness machines and video game consoles.

Powerless Bilderberg Group: Nord Stream 2 and S-400

Transatlantic relations have been strained not just because of Trump. Another highly contentious issue is the Russian-German pipeline Nord Stream 2, which was opposed also by Trump's predecessor Obama. Yet, the construction continued and now is finished.

The pipeline will limit the chances of U.S. exports of liquefied natural gas. At the same time, it will strengthen ties between Russia and Germany, which is the leading economy of the EU. For this reason, Nord Stream 2 was criticized by Central and Eastern European countries as well. However, the debates at Bilderberg Group (and elsewhere) have not been able to resolve this longstanding dispute.

Even in the past, Bilderberg Group conclaves could not prevent various rifts in transatlantic and/or European unity. The most striking example was the divide vis-à-vis Iraq invasion in 2003. At that time, two prominent European states Germany and France openly

opposed the U.S-led intervention, which was supported by Great Britain, Italy and some other mostly post-communist countries like Poland and the Czech Republic.

In fact, U.S and the EU rarely follow same line in foreign policy, especially when it comes to the Middle East. This strategic and highly sensitive region has been discussed in almost every Bilderberg conference. Yet, U.S. and EU representatives have not reached lasting joint stance on Iran or Israel. With certain exception of Obama's administration, Washington has always one-sidedly backed Israel, whereas EU position continues to be more balanced and sometimes rather pro-Palestinian.

In contrast to the EU, the U.S. has tended to more hawkish policy towards Iran. The American president George Bush jr. contemplated attack on Iran (The Guardian, 8.11.2010) and Trump abandoned the nuclear deal with Tehran and imposed sanctions against it.

More importantly, Bilderberg Group could not produce consensus regarding Turkey's future entry into the EU. Several Turkish attendees are present at every Bilderberg conference. In 2007, the meeting was held in Istanbul. Prominent American participants like Henry Kissinger allegedly used this occasion to exert "pressure... to admit Turkey into the EU" (van der Pijl, 2010: 58). Yet, the official standpoint of European politicians is still reserved, ambivalent, and in some cases, even dismissive. Plus, Bilderbergers have not been able to stop the current alienation between the EU and post-coup Turkey, which makes further integration even more illusory.

The most dangerous seems to be the dispute between old rivals Greece and Turkey over drilling rights on potential oil and gas near Cyprus. In migration crisis, Europeans complained about Ankara's blackmail (Reuters, 3.3.2020). Turkey's purchase of Russian missile system S-400 was also damaging for cooperation with the West.

Bilderberg Group as deliberate underachiever?

The International Relations discipline operates with the term (*strategic*) *restraint* (Steele, 2019). This notion usually describes seemingly paradoxical situation when some state has greater (military) power, but intentionally does not use it (in full capacity). Even the hegemon can restrict itself surprisingly often. The United States are no exception. Just consider that for decades, U.S. army never really punished any of numerous provocations, blackmails and crimes of so much weaker North Korea.

It is worth investigating if similar conclusion can be made in relation to Bilderberg Group (and perhaps other elite clubs). Obviously, this private network has preconditions to exert influence. But maybe it does not want to do so (as it proclaims). This could be another explanation of the counterintuitive finding that powerful Bilderbergers seem to be powerless quite often.

As with U.S behavior on international battlefield, capabilities and opportunities are one thing, and the willingness to exploit them another. Put simply, it is possible that Bilderberg Group can have bigger influence, but it might be practicing some kind of *restraint*. If this is the case, what could motivate such seemingly illogical stance? First of all, Bilderberg Group wishes to keep low profile (Rothkopf, 2008: 277; Thompson, 1980: 177-178). And if it intervenes (a lot), there is risk of arousing too much attention and controversy.

Of course, alternative explanations have to be considered as well. For example that mismanagement is to blame for apparent underachievement of Bilderberg Group. Could consensus among Euro-Atlantic elites be fostered more effectively, if the meetings were organized differently? Was the performance of the chairmen good enough? When it comes to WEF, some criticism of Klaus Schwab has already been voiced (Rothkopf, 2008: 273).

These questions deserve to be examined by future research. If nothing else, they remind us that collective action problems hamper efforts not only of the underprivileged, but of elites too.

Conclusion

The message of this chapter is to reject paranoid, but also benign narrative of transnational elite clubs. The power of Bilderberg Group should be neither over- nor under-estimated. It varied depending on concrete issue, epoch and external constellations.

No doubt, Bilderbergers champion concrete political and economic agendas. But these are not (all) necessarily bad and they would probably materialize even without Bilderberg Group. The best example is the progress of the European integration.

During Cold War as well as after it, Bilderbergers helped to advance the European integration. Their meetings facilitated the breakthrough establishment of monetary union. So, in the important realm of the EU, the influence of Bilderberg Group was significant.

Recently, however, the club has not been able to forestall Brexit, which proves that it is far from omnipotent.

Moreover, Bilderberg Group could not prevent or eliminate U.S.-EU and U.S./EU-Turkey frictions. These range from TTIP, tariffs and Nord Stream 2 to S-400 and oil near Cyprus. For all these reasons, the political power of Bilderberg Group seems to be declining, since the club no longer fulfills its coordinating and unifying function.

Yet, even its critics should not celebrate the fading of Bilderberg Group, because it mirrors broader weakening of the so-called Atlantic alliance, which used to be the backbone of liberal international order. And who will solve the underlying troubles, when they could not be fixed even in open private interactions between elite stakeholders? Said provocatively, if even Bilderberg Group was helpless vis-à-vis Brexit and Trump, then the average citizens must have been all the more helpless.

Main task for future research lies in illumination of careers of selected Bilderbergers. This chapter found correlations suggesting that for politicians, attendance at the club could have career benefits. Specifically, it seems that “factor Bilderberg” plays a role in nominations to international organizations. If this is true, one question remains to be answered: what is the exact mechanism which ensures appointments of Bilderbergers? It might be that Bilderbergers intervene in the selection process in favor of their club's fellows, as in the case of Jordan and Wolfensohn. But it is also possible that no meddling and patronization are needed. Bilderbergers could be promoted simply because of their qualities and perhaps also given the fact that others know of their exceptional contacts (and backing). Well-connected people are more likely to be respected and obeyed, which makes them more preferable candidates for leadership posts.

Finally, the central argument of Bilderberg Group's declining power also merits further investigation. The present chapter does not elaborate on deeper reasons why is the club failing in "uniting the West". In this connection, it should be asked whether, or under what conditions, could Bilderberg Group's influence increase again.

In this context, it is worth stressing that in 2020, Bilderberg conference had to be cancelled (officially “postponed”) due to coronavirus. It was only for the second time in its long history that the annual gathering did not take place. This pause must have contributed to (further) weakening of Bilderberg Group. Moreover, in 2021, again no conference was

organized. Hence, it will be extremely interesting to see whether, or in what shape, will Bilderbergers meet in 2022. This will tell a lot about the future of this elite network and perhaps, the whole Atlantic alliance.

Final comments on power and capital

The present chapter highlights that political power is not confined only to official institutions. Some informal actors (with political, economic and/or social capital) can also have political power. This type of power operates mainly as influence on political decisions and outcomes, often via (direct or indirect) lobbying. Actors with big political power can secure that their preferred political outcomes materialize.

One of the most important mechanisms of political power is political access – the ability to get in touch with key decision-makers. Invitation to Bilderberg conference is just one way how to gain political access. Bilderbergers could also arrange more ordinary and smaller meetings or at least phone calls or email exchanges with influential people in political circles in EU or USA. They could also communicate via intermediaries – though Trump himself never attended any Bilderberg conference, some of his collaborators did (see conclusion).

Bilderberg Group always promoted European and transatlantic integration. The network contributed to establishment of European monetary union. In this sense, Bilderberg Group had political power and used it successfully. However, Brexit and TTIP fiasco were in no way Bilderberg Group's preferred outcomes. And there are indicia that at least some Bilderbergers tried to stop Brexit and push through TTIP. Yet, these efforts failed and therefore the chapter infers that Bilderberg Group's political power declined.

Political power can also function as co-determinant of career advancement. Individuals with political clout co-decide about nominees to leading political positions. These individuals need not have official posts (in government or party hierarchy); some of them might be behind-the-scenes players. There are indicia that at least several members of Bilderberg Group (mis)used their political power in order to influence appointment processes in international organizations.

Yet, such manifestation of power is closely connected not only to political capital, but also – or even primarily – social capital. Whenever one Bilderberger contributes to elevation

of another Bilderberger, the root of this favoritism lies in social capital (conceived as contacts and mutual ties) of and between these two Bilderbergers. Therefore, the subsequent chapter elaborates on the question how social capital can be accumulated and exploited in Bilderberg network.

Chapter 4

Elite clubs as career elevator?

Mixed evidence from Bilderberg Group

Abstract of the chapter

This chapter is the first robust scholarly test of the hypothesis that politicians can foster their careers by attendance in private elite clubs. Focusing on Euro-Atlantic Bilderberg Group, the chapter provides preliminary evidence in support of the hypothesis. Still, most politicians who participated at Bilderberg conferences were never later elevated. But dozens of them were and sometimes even shortly after their appearance at the gatherings. These mainly European politicians became prime ministers, presidents or top representatives of international organizations like EU, NATO, IMF or World Bank. However, the chapter found correlation, not causation. And there are little additional indicia which suggest that “factor Bilderberg” was really one of the reasons for these career advancements. Nonetheless, politicians invited to the exclusive meetings gain valuable international contacts and probably also insider information or even some backing. On the other hand, the suspicion of Bilderberg Group's direct influence on personnel policy cannot be confirmed.

Motto

“Bilderberg meetings often feature future political leaders shortly before they become household names. Bill Clinton went in 1991 while still governor of Arkansas, Tony Blair was there two years later while still an opposition MP. All the recent presidents of the European Commission attended Bilderberg meetings before they were appointed. This has led to accusations that the group pushes its favoured politicians into high office.” (BBC, 29.9.2005)

Introduction

There is a plethora of academic literature on political elite recruitment (Nagle, 1977; Harasymiw, 1984; Fukai – Fukui, 1992; Norris – Lovenduski, 1995; Best – Cotta, 2000; Zang, 2001; Almeida – Pinto – Bermeo, 2003; Gaman-Golutvina, 2007; Edinger – Jahr, 2015; Best –

Higley, 2018). Quite often, this type of research highlights the role of few prestigious universities like Ivy League in USA, Oxbridge in UK and ENA in France (Bourdieu, 1996; Kurtz – Simon, 2007; Reeves – Friedman – Rahal – Flemmen, 2017; Zarifa – Davies, 2018). Yet, largely overlooked remains the possibility that political careers are also fostered by affiliation to (transnational) private elite clubs. Completely missing is any scholarly study that thoroughly tests this hypothesis by using the case of the Euro-Atlantic elite club called Bilderberg Group. The present chapter is the first attempt to partly fill this gap.

Critics and conspiracy theorists believe that Bilderberg Group supports careers of (some of the) politicians who the club selected as participants of its confidential annual conferences. Put simply, attendance at Bilderberg gatherings purportedly foreshadows future elevation, even to highest offices of prime ministry or presidency. In this sense, there are speculations that behind the curtains, Bilderbergers are “picking our politicians” (Marshall, 2014).

In general, this suspicion points in right direction, but it must be softened. As demonstrated below, politicians invited to Bilderberg Group have no guarantee that they will get higher positions. But they certainly increase chances of promotions, because they enhance their social capital. At Bilderberg conclaves, newcomers are introduced to already existing global elites and such networking always fostered careers. As one insider from US power circles put it: “... those who have status can transfer it to those around them and determine who is elevated and who is not.” (Rothkopf, 2008: 19-20)

In fact, highly exclusive invitation to Bilderberg Group means that the given politician has something of interest to the global elite. Consequently, it would not be surprising if the elite try to support the career of such politician. At least in some cases, Bilderbergers could intervene in the nomination processes in favor of their club's fellows. But it is also possible that often no meddling and patronization are needed. Bilderbergers are probably frequently elevated simply because of their qualities, which include – but are not confined to – their exceptional contacts.

The present chapter produces mixed results. It shows that among hundreds of political participants of Bilderberg conferences, only small portion achieved later significant career advancements. Still, there are dozens of mainly European politicians who *first* attended Bilderberg conference(s) and *then* became key ministers, prime ministers,

presidents or high officials in international organizations like EU, NATO or IMF. However, this chronological evidence only provides correlations, not causations. And the chapter found little additional information which suggest or even prove that “factor Bilderberg” was really one of the reasons for (most of) these career jumps.

Put differently, the chapter makes a case for the claim that for politicians, affiliation with Bilderberg Group is associated with career benefits. Yet, this does not necessarily imply that Bilderbergers are promoted because of Bilderberg Group's influence on nominations. Indeed, this purported influence is often hard to confirm with any revelations that go beyond mere correlations. The chapter found just two cases (Vernon Jordan and José Manuel Barroso) when prominent Bilderbergers pushed their club's fellows into high offices and only in one case (Vernon Jordan) these attempts resulted in the desired appointment.

Despite these qualifications, it remains probable that Bilderbergers tried to influence nominations more often. But so far, it cannot be proved with publicly available information. Nonetheless, political activities are usually accompanied with favoritism and lobbying and it is natural to assume that Bilderberg Group is no exception. Thus, the real puzzle is not whether Bilderbergers try to have some influence on the nominees, but how successful they are in this effort.

Generally, one should focus especially on international organizations, because their representatives are appointed by elites, not elected by voters. Hence, for Bilderbergers, it would not be so difficult to influence the nomination processes in EU or NATO. Indeed, as documented below, there are many remarkable personnel overlaps between participants at Bilderberg meetings and appointees to highest positions in EU and NATO.

The remainder of this chapter proceeds in three big parts. The following first one offers qualitative insights that illustrate how Bilderbergers can capitalize on their connections. It also reflects on few publicly available information on cases in which Bilderbergers (possibly) tried to influence some appointments. The second section presents original empirical research which produced also quantitative data on political participants of all post-Cold War Bilderberg conferences. Tables in the appendix show that among this group, only small portion was later elevated, and often many years after first Bilderberg experience. Finally, the third part discusses the mixed results, suggests directions for future

scholarship and provides overall conclusion with summary of findings and restatements of main arguments.

Bilderberg Group as social capital accelerator

Similarly like free masons, Bilderbergers are encouraged to form some kind of friendly community or even fraternity. This probably includes willingness to help each other, possibly also in professional life. As Thompson (1980: 171) put it: “While some of the participants have known each other for decades, efforts are made to deepen and broaden contacts among Bilderbergers. There is “the unwritten rule that anybody who has ever been to a Bilderberg Conference should be able to feel that he can, in a private capacity, call on any former member he has met.”

At least in the past, before the age of internet, contacts to fellow Bilderbergers were actively distributed: “Bilderberg members received a regularly updated list with the addresses of all those who ever participated. Bilderberg membership thus opened the doors of a great many influential people.” (Gijswijt, 2007: 302)

The networking opportunities provided by Bilderberg were highly appreciated even by the most powerful business people, who certainly could have access to other members of the elite also without Bilderberg. For instance, the famous US banker David Rockefeller said that thanks to Bilderberg, he gained 70 percent of his important (transatlantic?) connections. The leading German entrepreneur Otto Wolff von Amerongen claimed that in his case, it was almost 100 percent. (Gijswijt, 2007: 302)

Political attendees of Bilderberg gatherings could also benefit from contacts with other members of the club. For example, participation at Bilderberg conference in Turkey in 1975 helped Margaret Thatcher in gaining connections in US power circles. Thatcher's story was unveiled by anonymous former member of Bilderberg Group's steering committee: “I remember when I invited Margaret Thatcher back in '75. She wasn't worldly. (...) (...) Here's something for your conspiracy theorists. As a result of that (Thatcher's – note) speech, David Rockefeller and Henry Kissinger and the other Americans fell in love with her. They brought her over to America, took her around in limousines, and introduced her to everyone.” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 145).

In 1975, Thatcher was a “mere” member of parliament. In 1979, she became British prime minister, when her Conservative party won the general election. Yet, the fact that she rose to the top of political pyramid had more to do with British endogenous circumstances than with “factor Bilderberg”. In other words, Thatcher capitalized on contacts from Bilderberg Group, but the club's influence was not the (main) reason, why she won the election. More or less the same probably applies also to other national politicians, who attended Bilderberg conference(s) and later gained higher positions in their homelands.

Macron as master of networking

The current French president Emmanuel Macron attended Bilderberg conference in Denmark in 2014 (see Table 25), when he was Deputy Secretary General of the Presidency. In 2017, Macron became president and it makes sense to assume that his Bilderberg affiliation could contribute to this career advancement.

First of all, it is necessary to recall that Macron worked at Rothschild bank from 2008 to 2012. Representatives of this bank are regular participants of Bilderberg conferences. Edmond de Rothschild joined Bilderberg Group's steering committee in the mid-1960s (Zieliński, 2017: 115).

Before Macron, another ex-employee of Rothschild bank became French president – Georges Pompidou in 1969. And Pompidou too first appeared at Bilderberg conference and then rose to the top of the French political pyramid (Le Journal du Dimanche, 2.12.2017).

At Rothschild bank, Macron proved that he did not hesitate to capitalize on the (mis)use of his connections. As prominent pro-business newspaper with links to Bilderberg Group openly stated: “What Mr Macron lacked in technical knowledge and jargon at first, he made up for with contacts in government (...) At the bank, Mr Macron mastered the art of networking (...) making good use of his connections as an Inspecteur des Finances (...) He was ... trading intelligence, friends with everyone. (...) Mr Macron’s time at the bank shows how he sought to benefit from a network of contacts within France’s tight-knit establishment — in contrast with his campaign promises to rid the country’s “insiders” of their “privileges”.” (Financial Times, 28.3.2017).

In light of this account, it is completely reasonable to assume that in a similar way (and with similar success), Macron also (mis)used his connections from Bilderberg

conference. After all, in 2017, respected French journal disclosed interesting detail of what happened at Bilderberg gathering in 2014. At that conclave, Macron was not yet a big name, when compared to most other participants. But he ensured his visibility – in front of all attendees, Macron criticized the socialist president Francois Hollande, for whom he worked (Le Journal du Dimanche, 2.12.2017).

Motivation of this disloyalty is not discussed in the journal. But it cannot be ruled out that Macron wanted to make impression on the present businesspeople, who usually do not like socialist politicians. By the way, Hollande himself is never mentioned on any of the lists of Bilderberg participants, because he was most probably never invited.

Nine days after 2014 Bilderberg conference, Macron left his post at the Presidency. Then he sought job as lecturer at Harvard University or in Berlin (Le Journal du Dimanche, 2.12.2017). Interestingly, two key representatives of Harvard (professors Martin Feldstein and Lawrence Summers) attended the same Bilderberg conference as Macron.

Nonetheless, two months after 2014 Bilderberg conference, Hollande suddenly had to find new minister of economy. And Macron took the office. It is unclear why he again decided to work under Hollande, whom he criticized. But it is clear that Hollande did not know of Macron's disloyalty, otherwise he certainly would not give him a key ministry.

The journal stresses that Bilderbergers obviously obeyed the rule of confidentiality perfectly, because no information about Macron's speech at the conclave leaked to Hollande or his entourage. This suggests that it is indeed possible to keep secrets (at least temporarily) even among approximately 130 people (the number of all participants of Bilderberg conferences).

In any case, in 2016, Macron resigned from Hollande's government and shortly afterwards, he launched his own party En Marche! In 2017, Macron won the presidential election and replaced Hollande. That is why the journal calls Macron Hollande's "future Brutus".

Of course, this is no evidence of any conspiracy. It might even be that these indicia are all coincidental and/or unrelated to one another. Yet, the discussion section below adds further information which shows that Macron belongs to group of French Bilderbergers who appointed one another into governmental functions.

Bilderberg as a testing platform for aspiring politicians

It appears plausible that Bilderberg meetings can also serve as one of the platforms for testing which political candidacies would be (most) acceptable for the global elite. One example was provided by Zieliński (2017: 129), who reflected on Bilderberg conference in Austria in 11-14 June 2015. This was the first time when former French Prime Minister Alain Juppé attended Bilderberg meeting. And two weeks after the gathering, Juppé announced that he would run for French presidency at the upcoming election.

Zieliński did not state it explicitly, but it seems that he suggests that Juppé's decision could have been co-influenced by his Bilderberg experience. This chapter argues that it is possible. Two scenarios come to mind. The first one: Juppé did not contemplate his candidacy until Bilderberg conference, where he was encouraged to do so. As right-wing politician, Juppé would certainly be a favorite president for (not only) businesspeople among Bilderbergers. Or, more probably, Juppé wanted to run for the office already before Bilderberg, where he just consulted his intention and/or tested possible support.

In both scenarios, it is conceivable that Juppé received not only moral support, but perhaps also some promise(s) of other (political, financial, media) backing. This chapter cannot prove it, but it seems to be a legitimate hypothesis. In any case, Juppé's candidacy resulted in failure, so if he had backing from fellow Bilderbergers, it would be another proof that Bilderberg Group is (far) less powerful than its critics suspect.

Bilderberg as a place where national rising stars are connected with international elite

The usual process of elite recruitment is not necessarily (completely) conspiratorial, but also not necessarily (completely) meritocratic or democratic. In most cases, successful newcomers in the elite circles need to display inner qualities (skills, charisma, drive), but they also have to gain acceptance of those who were incorporated earlier. In other words: individual potential of aspiring elite member is an important part of the story, but the already powerful must recognize this potential and invest in socialization of the prospective fellow.

In political domain, some talented cadres are often pre-selected and then prepared for possible future elevations (successions in chairmanships etc.). This process can appear to be natural, but it is embedded in power relationships, in which loyalty might be more

important than skills. And loyalty means here not only personal loyalty, but mainly loyalty to specific ideology that reflects interests of specific social groups.

Last but not least, the elite recruitment can be shaped by seemingly random factors like momentous public mood (for instance: demand for new faces, more women and/or people of color, more “Kindermanagement” etc.).

The overall argument is well illustrated by Angela Merkel. The German ex-chancellery is undoubtedly smart and hard-working individual, but this was not the only reason why she rose to the top of German – and international – political pyramid. In the 1990s, the already established key member of the German elite Helmut Kohl had to choose her as his protégé or even “crown princess”. And this Kohl's decision was partly dictated by the need to incorporate former East Germans – and women – into the elite.

Interestingly, Kohl was also Bilderberger. He participated at Bilderberg conferences in 1980, 1982 and 1988. Yet, this chapter found no indicia that would suggest that Kohl's favoritism of Merkel could have been co-influenced by Bilderberg Group. In other words, there seems to be no possible role of Bilderberg Group in Merkel's career. Merkel herself attended Bilderberg conference only once – in 5-8 May 2005 (see Table 16), when the meeting took place in Germany. At that time, Merkel already led the center-right (once Kohl's) CDU party that was the main opposition force. In September 2005, CDU closely won the early federal elections, after which Merkel became German Prime Minister.

Thus, it can be assumed that Bilderbergers invited Merkel in order to establish or strengthen the connections between would-be PM and the already incorporated members of the international elite. The same reason was probably behind Merkel's acceptance of the invitation. At Bilderberg conference, Merkel could have been introduced to the elite similarly as was Bill Clinton in 1991 (see Table 2), when he served as governor of Arkansas.

One anonymous “established Bilderberg attendee” provided this account of Bilderberg gathering in 1991 in Germany: “I remember Vernon Jordan, a very powerful man in the democratic world, I forget where we were [... but] he came up to me and said, ‘Meet the next President of the United States’ and introduced me to Clinton. Well, I’d never heard of Clinton, it was well before he ran for President [... but] I thought ‘Verdon Jordan’s a wise old man, I’ll keep my eye on him’. And it was interesting because Clinton was obviously quite something – as, indeed, he proved to be.” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 173)

Clinton became US president in 1993, two years after his Bilderberg première. It is probable that in the meantime, he somehow profited from connections with other Bilderbergers. Contrary to Merkel, Clinton's case offers more room for speculations of this kind. The quoted testimony suggests that already in 1991, Clinton's presidential nomination was contemplated or even pre-determined by key figures in his Democratic party. Importantly, at that time, Jordan was also a key figure in Bilderberg Group, namely member of its steering committee. As such, he could have helped to ensure that Clinton would get invitation to some Bilderberg meeting. And when Clinton appeared at the conference, Jordan obviously assisted him in networking.

So, it is reasonable to assume that power broker Jordan (successfully) pursued two interconnected objectives. First, to enable his fellow Bilderbergers to familiarize with the possible next US president before his candidacy would be announced to public. And second, to enhance Clinton's status in elite circles and by extension, his chances to really become next US president.

In *The Guardian* (10.3.2001), Jordan was described as “Clinton's close friend, his unelected unofficial adviser and golfing partner” and – most importantly – as the man “who plucked the president from Arkansas obscurity and nurtured him to the White House”. In other words: prominent Bilderberger Jordan helped in career advancement of Bilderberger Clinton. Yet, is such favoritism among members of private elite network compatible with democratic ethos?

The whole story reveals one important, but overlooked aspect of “real-existing” democracies. To put it bluntly: established elites decide about next elites, who they first introduce to fellow elites and only then to masses. Power brokers inside political parties – and private clubs – pre-select candidates for various functions and only from this pre-determined “supply” are voters allowed to choose. Since in the end, Clinton was elected by US voters, not by Bilderberg Group. But this club might have played some role in the initial phase before Clinton's official nomination. In this sense, it is not completely unreasonable to hypothesize that Bilderberg Group can (slightly) co-influence the selection of some political leaders.

Bilderberg Group as talent spotter, but also intercessor

Right from Bilderberg's beginnings in 1950s, the organizers of the conferences were successful in inviting future key ministers, prime ministers or presidents. But how could they identify those rising stars? Was it all about talent spotting that is similar to discerning and preselecting of top sportsmen? Or did Bilderbergers also support their favorite politicians?

John Pomian, longtime secretary of Bilderberg Group's early mastermind Joseph Retinger, commented on the topic as follows: "Retinger displayed great skill and an uncanny ability to pick out people who in few years time were to accede to the highest offices in their respective countries... today there are very few figures among governments on both sides of the Atlantic who have not attended at least one of these meetings." (Thompson, 1980: 170)

The word "uncanny" deserves the biggest attention. Even to his secretary, it seemed strange or even mysterious how well Retinger predicted who would become key minister, prime minister or president. True, to certain degree, one can successfully make such forecasts even without (much) insider's knowledge and without the ability to influence the personnel policy. Yet, Bilderbergers usually had and could exchange a lot of insider's knowledge and they were also able to intervene in the nomination processes. And if one admits the possibility that some of those nominations could have been pre-consulted (or even pre-determined) at Bilderberg gatherings, then it seems no longer so uncanny that Bilderberg's mastermind knew so well who would soon become influential politician.

Bilderberg Group's recent ex-chairman Étienne Davignon explained how Bilderberg steering committee repeatedly managed to invite future political leaders: "I don't think it's an accident because, when you ask a German, 'who do you think would be interested and who is going places in German politics?' he will make his best assessment of the bright new boys and girls – people who are in the beginning phase of their career and who would like to get known – and the other people who would like to know them." (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 115-116)

However, Davignon denied that Bilderberg Group can give boost to careers of invited politicians. "If they go places it's not because of Bilderberg, it's because of themselves," he stressed (BBC, 29.9.2005). In many cases, Davignon's assertion might be true. But in some instances of (rapid) career jumps, it seems that at least minor role of "factor Bilderberg" could be part of the explanation. The above cited examples about Thatcher's and Clinton's

Bilderberg experience suggest that invitation to the conference can have positive impact on social status and the corresponding (future) career chances.

Most importantly, one must distinguish between national and international politics. For Bilderbergers, the first domain would be much harder to influence, since in democracies, the selection of political leaders must reflect the will of voters. By contrast, appointments to high offices in international organizations are mostly at the discretion of elites. Thus, for Bilderbergers, it would be relatively easy to influence the nomination processes in EU, NATO, or World Bank. And there are few reports that prominent Bilderbergers really tried to exert such influence.

One example is the above mentioned Jordan, who “is widely credited with pulling strings to get Wolfensohn his job as president of the World Bank.” (The Guardian, 10.3.2001) James Wolfensohn attended (as businessman) his first Bilderberg conference in 1985. Jordan too participated at that conclave. Both men met again at countless subsequent Bilderberg gatherings – those in 1987, 1989-2000, 2002-2009, 2011-2013 and 2017. Wolfensohn also joined Bilderberg Group's steering committee.

In 1995, Wolfensohn became head of World Bank – as the nominee of Clinton's administration. In other words: prominent Bilderberger Jordan contributed to career advancement of Bilderberger Wolfensohn, via another Bilderberger Clinton. This is clear evidence that at least sometimes Bilderbergers help each other in gaining influential and lucrative positions. Wolfensohn remained head of World Bank until 2005.

Another example is former president of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso, who became member of Bilderberg Group's steering committee. As such, he co-organized Bilderberg conferences and co-invited its participants. This was also the case of Bilderberg conference in 2016 in Dresden, which Barroso attended along with EU commissioner Kristalina Georgieva. At that meeting, Barroso allegedly sought to mobilize support for Georgieva's candidacy to the top position at UN: “According to information obtained by Euractiv, Barroso organised the Bilderberg gathering to lobby for Georgieva's nomination as a candidate for UN Secretary-General.” (Euractiv.com, 10.6.2016)

For the argument of this chapter, it is not decisive that eventually, Georgieva was not selected as the head of UN. But her story reveals that at least sometimes, Bilderbergers do indeed try to influence nomination processes in international organizations.

Still, it remains unclear why Barroso wanted to intervene in the choosing of UN Secretary-General. UN lacks real power and has global, multi-thematic focus. Both these features make UN relatively irrelevant – or “unusable” – to Bilderberg Group with its more regional (namely Euro-Atlantic) and thematically limited (mainly politics and economy) perspective. In any case, if Bilderbergers were eager to influence the selection of head of UN, it is all the more plausible that they also tried to influence the selection of head of EU.

Here, it should be recalled what happened in 2009. At that time, EU member states were to choose the first full-time European Council president. Belgian Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy was considered to be a candidate with biggest chances. On 12.11.2009, one week before key summit in Brussels, Van Rompuy “hosted a Bilderberg event in Brussels, in order to secure his appointment” (Euractiv.com, 10.6.2016).

Van Rompuy had a dinner with leading Bilderbergers, including Davignon and former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger (Euobserver.com, 16.11.2009). At this meeting, Van Rompuy proposed new EU tax, which would increase EU's own financial resources. The idea was certainly welcomed by Davignon, who is former EU commissioner. In fact, every prominent Bilderberger would probably endorse Van Rompuy's proposal, because Bilderberg Group always championed (ever-closer) European integration.

In any case, at summit in Brussels on 19.11.2009, politicians from EU member states approved Van Rompuy as the European Council president. But no information of possible Bilderberg Group's lobbying is available. Admittedly, Van Rompuy would probably win under all circumstances, even without the above mentioned dinner. Still, it is an important revelation that insider Van Rompuy felt (knew?) that he could reap career benefits from contacts with Bilderberg Group. At the time of the summit, the information about Van Rompuy's meeting with Bilderbergers was already in public domain. This could have created impression that Van Rompuy had backing from influential behind-the-scenes players. And such signals might have some impact on decisions, even without any real lobbying.

Plus, the story of Van Rompuy's dinner provides additional proof that prominent Bilderbergers are interested in matters that relate to candidates into international organizations. Moreover, the dinner shows that leading Bilderbergers engaged in activities which could amount to efforts to influence the upcoming appointment. Noteworthy is also the fact that in 2011, Van Rompuy participated at the regular annual Bilderberg conference.

Finally, the president of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen is another example which supports the claim that ties to Bilderberg Group increase chances of promotion. Originally, Manfred Weber was expected to become the new head of the EU's executive body, because he led the European People's Party which won the election to the European parliament in 2019. Yet, in the end, political elites decided to appoint von der Leyen instead of Weber. And main reason for this move lied in von der Leyen's better personal contacts that she cultivated also at Bilderberg meetings.

Von der Leyen participated at four Bilderberg conferences in important years (2015, 2016, 2018 and 2019). She also served on the board of trustees of World Economic Forum, another transnational elite club that meets annually in Davos and whose attendees partly overlap with those of Bilderberg conferences. As key news outlet on EU openly states: "Bilderberg. Davos. Munich. (...) Ursula von der Leyen (...) has quietly built an extensive international network in politics and business — connections that won her the nod for the EU's top job (...) (...) It's thanks to her international network that her political career is still alive." (Politico, 11.7.2019)

However, it is not clear how big the role of "factor Bilderberg" was. Possibly, elites chose von der Leyen simply because they knew that she was also well-connected. This would be relatively legitimate reason. Yet, it is also conceivable that von der Leyen received active backing from some Bilderbergers, who could intercede for her. And this would be problematic intervention in the nomination process.

Discussion of the findings on careers of political participants of Bilderberg conferences

The tables in appendix provide mixed results. On one hand, they prove that most politicians who attended Bilderberg conference(s) were never later elevated. But still, dozens of political participants reached (significantly) higher functions after their appearance at Bilderberg gatherings.

Of course, these career advancements need not have anything in common with the "factor Bilderberg". In the end, in most cases, it is still the voters who decide about fate of politicians, not their fellows from elite clubs. However, this does not mean that Bilderberg Group could not have any influence at all.

Indeed, it seems that participation at the conference(s) increases career chances of politicians. Those invited gain valuable international contacts and probably also insider information or even some backing. This can be advantage when they seek higher position.

To rephrase one bonmot: not all political attendees of Bilderberg conference(s) became later prime ministers, but many prime ministers participated at some Bilderberg conference(s) before they reached the top government post. Examples include both right-wing and left-wing politicians like Canadian PMs Paul Martin and Stephen Harper, British PMs Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, French PMs Lionel Jospin, Manuel Valls and Philippe Édouard, German PM Angela Merkel, Italian PM Enrico Letta, Spanish PM Pedro Sánchez, Austrian PM Alfred Gusenbauer, Dutch PM Wim Kok, Norwegian PM Erna Solberg, Swedish PMs Fredrik Reinfeldt and Stefan Löfven, Danish PMs Anders F. Rasmussen and Helle Thorning-Schmidt, Finnish PM Jyrki Katainen, Greek PMs George Papandreou, Kostas Karamanlis and Kyriakos Mitsotakis.

The case of Portugal is most striking – five Portugal politicians (Antonio Guterres, Jose Manuel Barroso, Pedro Santana Lopes, Jose Socrates and Antonio Costa) became prime ministers after their appearance at Bilderberg conference(s). Moreover, Bilderberg conference in 2004 was attended by even two future Portugal PMs – Lopes and Socrates. At that time, Socrates was mere MP, but already next year he became PM.

On the level of national politics, suspicious is also the case of France. Just consider Emmanuel Macron, who participated at Bilderberg conference in May-June 2014. Already in August 2014, he was chosen to lead key ministry of economy. Importantly, Macron was elevated by another Bilderberger – Manuel Valls, who occupied the office of Prime Minister from March 2014 and who appeared at Bilderberg conference in 2008.

Moreover, on 14 May 2017, Macron reached the position of French president. And the next day, another Bilderberger – Édouard Philippe – became new Prime Minister. Philippe attended Bilderberg conference in 2016, at that time as mere mayor. In light of all these facts, it seems highly improbable that “factor Bilderberg” played no role in Macron's or Philippe's career jumps. Indeed, both examples suggest that at least sometimes, Bilderbergers help each other in professional life.

Even stronger correlations emerged between political attendees of Bilderberg conferences and appointees to international organizations. Especially EU has been

overcrowded by Bilderbergers. After their appearance at some Bilderberg conference(s), many politicians were installed to all highest functions in EU. These people occupied or occupy the posts of 1) president of the European Commission (Jose Manuel Barroso, Ursula von der Leyen), 2) member of the European Commission (Joao Pinheiro, Ritt Bjerregaard, Gunther Verheugen, Frits Bolkestein, Antonio Vitorino, Joaquin Almunia, Peter Mandelson, Pedro Solbes Mira, Elisa Ferreira, Connie Hedegaard, Frans Timmermans, Jutta Urpilainen, Margrethe Vestager), 3) president of the European Central Bank (Christine Lagarde, Mario Draghi, Jean-Claude Trichet), 4) president of Eurogroup (Paschal Donohoe), 5) president of the European Council (Charles Michel), 6) president of the European parliament (Pat Cox), 7) EU Brexit negotiator (Michel Barnier), 8) EU special representative for the Southern Mediterranean (Bernardino León Gross), 9) EU antiterrorism coordinator (Gijs de Vries), 10) EU ombudsman (Nikiforos Diamandouros). This raises suspicion that Bilderbergers are the preferred candidates. Interestingly, von der Leyen and Michel attended the same Bilderberg conference in 2015 and subsequently in the same year 2019 they both gained highest positions in EU. Theoretically, it could be mere coincidence, but this version does not seem probable.

The case of NATO is also very telling. Recent five general secretaries of NATO (Jens Stoltenberg, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, George Robertson, Willy Claes) appeared at Bilderberg conference(s) prior to their appointment. The same is true for Javier Solana and Manfred Wörner. But they participated at conference(s) before 1990 (interestingly, both Wörner and Solana had their Bilderberg première in 1985) and therefore are not mentioned in the tables below. So, in fact, all post-Cold War general secretaries of NATO participated at some Bilderberg conference prior to their appointment. Plus, three political attendees of Bilderberg conference(s) (Karl Lamers, Pierre Lellouche, Bert Koenders) became later presidents of NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

Other political participants of Bilderberg conference(s) were subsequently installed into top positions at IMF (Rodrigo de Rato, Christine Lagarde, Kristalina Georgieva), World Bank Group (Paul Wolfowitz, Ad Melkert, Robert Zoellick, Frank Heemskerk) and WTO (Renato Ruggiero, Pascal Lamy).

The current general secretary of UN Antonio Guterres also attended Bilderberg conferences prior to his appointment. During Guterres mandate, at least two Bilderbergers

(Miguel Ángel Moratinos and Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert) were selected as UN representatives. Moratinos became UN High-Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations. So far, this position has been held by three people and the first holder Jorge Sampaio also appeared at Bilderberg conference before his appointment.

Careers of several central bankers also offer some room for speculations. Just consider Mark J. Carney. In 2011, he attended Bilderberg conference as governor of Canadian central bank. Another prominent participant at that meeting was British minister of finance George Osborne. It is not known whether these two men had any private talks. But when Carney left his function at Canadian central bank in June 2013, he shortly afterwards became governor of British central bank. And Osborne was the official who appointed Carney to this new prestigious position. Interestingly, Carney is currently member of Bilderberg Group's steering committee, but it is not clear when he joined this “hard core” of Bilderberg network.

Speculations might also be legitimate when it comes to some diplomats. Here, one must highlight the case of Karel Kovanda, the only Czech who made great career in both NATO and EU. No doubt, Kovanda was highly qualified (he is polyglot), but skills are rarely the only criterion. Frankly speaking, citizenship also matters. Representatives of more influential states usually gain better positions. And Czech Republic has had (very) little leverage on international scene. True, in the process of enlargements, NATO and EU needed to incorporate in its staff some people from post-communist countries. Yet, even in the group of post-communist states, Czech Republic is not such a big player, especially when compared to Poland. For all these reasons, it seems plausible that Bilderberg experience could have helped Kovanda in his impressive career.

However, quite often, it took many years until Bilderberg attendees got promoted. So, in these cases, it is probable that “factor Bilderberg” could have played only minor, if any, role. Yet, sometimes, politicians gained significantly higher functions shortly after they attended Bilderberg conference. These cases seem to be the most suspicious.

Directions for future scholarship

This chapter is just a first step, which should be followed by further research. Most needed are more detailed investigations regarding individual political attendees of Bilderberg

conferences – those who subsequently made careers (people in the tables below) as well as those never elevated. Only such studies can authoritatively determine whether or how much were the concrete career trajectories co-influenced by "factor Bilderberg". Process tracing and biographical method might help in this endeavor. However, such explorations would probably be hampered by lack of reliable data (unwillingness of Bilderbergers to tell the whole truth).

Of course, Bilderbergers could also support careers of some politicians who never attended (due to their busyness or fear of publicity) any of Bilderberg conferences. Thus, future research should focus not only on political participants of the conferences, but on all politicians who share similar worldview as Bilderbergers and/or who (in critical times) were in touch with (prominent) Bilderbergers (like Herman Van Rompuy).

In this context, it is necessary to stress that personnel policy need not be discussed only at (the sidelines of) Bilderberg annual conferences, but also at more frequent and more exclusive meetings of Bilderberg Group's steering committee. However, meetings of this committee are surrounded by even more secrecy than the conferences. Hence, in public domain, there is virtually no information about the places, times, topics and participants of the committee's individual meetings.

More importantly, scholars should also try to test the opposite hypothesis that presence at Bilderberg conference can (sometimes) rather threaten career prospects of politicians. This contradicts the main argument of this chapter, which is not as self-evident as it might seem. Because in recent decades, many citizens became more aware of Bilderberg Group and part of them do not want to be governed by people who are associated with this club. That is why some decision-makers prefer not to attend Bilderberg conferences or ask not to be mentioned on the lists of participants (Zieliński, 2017: 121, 129).

Finally, this chapter encourages scholars to replicate the employed research design in other (transnational) elite clubs, especially in Trilateral Commission, which is kind of a younger and more global (Euro-Atlantic plus Asian) version of Bilderberg Group. If findings on both these clubs are compatible, one will have some grounds to claim generalizability of the argument that (to certain extent) elite clubs might serve as career elevator.

Last but not least, it would be logical to study whether affiliation to elite clubs yields career benefits also for businesspeople. It seems that affirmative answer is the right one, as

suggests the following testimony of anonymous industrialist and (former) member of Bilderberg Group's steering committee: "... this very often leads to something that I've always regarded as a special phenomenon: someone approaches you and says, 'I've heard from [someone], who knows you from the Bilderberg meeting, that you're willing to do this or that, or that you're interested in this or that. ... Could we talk about it? Or, would you like to join our board?' I've never met this guy before, but it comes through some kind of network." (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 175)

Indeed, the board membership can be one indicator of career benefits and not only for businesspeople. For instance, Canadian-British media mogul and prominent Bilderberger Conrad Black gave post in board of his corporate empire to American politician and another Bilderberger Richard Perle.

This leads to the last recommended future research question: how can Bilderberg connections help politicians in their frequent switch into business. To mention just one possible example: Eckart von Klaeden was foreign policy spokesman of German ruling party CDU/CSU and close collaborator of Merkel. In 2007, he attended Bilderberg conference for the first time. Another participant of that meeting was Jürgen Schrempp, former head of German automaker Daimler(Chrysler). In 2013, von Klaeden left politics and became chief lobbyist for – Daimler.

Conclusion

This chapter contributes to multidisciplinary research on elite recruitment and networking. It also extends scholarship on staffing of (secretariats of) international organizations (Parizek, 2017; Parizek – Stephen, 2021). Specifically, the chapter provides support for the thesis that for politicians, affiliation to (transnational) elite clubs can yield career benefits. This is documented on the case of the Euro-Atlantic forum Bilderberg Group, where the national and international levels of elite recruitment intertwine.

At the minimum, by attending Bilderberg conferences, politicians could enhance their status and social capital and by extension, their future career chances. This was probably the case of Margaret Thatcher.

International connections are most valuable for those seeking promotion to international organizations. One prominent example is Ursula von der Leyen – contacts with

Bilderbergers helped her in unexpected appointment to the presidency of the European Commission.

Moreover, it is probable that sometimes, Bilderbergers directly push their club's fellows into high offices. However, in the public domain, there is minimum information that could prove such meddling and patronization. One exception is revelation about Bilderberg trio Jordan – Clinton – Wolfensohn. Prominent Bilderberger Jordan helped Clinton into the White House and Wolfensohn into World Bank.

Plus, leading Bilderberger José Manuel Barroso lobbied for Kristalina Georgieva's candidacy for the post of UN Secretary-General. Yet, Barroso's effort was not successful, which suggests that Bilderberg Group's (putative) influence on nominations should not be overestimated.

Still, this chapter shows that French Bilderbergers appointed each other to governmental functions. Bilderberger Édouard Philippe made career also thanks to Bilderberger Emmanuel Macron, who was previously elevated also thanks to Bilderberger Manuel Valls.

However, in general, for Bilderbergers, it would be relatively difficult and not so logical, if they try to influence the selection of (all) national political leaders. But they could quite easily intervene in the nomination processes into international organizations. And this would make perfect sense given Bilderberg Group's longstanding advocacy of European and transatlantic integration.

Indeed, this chapter shows that NATO and especially EU have been overcrowded by Bilderbergers. One can even speak of “revolving door” between European Commission and Bilderberg Group. Just consider the case of Barroso – he first attended Bilderberg conferences (in 1994 and 2003) and then became president of the European Commission (from 2004 to 2014). And after leaving this position, Barroso joined Bilderberg Group's steering committee.

Étienne Davignon has similar career trajectory – he first participated at Bilderberg conferences (in 1972 and 1974), soon after became EU commissioner (from 1977 to 1985) and then chairman of Bilderberg conferences (from 1999 to 2011). Gunther Verheugen, Frits Bolkestein, Joaquin Almunia, Peter Mandelson, Connie Hedegaard, Frans Timmermans, Margrethe Vestager and others first attended Bilderberg conferences and then were

selected as EU commissioners. Hedegaard is now member of Bilderberg Group's steering committee. All these personnel overlaps and transfers are one of reasons, why it would be logical and relatively easy, if Bilderberg Group (continuously) tries to influence EU policies, including nomination processes.

The case of NATO is similar, albeit not so telling. Here, one must highlight the career path of Peter Carrington, who first attended Bilderberg conferences (in 1978 and 1983) and then was appointed NATO Secretary General (he served from 1984 to 1988). And shortly after leaving this function, he became chairman of Bilderberg conferences (from 1990 to 1998).

In sum, Bilderberg gatherings offer rare networking opportunities, because they are one of few places where former, current and future political leaders regularly meet in privacy. It would be intuitive if these people exchange information, contacts and other support. Plus, they can cultivate connections with influential businessmen, which is another boost for career prospects.

On the other hand, Bilderberg organizers usually invited promising politicians (party leaders, hot candidates to international organizations etc.), who were likely to be elevated in any case, sooner or later. Yet, attendance at Bilderberg conclave could further enhance their career chances. Thus, the invitation to Bilderberg should also be seen as special power instrument. In a sense, the invited politicians are those favored and preferred, since all the others – the majority – are denied the same access to global elite. Already through this sheer exclusivity of invitations, Bilderberg Group might be able to (slightly) increase the probability that someone will (not) rise to political leadership.

This chapter finds dozens of mainly European politicians who participated at Bilderberg conference(s) and later became key ministers, prime ministers, presidents or high representatives in international organizations. And it is possible that “factor Bilderberg” could have been one of the reasons why some of these politicians made such (international) careers. Yet, further research is needed to confirm – or disqualify – this hypothesis.

Appendix

Quantitative part: data and method

The tables below enumerate all politicians who were elevated *after* their attendance at some of the post-Cold War Bilderberg conference. This chronological evidence is a necessary – but not sufficient – condition for corroborating the claim that participation at Bilderberg gatherings can yield career benefits.

The names of the politicians are drawn from lists of participants at Bilderberg conferences from 1990 to 2019. These lists are stored at “international, collaborative research project” called Public Intelligence. This website seems to be reliable and has been cited in respected mainstream media like Newsweek, CNN and Reuters.

However, Public Intelligence warns that the lists of participants at Bilderberg conferences from 1990 to 2006 are “unofficial and may contain inaccuracies”. So this is the main caveat of the present chapter. Therefore, the tables perhaps do not provide precise exhaustive statistics. Yet, at least, they offer basic overview, which is sufficient for the purpose of the examination above.

The tables count the number of politicians who participated at Bilderberg conferences. At the same time, the tables show how many of these politicians were later elevated, to what function and when.

Following people were counted as politicians: diplomats, mayors, members of parliament (MP) and government, presidents, monarchs, governors of US states, high employees (secretary, chief of staff) of public offices, military and intelligence officers (because they serve politicians), party leaders, representatives of international governmental organizations and central bankers (because they are appointed by politicians and central banks are state institutions).

As elevation this chapter took significant career advancements, especially: from MP to member of government, from minister to prime minister (PM), from MP or minister to high representative of international organization, and from governor of one U.S. state to president of the United States. So, for instance: Manuel Valls attended Bilderberg gathering in 2008 as MP (see Table 19) and in 2012 he became minister and in 2014 PM. Therefore, he

is counted among political participants of Bilderberg conference in 2008 who were later elevated.

Importantly, the category “later elevated politicians” include only those politicians who after their first Bilderberg experience reached (significantly) higher position(s) than they held *any time* before Bilderberg experience. Therefore, the tables do not list some people who nonetheless can also support the argument of this chapter. Prominent examples are Michel Barnier and Mark J. Carney.

Barnier attended Bilderberg conference for the first time in 2006. On the list of participants, he is presented as “former minister” of France. In 2010, Barnier became EU commissioner (for Internal Market) and in 2016 EU chief negotiator for Brexit. Seen from this perspective, he reached significantly higher position(s) after Bilderberg experience. Yet, Barnier was EU commissioner (for Regional Policy) already before 2006, so for this reason, he is not counted among “later elevated politicians”. Nevertheless, Barnier can also support the thesis of career benefits of affiliation to Bilderberg Group, because after his participation at Bilderberg meeting, Barnier was allowed to return to international politics (a higher level than national politics). Plus, Barnier is additional proof of the personnel overlaps between EU and Bilderberg Group.

Carney attended his first Bilderberg conference in 2011 as governor of Canadian central bank. In 2013, he became governor of British central bank. So, Carney did not reach higher position after Bilderberg experience (and therefore is not mentioned among “later elevated politicians”), but he got the same top job in another country, which is unusual. Moreover, in Britain, Carney was appointed by another Bilderberger (for details see above) which is further indicia that “factor Bilderberg” could play some role in his impressive career.

As already indicated, many promoted politicians appeared at numerous Bilderberg conferences. Yet, they are counted only once into the category “later elevated politicians”. For example, Dutch minister Ad Melkert attended Bilderberg conference for the first time in 1996. In 2002, he became executive director at World Bank. So in Table 7 about Bilderberg conference in 1996, Melkert is included among “later elevated politicians”. In 2001, he again participated at Bilderberg conference. Yet, in Table 12 about Bilderberg conference in 2001, Melkert is not mentioned among “later elevated politicians”, because each year only new names are counted.

Perhaps, other researchers would choose different ways of counting that could lead to (slightly) different numbers. But that is not decisive, because for the argument of this chapter, what matters most, are not exact numbers, but general trends. And the tables unveil clear pattern – most politicians who attended Bilderberg conferences were never later elevated. But dozens of them were and sometimes even shortly after their participation at the gathering.

Table 1: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in May 1990 in New York, USA

Number of all present politicians		40
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		7
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Joao Pinheiro	Portugal minister of foreign affairs	in 1993 EU commissioner
Antonio Guterres	Portugal MP	in 1995 Portugal PM, in 2017 head of UN
Erdal Inonu	leader of Turkish populist party	in 1991 deputy PM
Renato Ruggiero	Italian minister of foreign trade	in 1995 head of WTO
Philippe Seguin	member of French parliament	in 1993 head of parliament
Narcis Serra	Spanish minister of defense	in 1991 deputy PM
Paul Wolfowitz	US undersecretary of defense	in 2005 head of World Bank

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/1990-bilderberg-participant-list/>

Table 2: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 1991 in Baden-Baden, Germany

Number of all present politicians		37
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		6
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Bjorn Bjarnason	Icelandic MP	in 1995 minister
Ritt Bjerregaard	Danish MP	in 1995 EU commissioner
Gordon Brown	British MP	in 1997 minister of finance, in 2007 PM
Bill Clinton	governor of Arkansas	in 1993 US president
Ruud Lubbers	Dutch PM	in 2001 UN commissioner
Volker Ruhe	secretary of German party CDU	in 1992 minister of defense

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/1991-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 3: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in May 1992 in Evian-les-Bains, France

Number of all present politicians		30
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		7
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Lloyd Bentsen	U.S. senator	in 1993 minister of finance
Emre Gonensay	chief adviser to Turkish PM	in 1996 foreign minister
Michael McDowell	head of Irish Progressive Party	in 1999 attorney general
Pierre Morel	adviser to French Presidency	in 2006 EU representative
Rodrigo de Rato	Spanish MP and party leader	in 1996 minister of finance, in 2004 head of IMF
Jacques Toubon	French MP	in 1993 minister of culture
Hubert Vedrine	French president's secretary general	in 1997 foreign minister

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/1992-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 4: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in April 1993 in Vouliagmeni, Greece

Number of all present politicians		33
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		4
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Tony Blair	British MP (shadow minister)	in 1997 PM
Patrick Devedjian	French MP	in 2008 minister
Wim Kok	Netherlands minister/deputy PM	in 1994 PM
Theodoros Pangalos	Greek MP	In 1996 foreign minister

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/1993-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 5: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 1994 in Helsinki, Finland

Number of all present politicians		30
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		3
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Jose Manuel Barroso	Portugal foreign minister	in 2002 Portugal PM, in 2004 head of European Commission
Willy Claes	Belgian foreign minister	in 1994 head of NATO
Mario Draghi	director in Italian ministry of finance	in 2011 head of ECB

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/1994-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 6: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 1995 in Zurich, Switzerland

Number of all present politicians		38
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		6
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
David Hannay	British Representative to UN	in 1996 UN representative for Cyprus
Karl Lamers	German MP	in 2010 president of NATO Parliamentary Assembly
George Papandreou	Greek minister of education	in 2009 PM
Jean-Claude Trichet	governor of French central bank	in 2003 head of ECB
Federico T. Figueroa	Spanish MP	in 1996 head of parliament
Gunther Verheugen	German MP and party leader	in 1999 EU commissioner

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/1995-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 7: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in May-June 1996 in Toronto, Canada

Number of all present politicians		38
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		8
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Frits Bolkestein	Netherlands MP and party leader	in 1999 EU commissioner
Lionel Jospin	French MP and party leader	in 1997 PM
Pierre Lellouche	Foreign Affairs spokesman of major French party	in 2004 president of NATO Parliamentary Assembly
Paul Martin	Canadian minister of finance	in 2003 PM
Philippe Maystadt	Belgian minister and vice-PM	in 2000 head of European investment bank
Ad Melkert	Netherlands minister	in 2002 director of World Bank
Jan Petersen	Norwegian MP and party leader	in 2001 foreign minister
Antonio Vitorino	Portugal minister and vice-PM	in 1999 EU commissioner

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/1996-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 8: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 1997 in Atlanta, USA

Number of all present politicians		22
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		2
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Sauli Niinisto	Finish minister of finance	in 2012 president
Gijs de Vries	Dutch member of EU parliament	in 2004 EU antiterrorism coordinator

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/1997-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 9: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in May 1998 in Ayrshire, Britain

Number of all present politicians		37
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		10
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Joaquin Almunia	Spanish MP and party leader	in 2004 EU commissioner
Wolfgang Ischinger	director at German foreign ministry	in 2008 head of Munich Security Conference
Otmar Issing	member of the board of German central bank	in 1998 member of the board and chief economist of European central bank
Kostas Karamanlis	Greek MP and party leader	in 2004 PM
Karel Kovanda	Czech ambassador to NATO	in 2004 dean of NATO diplomatic corps, in 2005 deputy director-general of EU diplomacy
Mogens Lykketoft	Danish minister of finance	in 2015 head of UN General Assembly
Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa	head of Italy's stock market supervision agency	in 1998 member of board of ECB
George Robertson	British defense minister	in 1999 head of NATO
Marcelo R. de Sousa	Portugal MP and party leader	in 2016 president
Lawrence Summers	Deputy Secretary at U.S. finance ministry	in 1999 minister of finance

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/1998-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 10: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 1999 in Sintra, Portugal

Number of all present politicians		36
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		4
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Chuck Hagel	US senator	in 2013 defense minister
Peter Mandelson	British MP	in 2004 EU commissioner
Jorge Sampaio	Portugal president	in 2007 UN High-Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations
Pedro Solbes Mira	Spanish MP	in 1999 EU commissioner

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/1999-bilderberg-participant-list/>

Table 11: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 2000 in Brussels, Belgium

Number of all present politicians		30
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		4
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
N. Diamandouros	Greek ombudsman	in 2003 EU ombudsman
Teresa Gouveia	Portugal MP	in 2003 foreign minister
Pascal Lamy	EU commissioner	in 2005 head of WTO
Anders F. Rasmussen	Danish MP and party leader	in 2001 PM, in 2009 head of NATO

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2000-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 12: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in May 2001 in Stenungsbaden, Sweden

Number of all present politicians		35
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		2
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Edward Balls	Chief economic adviser to Treasury	in 2007 minister for families
Pat Cox	Irish member of European parliament and party leader	in 2002 head of European parliament

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2001-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 13: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in May-June 2002 in Chantilly, USA

Number of all present politicians		28
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		4
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Kemal Dervis	Turkish minister	in 2005 administrator of UN Development Program
Elisa Ferreira	Portugal MP and former minister	in 2019 EU commissioner
Alfred Gusenbauer	Austrian MP and party leader	in 2007 PM
Jens Stoltenberg	Norwegian MP and party leader	in 2005 PM (also before), in 2014 head of NATO

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2002-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 14: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in May 2003 in Versailles, France

Number of all present politicians		45
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		6
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Dora Bakoyanni	mayor of Athens	in 2006 foreign minister
Jean-François Copé	French government spokesperson	in 2005 minister of budget
Stephen Harper	Canadian MP and party leader	in 2006 PM
Jaap Hoop Scheffer	Dutch foreign minister	in 2004 head of NATO
G. Tumpel-Gugerell	vice-governor of Austrian central bank	in 2003 member of board of ECB
Robert Zoellick	trade adviser to US president	in 2007 head of World Bank

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2003-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 15: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 2004 in Stresa, Italy

Number of all present politicians		39
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		5
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Timothy Geithner	President, Federal Reserve Bank of New York	in 2009 minister of finance
Bert Koenders	Dutch MP	in 2006 president of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly
Pedro Santana Lopes	mayor of Lisbon	in 2004 Portugal PM
Jose Socrates	Portugal MP	in 2005 PM
Ignazio Visco	manager at Italian central bank	in 2011 head of central bank

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2004-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 16: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in May 2005 in Rottach-Egern, Germany

Number of all present politicians		42
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		4
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Ziad Abu Amr	Palestinian MP	in 2007 foreign minister
Connie Hedegaard	Danish minister for environment	in 2010 EU commissioner
Angela Merkel	German MP and party leader	in 2005 PM
Miguel S. Gascón	economic adviser to Spanish PM	in 2008 minister of industry

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2005-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 17: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 2006 in Ottawa, Canada

Number of all present politicians		32
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		6
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Egemen Bagis	MP, Foreign Policy Advisor to PM	in 2009 chief negotiator for Turkish accession to EU
Siv Jensen	Norwegian MP	in 2013 minister of finance
Bernardino León Gross	Secretary of State of Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs	in 2011 EU special representative for the Southern Mediterranean
George Osborne	British MP and shadow minister	in 2010 minister of finance
Fredrik Reinfeldt	Swedish MP and party leader	in 2006 PM
Maxime Verhagen	Dutch MP and parliamentary party leader	in 2007 foreign minister

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/list-of-participants-for-the-2006-bilderberg-meeting/>

Table 18: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 2007 in Istanbul, Turkey

Number of all present politicians		37
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		8
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Gerald Butts	Principal Secretary to the Premier of Ontario	in 2015 Principal Secretary to Canadian PM
Frank Heemskerk	Dutch minister of foreign trade	in 2013 Executive Director at World Bank Group
Jyrki Katainen	Finish minister of finance	in 2011 PM
Jason Kenney	Canadian MP	in 2008 minister of citizenship and immigration
Rick Perry	Governor of Texas	in 2017 US Secretary of Energy
Kathleen Sebelius	Governor of Kansas	in 2009 US Secretary of Health and Human Services
Kristen Silverberg	Assistant Secretary of State	in 2008 US Ambassador to EU
Guido Westerwelle	Chairman of German party FDP	in 2009 foreign minister

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/official-list-of-participants-for-the-2007-bilderberg-meeting/>

Table 19: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 2008 in Chantilly, USA

Number of all present politicians		42
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		3
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
António Costa	mayor of Lisbon	in 2015 Portugal PM
Frans Timmermans	Dutch minister of European affairs	in 2014 First Vice President of the European Commission
Manuel Valls	French MP	in 2012 minister of interior, in 2014 PM

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/official-list-of-participants-for-the-2008-bilderberg-meeting/>

Table 20: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in May 2009 in Vouliagmeni, Greece

Number of all present politicians		42
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		4
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Luc Coene	Vice Governor of Belgian central bank	in 2015 member of Supervisory Board of ECB
Christine Lagarde	French minister for economy	in 2011 director of IMF, in 2019 head of ECB
Miguel Ángel Moratinos	Spanish foreign minister	in 2019 UN High-Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations
Helle Thorning-Schmidt	leader of opposition Danish social democratic party	in 2011 PM

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/official-list-of-participants-for-the-2009-bilderberg-meeting/>

Table 21: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 2010 in Sitges, Spain

Number of all present politicians	30
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)	0

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2010-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 22: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 2011 in St. Moritz, Switzerland

Number of all present politicians		35
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		3
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
María Dolores de Cospedal	Secretary-General of Spanish People's Party	in 2016 minister of defense
Erna Solberg	Leader of Conservative Party	in 2013 Norway PM
Rory Stewart	British MP	in 2016 Minister of State for International Development

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2011-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 23: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in May-June 2012 in Chantilly, USA

Number of all present politicians		37
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		6
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Nick Boles	British MP	in 2014 Minister of State for Skills
Anousheh Karvar	Inspector at French Office for Social, Health, Employment and Labor Policies	in 2018 government Delegate to International Labor Organization and Labor & Employment Task Officer to G7 and G20
John Kerry	US Senator	in 2013 foreign minister
Enrico Letta	Deputy Leader of Democratic Party	in 2013 Italian PM
Jorge Moreira da Silva	First Vice-President of Portugal social democratic party	in 2013 minister of Environment and Energy
Jutta Urpilainen	Finnish minister of finance	in 2019 EU commissioner for International Partnerships

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2012-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 24: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 2013 in Watford, UK

Number of all present politicians		31
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		2
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Luis de Guindos	Spanish minister of economy	in 2018 Vice President of ECB
Stefan Löfven	Leader of Swedish Social Democratic Party	in 2014 PM

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2013-bilderberg-meeting-participant-list/>

Table 25: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in May-June 2014 in Copenhagen, Denmark

Number of all present politicians		35
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		3
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Liu He	Chinese minister, Office of the Central Leading Group on Financial and Economic Affairs	in 2018 one of the vice-premiers of China
Emmanuel Macron	Deputy Secretary General of French Presidency	in 2017 French president
Margrethe Vestager	Danish Deputy PM and Minister of economy	in 2014 EU Commissioner for Competition

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2014-bilderberg-participant-list/>

Table 26: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 2015 in Telfs-Buchen, Austria

Number of all present politicians		27
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		5
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Ursula von der Leyen	German minister of defence	in 2019 President of the European Commission
Christina Markus Lassen	Head of Department at Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs	in 2015 EU Ambassador in Lebanon
Charles Michel	Belgian PM	in 2019 President of the European Council
Pedro Sánchez	Leader of Spanish socialist party	in 2018 Spanish PM
Alexander Stubb	Finnish PM	in 2017 Vice-President of the European Investment Bank

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2015-bilderberg-participant-list/>

Table 27: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 2016 in Dresden, Germany

Number of all present politicians		31
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		5
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Kristalina Georgieva	Vice President of European Commission	in 2017 Chief Executive of the World Bank Group, in 2019 director of IMF
Sylvie Goulard	Member of European Parliament	in 2017 Minister of the Armed Forces, in 2018 Deputy Governor of French central bank
Kyriakos Mitsotakis	Leader of Greek New Democracy Party	in 2019 Greek PM
Kajsa Ollongren	Deputy Mayor of Amsterdam	in 2017 Minister of Interior
Édouard Philippe	Mayor of Le Havre	in 2017 French PM

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2016-bilderberg-participant-list/>

Table 28: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 2017 in Chantilly, USA

Number of all present politicians		26
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		2
Elevated politicians	At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to
Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert	Dutch minister of defence	in 2018 UN Special Representative for Iraq
Jens Spahn	Parliamentary state secretary in German Ministry of Finance	in 2018 minister of health

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2017-bilderberg-participant-list/>

Table 29: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in June 2018 in Turin, Italy

Number of all present politicians		34
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		1
Elevated politicians		
At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to	
Paschal Donohoe	Irish minister of finance	
	in 2020 President of Eurogroup	

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2018-bilderberg-participant-list/>

Table 30: Politicians at Bilderberg conference in May-June 2019 in Montreux, Switzerland

Number of all present politicians		39
Number of later elevated politicians (new names)		3
Elevated politicians		
At Bilderberg present as	In year elevated to	
Clément Beaune	Adviser, Office of French President	
	in 2020 Secretary of State for European affairs	
Niki Kerameus	Greek MP	
	in 2019 minister of education	
Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer	Leader of governing German party	
	in 2019 minister of defence	

Source: website Public Intelligence (calculations and compilations are the author's)

<https://publicintelligence.net/2019-bilderberg-participant-list/>

Final comments on power and capital

Most invitees to Bilderberg conferences already have significant amount of social capital. Nonetheless, by (repeatedly) attending Bilderberg conclaves – or even joining Bilderberg Group's steering committee – they can further augment this type of capital. Indeed, it seems that networking opportunities are among the main reasons (if not the main one) why many people (frequently) participated at Bilderberg gatherings.

Social capital accumulated at Bilderberg meetings contributes to political power, because it enhances political access to important decision-makers. Moreover, social capital also helps in nomination processes into (not only) political functions. This might partly explain why dozens of individuals got promoted after their participation at Bilderberg conclave(s). Because when it comes to lucrative posts, there are usually many candidates, often comparably strong in terms of qualifications. So, in the end, what can decide are personal connections – who knows (better) whom, who backs (more) whom, etc. Thus, social capital is easily convertible into political capital/power.

Yet, elevated people need not actively (mis)use their social capital. Their influential friends can intercede for them without their knowledge. Social capital might also manifest in more subtle and indirect ways. The mere fact that someone is well-connected has positive impact on his public image and reputation. Special attention is dedicated to such individuals as if they were more important.

Crucially, in most cases, social capital cannot be lost so quickly and completely as political (in case of resignation) or economic (in case of bankruptcy) capital. Politicians retain almost the same amount of social capital even after their departure from public offices. That is why corporations are eager to employ ex-politicians. Because they only lost functions, but not contacts.

Social capital also explains why many former politicians are still welcome at Bilderberg conferences. With reference to social capital, one can even argue that ex-president of EU Commission Barroso was more valuable “acquisition” for Bilderberg Group than several incumbent national politicians altogether. The reason is simple: Barroso's connections and notoriety span across the whole Europe.

Social capital also contributes to and translates into economic capital/power. Especially when millions or billions are at stake, many entrepreneurs would certainly prefer

to do business with someone they know well. Like people who belong to same network(s) – not necessarily just Bilderberg Group, but also – for instance – same commerce chamber(s) or Rotary/Lions club(s). Because social capital is also defined as trust and trust is essential for long-term business agreements (more than for political coalitions, which are often enforced by circumstances that change relatively quickly).

Chapter 5

No longer a taboo:

Bilderberg Group in European newspapers

Abstract of the chapter

This chapter provides preliminary appraisal of discursive/ideational power of Bilderberg Group. It argues that the network seems to be powerless in agenda-setting. Plus, Bilderberg Group is no longer able to achieve its goal of no or low public visibility, since mass media began to report on the conferences. The silence was broken after 2010, but there are still differences in content on Bilderberg Group in various newspapers. This chapter is the first scholarly attempt to analyze the coverage of Bilderberg meetings in three prominent European dailies. It surveys articles on Bilderberg from 2010 to 2021 that were published in British *The Guardian*, French *Le Monde* and German *Die Welt*. The chapter found that in terms of both quantity and quality of the articles, *The Guardian* is by far the best source on Bilderberg, while *Le Monde* is surprisingly the worst.

Motto

"I learnt that being followed around by a man in dark glasses was tame in comparison with the indignities suffered by some of the few prying journalists who had travelled this road before me. In June 1998, a Scottish reporter tracked Bilderberg to the Turnberry Hotel in Ayrshire, and when he started asking questions he was promptly handcuffed by Strathclyde police and thrown into jail."

Jon Ronson on suppressing media coverage on Bilderberg

(The Guardian, 10.3.2001)

“All this is the kind of thing that should be headline news, but with the president of Turner International attending, we can be fairly sure Bilderberg won’t make many ripples at CNN. And British readers should not expect much coverage at the London Evening Standard either: their new editor and longtime Bilderberg attendee George Osborne is on the list... You could of course complain about a lack of press coverage of Bilderberg in the UK, but with the head of the media watchdog Ofcom at the conference, you may not get an immediate reply.”

Charlie Skelton on mass media complicity during Bilderberg conference in 2017
(The Guardian, 1.6.2017)

Powerless Bilderberg Group: No (visible) impact on public discourse

Power can be manifested in various areas, including agenda setting (Rothkopf, 2008: 303). In this domain, powerful are those actors that shape public and/or expert discourse. For instance, the above mentioned European Round Table of Industrialists contributed to agenda-setting in EU (van Apeldoorn, 2000). First, with its reports, public utterances and private communication, ERT strengthened the belief that completion of the internal market was key priority. And later, ERT helped to advance neoliberal discourse, especially neoliberal conception of competitiveness. Contrary to ERT, it seems that Bilderberg Group never had discursive/ideational power and most probably intentionally.

Here, Bilderberg Group should also be compared with other transnational elite clubs. In sociological studies (Carroll – Carson, 2003; Carroll – Sapinski, 2010), Bilderberg Group is analyzed along with Trilateral Commission and WEF. To this trio, one might add Club of Rome, to provide broader context for the evaluation.

It is striking that Bilderberg Group has not produced any publicly available reports – unlike Club of Rome, WEF and Trilateral Commission. In other words, Bilderberg Group has not sought to visibly disseminate its narrative/ideology of Atlanticism and Europhilia.

In contrast, Club of Rome and WEF systematically promote their discourses and they are highly successful in this effort. Club of Rome even managed to become trend-setter, because of its famous bestseller *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al., 1972). This work has

been broadly discussed and it inspired the global policy of sustainable development and the de-growth movement. Recently, two Club of Rome's members and futurologists published book that repeats the call for only low economic growth (Randers – Maxton, 2016).

WEF actively champions free market ideology with special focus on competitiveness, which is highlighted in the annual Global Competitiveness Reports. In this regard, WEF has had huge impact on expert and even public discourse. Competitiveness has become obsession, fetish, buzzword, leading principle, ultima ratio. The discourse of competitiveness is so pervasive that its critics could not challenge it although they include Nobel Prize winning economists (Krugman, 1994).

Compared to WEF and Club of Rome, Trilateral Commission is not so successful in agenda setting. Yet, it still had more influence than Bilderberg Group. Trilateral Commission sparked heated debate with its report *The Crisis of Democracy* (Crozier – Huntington – Watanuki, 1975). Polemics about crisis of (liberal) democracy continue until today and various analysts identified different challenges and remedies for democracy (Kellner, 1990; Zakaria, 1997; Crouch, 2004; Harris, 2016; Fitzi – Mackert – Turner, 2018; McCoy – Rahman – Somer, 2018; Guo – Hu, 2019; Dryzek et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, publicly available reports are not the only instrument to shape discourse. Thus, the claim of Bilderberg Group's powerlessness in this field can prove to be hasty conclusion. Here, it is important to stress that Bilderberg meetings are regularly attended by publishers, journalists and editors of influential mass media. These include opinion-making newspapers and magazines from USA (The Washington Post, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Newsweek), Canada (The National Post, The Globe and Mail), Britain (The Financial Times, The Economist, The Daily Telegraph, The Times), Germany (Die Zeit), France (Le Figaro, Le Monde, Les Echos), Italy (La Stampa, La Repubblica, Corriere della Sera), Spain (El País), Austria (Der Standard), Denmark (Politiken) and Finland (Helsingin Sanomat). It is possible that via these media outlets, Bilderberg Group has been able to indirectly disseminate or strengthen its preferred narrative. However, this question cannot be solved here – it deserves a separate study, which is one of the tasks for future research.

Bilderberg Group in mass media

With its secrecy and decision-makers among participants, the annual Bilderberg conferences were perfect topic for investigative journalism. Yet, many mainstream media did not provide even basic news reports that some Bilderberg conclave took place (Klößner, 2016: 212). This (self) censorship was journalistic failure which contributed to the rising popularity of alternative media.

Mass media ignorance of Bilderberg Group suggests that this elite network was really powerful, because for decades, it could achieve its goal of no or low visibility. This would not be possible without deliberate silence of mass media. In other words: without complicity of media bosses (and little pressure from ordinary journalists and readers). Many mainstream media were simply co-opted and some other intimidated and suppressed, as indicated in the motto of this chapter.

The usual (post-Cold War) media black-out of Bilderberg started to change in recent two decades and especially after the year 2010, when Bilderberg Group launched its official website with some basic information about the participants and topics of the conferences (Wendt, 2016: 1-2).

Another breakthrough came in 2013, when Bilderberg meeting took place in British town Watford. This was the first Bilderberg conclave that mass media covered extensively. As veteran Bilderberg reporter Charlie Skelton put it: “Watford... has changed the hitherto secretive Bilderberg conference forever. In a freshly trimmed corner of the grounds of the Grove Hotel, half a mile from the most important international policy conference in the world, something remarkable happened: the mainstream press showed up. In droves.” (The Guardian, 7.6.2013)

Yet, in retrospect, Skelton was overly optimistic when he wrote that in 2014 Bilderberg Group would even hold a press conference – this prediction and wish has never come true. Moreover, as indicated below, in the period from 2013 to 2021, some mainstream media did not regularly report on Bilderberg meetings. So, in some cases, the deplorable practice of overlooking these gatherings prevailed again.

Despite this, there is now a substantial body of newspaper and on-line articles (and videos) about Bilderberg. Yet, largely missing is textual and other analysis of these texts. The present chapter is an attempt to partly fill this lacuna. Subsequent sections survey articles on

Bilderberg from 2010 to 2021 that were published in three opinion-shaping European dailies – British *The Guardian*, French *Le Monde* and German *Die Welt*. In so doing, the chapter contributes to both media studies and the interdisciplinary scholarship on Bilderberg Group.

Current state of debate on Bilderberg and media

Existing historical, sociological and political science/IR research on Bilderberg Group (Aubourg, 2003; Gijswijt, 2018; Kantor, 2017; Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011; Thompson, 1980; van der Pijl, 2010; Wilford, 2003; Zieliński, 2017) has not elaborated on the issues surrounding Bilderberg and mass media. The exceptions are works of Klöckner (2016), Martín Jiménez (2017) and Wendt (2016).

Klöckner (2016: 213) contrasted insufficient coverage on Bilderberg with abundant reports on World Economic Forums and Munich Security conferences, which are other annual summits of elites, whose attendees partly overlap with those of Bilderberg. He criticized journalists, who take part at Bilderberg meetings and obey the confidentiality rule: “The participating journalist receives absolutely privileged access to information (...), which he however does not make available to the public. (...) (...) Some of the topics at Bilderberg conferences are phrased as questions. Anyone who asks questions also wants answers. From a democratic point of view, isn't it indispensable for citizens to find out what answers elites come to when they confer for several days behind closed doors?” (Klöckner, 2016: 218-219)

In her groundbreaking monumental PhD thesis, Martín Jiménez (2017: 331-598) thoroughly mapped the personal ties between major Western media and Bilderberg Group. Elsewhere, she highlighted the risks associated with involvement of media representatives in Bilderberg network – involvement that started already at the first Bilderberg conference in 1954 in Netherlands: “Although six editors and media owners were present..., they did not publish news about the first Bilderberg meeting because secrecy prevailed over freedom of expression and the right to information. (...) With the founding of Bilderberg, the crisis of current journalism was also born” (Martín Jiménez, 2016: 1177).

Wendt's pioneering study offers first content analysis of articles about Bilderberg, but solely from German media (Wendt, 2016: 4). Plus, Wendt surveyed mainly texts that were published until 2012 (Wendt, 2016: VI). Thus, this chapter extends Wendt's research in two

ways – it focuses also on more recent articles and not only German, but also British and French.

Bilderberg and media: dangerous liaisons

Bilderberg Group's approach to media varied in different periods. The network always preferred to stay under the radar, but it used to hold press conferences at the end of its meetings. But in 1976, Bilderberg organizers cancelled their conclave to avoid negative publicity associated with the corruption scandal of Bilderberg Group's co-founder and chairman Prince Bernhard. In subsequent years, Bilderbergers relaunched their gatherings, but without press conferences (The Guardian, 12.6.2015).

These changes are mirrored in the coverage of Bilderberg in *Le Monde*. During Cold-War, *Le Monde* reported on nine Bilderberg conferences – those in the years 1957, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1969, 1974, 1976 and 1977. However, in 1980s and after the end of Cold War, *Le Monde* remained silent about Bilderberg. This omertà lasted until 2016.

The case of *Die Welt* is similar. Based on Google search, it strikes out that *Die Welt* reported on Bilderberg conference for the first time in 2010. Before, the journal was silent about Bilderberg meetings, except some cursory hints to Bilderberg phenomenon in several articles on different topics.

Critics and conspiracy theorists suspected that mass media black-out (or whitewashing) on Bilderberg was (at least partly) sustained due to involvement of many media bosses and “alpha journalists” in Bilderberg network. It is true that high representatives of (not only) *Le Monde* and *Die Welt* appeared at various Bilderberg conclaves.

Le Monde's “chief Foreign Service” journalist Andre Fontaine took part at Bilderberg gathering in 1963. Erik Izraelewicz, the CEO of the newspaper, participated at Bilderberg conference in 2012. And the conclave in 2014 was attended by Natalie Nougayrède, *Le Monde's* former director and executive editor. The case of *Die Welt* is even more telling – the journal's publishing house is chaired by Mathias Döpfner, who is member of Bilderberg Group's steering committee, the hard core of Bilderberg network. Only *The Guardian* has no personal connections with Bilderberg Group.

It cannot be ruled out that these personal ties – or their absence – might have co-influenced the portrayal of Bilderberg in these three newspapers. In any case, there is a big difference in their coverage of Bilderberg between 2010 and 2021. The quality and especially the quantity of *Le Monde's* articles are extremely poor. *Die Welt* scored much better, mainly in quantity. Yet, *The Guardian* is by far the best, mostly in quality, because it provided original reporting and analytical reflections, not just descriptive news articles.

The Guardian profited hugely from association with comedy writer Charlie Skelton, who systematically monitored Bilderberg Group for more than a decade. No other newspaper had among its contributors such a specialist on the topic of Bilderberg. This is why the biggest part of the analysis below is dedicated to articles from *The Guardian*.

Data and method

The section below provides basic textual analysis of articles on Bilderberg conferences that were published between 1.1.2010 and 29.8.2021. The section surveys British, French and German newspapers, because these three countries are the most influential in Europe's political and intellectual life. The section focuses on one prominent mainstream journal from each country – *The Guardian* from Britain, *Le Monde* from France and *Die Welt* from Germany.

The selection of these newspapers was motivated by several considerations. First, they are all dailies (with long tradition) and therefore it makes sense to compare them. Plus, all these journals have some international impact beyond their home countries. Especially *The Guardian* and *Le Monde* are read in many parts of the world. *Die Welt* is influential in all German-speaking countries (and Central Europe) and has English edition as well. Finally, already with their titles, both *Le Monde* and *Die Welt* indicate that they are interested in world affairs. So, one can expect that they must pay attention to Bilderberg conferences, because these three-days gatherings host dozens of political and business decision-makers from Europe, USA, Canada and Turkey, who come together to discuss world affairs.

However, the selected newspapers are also different in some regards. And this is another reason why it is interesting to compare them. Specifically, the analysis mirrors the both two main opposing political inclinations, because it contains left-leaning (*The Guardian*, *Le Monde*) as well as right-leaning (*Die Welt*) journal(s). And as indicated above, the

following study explores newspapers with (Le Monde, Die Welt) and without (The Guardian) personal connections to Bilderberg Group.

This chapter employed a combined search strategy to collect the articles. The Factiva database was used to identify relevant articles from *The Guardian*. Yet, on the journal's website, there are more articles or (Skelton's) blog (so called "Bilderblog") entries on Bilderberg than those displayed in Factiva. However, because of limited space, this chapter did not analyze articles on the website, but only those in Factiva. These two groups of articles partly overlap and already from Factiva one can get picture of how Bilderberg is portrayed in *The Guardian*. Moreover, if the chapter analyzes all content on Bilderberg from the journal's website, then the section on *The Guardian* would be so much longer than the sections on *Die Welt* and especially *Le Monde*.

Unfortunately, articles in French and German language stored in Factiva were not accessible via Charles University's account. Therefore, the author had to conduct searches on the homepages of *Le Monde* and *Die Welt*. Results produced in this way were controlled by searches undertaken via Google. In all these searches – those in Factiva as well as those in homepages and Google – the searched phrase was simply "Bilderberg".

The overall sample consists of 41 texts – 20 from *The Guardian*, 19 from *Die Welt* and 2 from *Le Monde*. The vast majority of them are news articles. The rest are rather commentaries, interviews or (analytical) essays. This chapter did not distinguish between long and short texts and those published (only) in print and (only) on-line. The sole criterion was the topic – all texts suitable for the sample must directly address some Bilderberg conference or Bilderberg Group generally.

In the following part, the portrayal of Bilderberg in the above mentioned three newspapers is analyzed. Specifically, the section shows what these media highlight, repeat and what they omit or misrepresent. The examination also demonstrates which articles are most critical, neutral or apologetic. The articles are reviewed from the most recent ones to the oldest.

Coverage of Bilderberg conferences in British daily The Guardian

The Guardian reported on almost all Bilderberg conferences between 2010 and 2021. Many of these meetings were covered in more than one article. Most importantly, *The Guardian* is

the only newspaper that systematically produced its own original content on Bilderberg. The journal often had its reporter Skelton directly at the sites where the gatherings took place. This is exceptional, although it should have been standard practice.

Undisclosed participant(s)

Skelton confirmed that the US secretary of state Mike Pompeo joined Bilderberg meeting in 2019 in Switzerland (The Guardian, 3.6.2019). Yet, Skelton did not add that Pompeo was not mentioned on the official list of participants which Bilderberg Group released. This fact is important, because it proves that Bilderberg Group does not provide complete information and therefore cannot be fully trusted.

Trump's relative and advisor Jared Kushner was another high representative of US government who appeared at Bilderberg gathering in 2019. Skelton highlighted “military flavor” of many topics of the meeting, which also hosted the head of NATO Jens Stoltenberg and Pentagon officials. In this context, it seems as a plausible hypothesis when Skelton suggested that at the Bilderberg conclave, Kushner perhaps tried to “sell a war with Iran”.

Skelton stressed the problematic entanglement of business and politics. Despite lessons from the past, this trouble persists and even has the same contours: “King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands chatted to James O Ellis, a former head of US Strategic Command, now a director of Lockheed Martin. (...) For the Dutch king to be seen networking with Lockheed Martin at Bilderberg might not be the best look: in the 1970s a lobbying scandal involving the company caused his grandfather, Prince Bernhard, to resign his public offices.”

Alleged fear of losing power

Skelton highlighted that Bilderberg conference in 2018 was dedicated to the issue of US world leadership and to artificial intelligence (AI), which had been expected to change the distribution of power and the way of fighting wars (The Guardian, 11.6.2018). According to Skelton, Bilderberg Group was discussing a possibility of total substantive revolution: “It is not just that world leadership will be passed from the US to China like a baton. It is that the whole structure of world leadership might just melt away, or take a form that no one ... could foresee.”

Skelton asserted that Bilderbergers felt highly threatened: “What this means for Bilderberg is that the system of transatlantic influence and opinion-shaping that the group has spent more than six decades refining might vanish overnight. All the diplomatic machinations of Józef Retinger and Étienne Davignon, all the Rockefeller, Agnelli and Wallenberg power, rendered irrelevant by the disruption of AI.”

Unfortunately, these strong claims were not supported by equally strong argumentation. It seems that Skelton exaggerated the “existential angst” of Bilderberg Group. No doubt, AI can change everything, including the international (US world leadership) and social (Rockefeller, Agnelli, Wallenberg and other capitalists' power) hierarchy. But those international and social actors that are currently in advantageous positions are more likely to have the capacity to adjust in time. So they will probably be able to preserve (many of) their advantages. After all, it is hard to find evidence that the West is clearly losing in the competition with China (let alone Russia) when it comes to AI and hi-tech in general (except 5G network perhaps).

Skelton insinuated three Bilderbergers who could have economic motivation for prolonging conflicts or starting new ones: “In the meantime, having a few proxy wars with Russia is a pleasant way to pass the time. Especially if you run a giant arms company, as several at Bilderberg do.” Here, Skelton referred to Thomas Enders (Airbus), Giampiero Massolo (Fincantieri) and Marcus Wallenberg (Saab).

In sum, Skelton portrays Bilderberg Group as a place where political and business insider information is exchanged and later monetized. As such, Bilderberg meetings are said to threaten democracy: “At Bilderberg, you’ve got the secretary general of NATO discussing Russia with financiers whose job it is to turn knowledge into dollars. (...) This is what Kissinger has been doing for decades through Kissinger Associates: leveraging information for money. This isn’t how representative democracy is meant to work. It’s how Wall Street works. It’s the geopolitical version of insider dealing: private access to non-public information.”

Bilderbergers nurtured EU

Bilderberg organizers used to invite both right-wing and left-wing politicians from both government and opposition parties. And they approached corporations with similar

universalism. Skelton highlighted that both new and old sectors of the economy were represented at Bilderberg conference in 2018 in Italy: “(Bilderberg's) recent flirtation with artificial intelligence and Silicon Valley seems to have blossomed into a full-blown affair. (...) (...) even as Bilderberg races into a bio-integrated smart future, there is a simultaneous resurgence of one of the group's traditional power cliques: big oil. (...) (...) The veins of Bilderberg run with oil, and its beating heart is the Dutch royal family and its oil interests.” (The Guardian, 8.6.2018)

Skelton reminded that the European integration process had been “for decades nurtured around the Bilderberg conference table”. At the same time, Bilderberg Group always fostered transatlantic ties. However, both these objectives were undermined by Brexit, Trump and the general rise of populism. Thus, Skelton concluded that Bilderbergers had to worry: “everything they have worked so hard to achieve is under threat.”

So powerful and so ridiculous

Skelton criticized Bilderbergers' efforts to isolate their meetings from public scrutiny: “Even though the annual conference is packed with government ministers, senators and party leaders, the public is resolutely denied even the most cursory press briefing.” (The Guardian, 5.6.2017)

In their attempts to avoid publicity, powerful decision-makers often resorted to ridiculous behavior: “Attendees spotted by the press are for the most part still locked in a bizarre, pre-internet paradigm of hiding their faces behind copies of the Financial Times or even, in the case of one participant this year, bending double to avoid – heaven forbid! – being identified.”

No wonder that this culture of secrecy nurtured conspiracy theories. In other words, Bilderberg Group is itself to blame for its controversial public image. Nonetheless, Bilderbergers really have good reasons to try to stay under the radar. They chose silence, because their activities are hard to defend, especially against charges of lobbying and possible corruption (in the broadest sense of this term): “At the airport, the Canadian finance minister, Bill Morneau, would not even grace journalists with a “no comment”. He had just spent a long weekend talking business and politics with the president of Canada's largest bank.”

Skelton was allowed to ask few questions to another Bilderberger Michael O’Leary, who is Ryanair’s CEO. Yet, O’Leary’s short answers were not specific. It seems that Bilderbergers do not want to share all their information with public, because information asymmetry is important part of the whole power asymmetry between elites and masses. For this reason, as Skelton stressed, Bilderberg organizers often invite top officials from secret services: “Bilderberg is plugged into the very highest levels of high finance and intelligence. There were two ex-CIA chiefs at this year’s conference: Gen David Petraeus and John Brennan, both of whom now work in the private sector.”

Skelton highlighted the personal overlaps and other links between Bilderberg Group and the bank Goldman Sachs: “The relationship between Bilderberg and Goldman Sachs runs deep. (...) (...) if Goldman Sachs is the “vampire squid” ... Bilderberg is its brain: doing the deep thinking, inviting historians and futurists’ perspectives, trying to work out where the world is going, doing its best to make sure everything stays more or less on course.”

Unfortunately, Skelton made factual mistake when he wrote that the conference was chaired by “a director of HSBC”. According to the official list of participants, Bilderberg meeting in 2017 (as well as the gatherings before and afterwards) was chaired by ex-CEO of AXA Henri de Castries. However, this does not change anything on the correctness of Skelton’s conclusion that Bilderberg Group “is dominated by transnational finance and big business”.

Can Bilderbergers depose politicians?

Bilderberg conference in 2017 took place near the White House and its agenda included the topic of Donald Trump’s policies that caused friction in transatlantic alliance. Skelton inferred that most Bilderbergers did not like Trump’s course. He speculated that Bilderberg Group could try to discipline or even depose Trump: “Perched ominously at the top of the conference agenda this year are these words: “The Trump Administration: A progress report”. Is the president going to be put in detention for tweeting in class? Held back a year? Or told to empty his locker and leave? If ever there’s a place where a president could hear the words “you’re fired!”, it’s Bilderberg.” (The Guardian, 1.6.2017)

This is plausible, but strong claim, which echoes suspicions spread by conspiracy theorists. Therefore, it is problematic that Skelton did not add some arguments or explicitly

admit that he just speculated. The readers were provided with no example of president (or other politician) that was (allegedly) “fired” by Bilderberg. Skelton also did not mention any of the ways how Bilderbergers could theoretically punish Trump or contribute to his political fall. Of course, impeachment is one of these ways.

Media intimidation

In 2016, Skelton provided first-hand account of media intimidation during Bilderberg conference in Dresden's Taschenbergpalais: “... people outside are having their identities checked, being filmed by police and closely monitored online. (...) (...) I have seen reporters in Dresden with their bags emptied on the pavements and picked through by police officers. At least two that I know of were threatened physically. For journalists, Bilderberg is the polar opposite of a G7 jolly... No goodie bags or free champagne bar here, just police cordons, mobile phone jamming and the chance to get jabbed in the arm by overzealous Turkish secret service operatives, as happened to my wife.” (The Guardian, 12.6.2016)

These abuses occurred in the country with experience of two repressive regimes which also harassed and silenced independent journalists. Skelton did not mention that Angela Merkel's party and government fellow Ursula von der Leyen took part at Bilderberg meeting in Taschenbergpalais.

Skelton praised alternative media, because they were the first sources that broke the silence about Bilderberg Group. Yet, Skelton also praised *Infowars*, but this American website is at least controversial, because it also promotes conspiracy theories.

In any case, mainstream media also started to report on Bilderberg conferences: “Press interest in the event is gradually increasing, with coverage becoming more widespread and serious.” Skelton mentioned that journalists from the authoritative news agency Reuters also came to Taschenbergpalais.

Skelton wrote that Bilderbergers could become more media-friendly due to generational change within the club: “The more reticent older guard of Bilderberg is gradually being replaced by a younger generation, particularly from Silicon Valley, more at ease with the idea of opening up to the press. The PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel, one of the more youthful members of Bilderberg’s steering committee, made a formal statement to journalists during his Dresden walkabout.”

Businessmen masked as academics

Bilderberg conference in Dresden in 2016 was described by Skelton as “an Airbus-organised” and “Deutsche Bank-funded” gathering. (The Guardian, 11.6.2016) Yet, Bilderberg Group wanted to obscure the corporate dominance. So on the official list of participants, many attendees were (again) presented as academics, although they also held influential business posts. For instance, prominent Bilderberger Marie-Josée Kravis was listed as a fellow at think-tank Hudson Institute and her membership on the board of big advertising and PR company Publicis was not mentioned. Similarly, Bilderberg Group characterized Marta Dassù as director at think-tank Aspen Institute and omitted her leadership position at the large arms company Finmeccanica.

The same tactic was used in case of the key Bilderberger Victor Halberstadt. Skelton described him as “the quiet Dutchman at the heart of Bilderberg” and even as “the big boss of Bilderberg”. Halberstadt was Dutch “Queen’s Informateur” and one of international advisers of Goldman Sachs. However, on the official lists of participants of Bilderberg conferences, he has been repeatedly listed only as “Professor of Economics” at Leiden University. Skelton did not say it openly, but these tricks were attempts to manipulate public perception. Therefore, Skelton warned: “Politicians who are at Bilderberg... should be aware that a meeting with Halberstadt is a meeting with Goldman Sachs rather more than... with Leiden University.”

Yet, was it appropriate at all that politicians attended Bilderberg conference(s)? According to Skelton, this fundamental question related to possible conflicts of interests that he outlined on the case of British Labour MP Helen Goodman. This left-wing politician and “member of the House of Commons Treasury committee” took part at Bilderberg conclave along with “two board members of HSBC” and other representatives of big business. Moreover, she herself criticized such behavior in the past: “Just a few years ago, Goodman... was chiding David Cameron in parliament for going on a foreign trip with an oil company executive... Now she finds herself locked away at a three-day lobbying event in Dresden with the CEO of Royal Dutch Shell and three board members of BP... Awkward!”

Though not specifically with reference to Goodman, Skelton suggested that for some of the participants, Bilderberg conference can serve as career elevator: “This is the big time: their entry into the inner sanctum of power. The chance to rub clipboards with power, and

slip out for a mid-conference cigarette with the king of Holland. Make a good impression... and who knows – maybe end up on the board of Royal Dutch Shell.”

Networking for career advancement

Skelton rejected Bilderberg Group's official assertion that the conferences were designed only to “foster dialogue between Europe and North America”, but with “no desired outcome”. The dominance of corporate leaders among Bilderbergers proved that business interests were at play: “The bottom line is that the Titan Cement (total assets: €5.8bn) doesn't send its CEO on a three-day trip from Athens to Dresden on the whimsical off-chance that some dialogue gets fostered. It's about getting a competitive edge.” (The Guardian, 8.6.2016)

Thus, Skelton argued that Bilderberg meetings were more about exchanging insider's information, networking and lobbying. Importantly, businesspeople were not the only Bilderberg participants with pragmatic or cynical motivation: “So what do the politicians and public officials get from the deal? For the more ruthless, it's a chance to line up future employment. We all remember the then head of MI6, Sir John Sawers, networking with the chairman of BP on a Copenhagen patio in 2014. A year later he was sitting on the oil firm's board of directors.”

Brexit as Bilderberg Group's nightmare

Skelton stressed that Bilderbergers were concerned about the prospect of Brexit: “Many of the participants at this year's Bilderberg have spoken out publicly against it. (...) Since it began back in the 1950s, Bilderberg has been pushing for the unity of Europe, and it's not about to stop now.” (The Guardian, 8.6.2016b) Skelton inferred that Bilderberg Group would lobby against Brexit: “Whatever happens in the days leading up to the referendum, you can be sure Bilderberg will be lobbying hard. After all, it's what they do best.”

Yet, in retrospect, this Skelton's claim proved problematic. As we now know, Brexit advocates won the referendum in June 2016 as well as the subsequent general election in 2019. So, obviously, Bilderberg Group's (putative) lobbying was not effective. This indicates that Bilderberg Group is (far) less powerful than many of its critics suggest.

The referendum was staged by David Cameron's government, although Cameron himself attended Bilderberg conference in 2013. It follows that Bilderberg Group's lobbying failed even twice. First, Europhile Bilderbergers could not dissuade Cameron from Euroscepticism, from flirting with the idea of referendum and later, from allowing the referendum to take place. And second, Bilderbergers could not persuade British masses to vote against Brexit in the referendum and in the general election.

TTIP as Bilderberg Group's dream

In 2015, Skelton reported that approximately 500 people took part in the demonstration against Bilderberg conference in Austrian town Telfs-Buchen. He inferred that TTIP must have been debated at that meeting, although the treaty was not directly mentioned on the official list of topics. However, the conclave discussed “globalization” and “current economic issues” and the present businesspeople championed TTIP. Skelton mentioned Carola Lemne (the head of the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise), Carl-Henric Svanberg (chairman of Volvo) and Jacob Wallenberg (the chairman of the industrial conglomerate Investor AB): “Wallenberg and Svanberg, along with five fellow Bilderberg participants, are members of the influential European Round Table of Industrialists. And the ERT is a member of “the European Business Alliance for TTIP”. Layer upon layer of lobbying. And this is still just a fraction of the big business pro-TTIP influence at Bilderberg.” (The Guardian, 14.6.2015)

About Greeks, without Greeks

Skelton stressed that at the Bilderberg conference in 2015, the topic of “Greece” was discussed without “any serving Greek politicians” present. (The Guardian, 12.6.2015) But banks like HSBC, Lazard, Deutsche Bank, Santander, Goldman Sachs, “all of whom have a keen interest in what happens to Greece,” were not missing. In the debate on debt crisis and other economic troubles of Greece also participated British and Dutch ministers of finance George Osborne and Jeroen Dijsselbloem plus member of the executive board of the European Central Bank Benoît Coeuré. Skelton did not say it openly, but it seems that he suggested that if these Bilderbergers agreed on anything, it was certainly not in favor of the suffering Greek population, but in favor of foreign financial institutions and rich northern EU creditor states.

Criminals among Bilderbergers

When reporting on Bilderberg conference in 2015 in Austria, Skelton was harassed by policemen, who undertook deliberately protracted car search and repeated ID checks, as if he was a criminal. And they did it in order to allow real criminals to arrive without confrontation from media. As Skelton put it: "I decided to point out to the officers that while they were treating a journalist like a criminal, there were actual criminals about to arrive at the hotel they were guarding. Convicted criminals. Such as disgraced former CIA boss, David Petraeus, who's just been handed a \$100,000 (£64,000) fine and two years' probation for leaking classified information." (The Guardian, 12.6.2015b) Skelton also mentioned René Benko, "the Austrian real estate baron, who had a conviction for bribery." But Bilderberg organizers did not mind inviting criminals and politicians (including Austrian president Heinz Fischer) did not mind meeting with them.

Bilderberger Cameron

In 2013, Bilderberg conference took place in British town Watford. Nicholas Watt revealed that British Prime Minister David Cameron attended the meeting. (The Guardian, 8.6.2013) Because of Bilderberg, Cameron faced criticism even from his party fellow: "Douglas Carswell, the Tory MP who campaigns for transparency in government, said the prime minister was taking part in a "cliche fest" whose participants had helped crash the global financial system." Cameron's office refused to publish details of the talks.

Watt wrote that "Ministers are usually expected to be accompanied by civil service note-takers when they meet business leaders." Bilderberg conferences are always overcrowded by business leaders. Watt mentioned that the conference in Watford was also attended by British minister of finance George Osborne. Yet, Watt did not ask whether Osborne obeyed the rule and took civil servant with him and if he did, where were the notes of that servant.

Bilderbergers are men

Although without explicit mention of possible conflict of interests, Benn Quinn stressed the problematic nature of private meetings between ministers of finance and corporate bosses. British minister of finance George Osborne as well as the shadow minister of finance Ed Balls

participated at Bilderberg conference in 2013. The same gathering was attended by “heads of Amazon and Google, both of which are under unprecedented political pressure over their companies' aggressive tax avoidance policies.” (The Guardian, 4.6.2013)

Quinn also highlighted the underrepresentation of women (let alone people of color). From approximately 140 participants only 14 were women. Yet, Quinn did not elaborate on this disproportionality, although it would illuminate the continuing all-pervasive male hegemony.

Private meeting co-financed by public money

Skelton criticized the misuse of state resources for the purpose of keeping Bilderberg conclaves nontransparent. In order to isolate it from journalists and concerned citizens, Bilderberg conference in Spain in 2010 was guarded by public-funded police: “For four whole days, a normally tranquil hotel on the Spanish coast was transformed into the Pentagon: riot police, police helicopters, military divers moored offshore, and hundreds of plain clothes officers - a mammoth euros 10m campaign of press exclusion for a "private meeting", all paid for by the already hard-pressed Spanish taxpayer.” (The Guardian, 12.6.2010)

Moreover, Bilderberg gathering in Spain was provocative in another aspect too. It amounted to a demonstration of power (impunity, better to say), because key American Bilderberger was investigated in Spain: “One of the organisers, who sits... on the core steering committee... is Henry Kissinger - still wanted for questioning in Spain over war crimes. Seems the police were pointing their machine guns in the wrong direction.”

Skelton also ridiculed the new PR “damage-control strategy” of Bilderberg Group: “No longer able to deny its existence, Bilderberg has shifted gear: the story they're putting out now is that "nothing goes on", "just some old chaps having a chinwag" - old, insignificant chaps like Jose Zapatero (the Spanish PM), Peter Voser (CEO of Royal Dutch Shell), Paul Volcker (chairman of Obama's economic advisory board)... Josef Ackermann (CEO of Deutsche Bank).”

Coverage of Bilderberg conferences in German daily Die Welt

Die Welt covered almost all Bilderberg conferences from 2010 to 2019 (except those in 2017 and 2018). However, the journal did not offer its own independent reporting, let alone investigation or analysis. Instead, it usually only reproduced descriptive articles from news agencies (German DPA, French AFP, and American AP). Understandably, *Die Welt* focused most on Bilderberg meeting in German city Dresden in 2016.

Cancelled attendance unexplained

In 2019, *Die Welt* published an extremely brief article (just one paragraph) based on probably exclusive revelation that German governing CDU party leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer cancelled her announced attendance at Bilderberg conference in 2019 in Switzerland (Die Welt, 31.5.2019). However, the newspaper did not say a word about the reason of this sudden cancellation that came shortly before the meeting started. Was Kramp-Karrenbauer unexpectedly too busy to travel to Switzerland or was she afraid of negative publicity? Why these intuitive questions were not raised? Similarly, it would be logical to ask Bilderberg organizers how often they face such cancellations and how do they react to them. These investigations could (later) result in longer and more interesting article.

Controversial meeting

Already in April 2016, *Die Welt* disclosed that Bilderberg conference in 2016 would take place in Dresden's Taschenbergpalais from 9 to 12 June (Die Welt, 8.4.2016). Shortly before the start of the conclave, *Die Welt* announced that the city of Dresden imposed a ban on gatherings around the conference venue (Die Welt, 2.6.2016). A week later, *Die Welt* published one-and-half-minute video with scenes of Bilderberg conference site (Die Welt, 9.6.2016). The arrival of black limousine with one Bilderberg participant is seen. Police guarding the conclave was interviewed, but greater space was dedicated to the protestors. One of them spoke on camera, another were shown with their posters that read, for instance, „Why are we not allowed to know anything?“. The title of this video suggests that Bilderberg Group is “information exchange of the mighty” (Infobörse der Mächtigen).

Die Welt further reported that Bilderberg meeting in Dresden would start in the evening with the (collective?) dinner. The newspaper also highlighted the participation of

three key German ministers – those of finance (Wolfgang Schäuble), interior (Thomas de Maizière) and defence (Ursula von der Leyen), all from Angela Merkel's center-right CDU party. Yet, other big names among participants were not mentioned. Plus, the topics of discussions were not specified, instead the vague term „global topics“ was used. (Die Welt, 9.6.2016b)

Already in the title of another article, *Die Welt* stated that Bilderberg meeting in Dresden was controversial (Die Welt, 11.6.2016). The short report summarized the main objections of the critics and Bilderberg Group's own justification. The story focused on the demonstrations against the gathering. The article (taken from German news agency DPA) stated that „only few people“ took part in the protests, which included art project „Pictures against Bilderberg“ (in German language „Bilder gegen Bilderberg“). Part of it was „a poster over 200 meters long painted on the floor“.

Yet, *Die Welt* did not say a word about suppression of media that was experienced and reported by *The Guardian's* journalist Charlie Skelton.

The secrecy of Bilderberg conference in Dresden was criticized by German Green politician Jürgen Trittin (Die Welt, 9.6.2016c). However, *Die Welt* did not recall of what it reported in the past – namely that Trittin himself participated at Bilderberg conference in USA in 2012 (Die Welt, 5.6.2012).

Tame interview with the boss

In 2016, *Die Welt* published DPA interview with the chairman of Bilderberg Group's steering committee Henri de Castries (Die Welt, 7.6.2016). This French businessman and aristocrat was confronted with some tougher questions, but not all that could/should have been raised (but perhaps, the reason was lack of time). De Castries had to defend the secrecy of the discussions, but he was not asked about other problematic aspects of the conferences. For example, about possible lobbying, about Bilderberg Group's influence on European integration or about the fact that dozens of political attendees of Bilderberg gatherings were later elevated to top functions in their homelands or in international organizations like EU, NATO or IMF. Surprisingly, De Castries also did not have to face the question why Bilderberg Group refuses to hold press conferences, although it did this during Cold War. So, on balance, the interview was quite tame and did not reveal much new important information.

Die Welt's publisher among Bilderbergers

Die Welt covered Bilderberg conference in 2015 and highlighted that this meeting was attended also by Mathias Döpfner, the director of the big German publishing house Axel Springer (*Die Welt*, 11.6.2015). This house also publishes *Die Welt*, but this was not recalled in the article. The daily further reported on the planned demonstration and quoted one of few academic experts on Bilderberg, German, sociologist Björn Wendt.

Döpfner also participated at Bilderberg conference in 2014. This was reported by *Die Welt* (30.5.2014), but again without reminder on this newspaper's links to Döpfner.

Freudian slip?

When reporting on Bilderberg conference in 2013, *Die Welt* apparently reproduced article from American news agency AP (*Die Welt*, 7.6.2013). Yet, this article is strange. It claims that „media have no access“ to Bilderberg meeting, which is true only in the sense that Bilderberg Group does not release details of the discussions. However, several representatives of mass media are present at each conference. The problem is that they remain silent about the specific contents of the discussions. So, the truth is very different: media have access, they are always at the conference, but they do not inform their readers what they heard and saw.

The last sentence of the article is even more troubling and could amount to political Freudian slip. It stated that „The conference has an agenda. (but) There is an iron silence about the results.“ Yet, Bilderberg organizers routinely stress that the meetings lead to no results, no agreed action, no recommendations. So, who is misinforming? Bilderberg organizers or renowned news agency?!?

Should politicians go to Bilderberg?

In 2012, *Die Welt* did not cover Bilderberg conference as a whole, but only the controversy around the participation of German politician Jürgen Trittin (*Die Welt*, 5.6.2012). This leader of the opposition left-leaning Greens was criticized for his attendance by some of his party fellows. Yet, Trittin defended his presence at Bilderberg and *Die Welt* wrote that he had no reason to justify himself. Instead, the newspaper congratulated Trittin, because he managed

to appear at important meeting, something that many other German politicians never achieved.

Trittin revealed that he took part at the discussions at the panel „about the crisis of euro and EU“. He insisted that he promoted Green's approaches and that he himself covered the costs of his participation. Plus, Trittin disclosed that he was invited to Bilderberg by Matthias Naß, journalist from *Die Zeit*, German weekly that frequently had its representatives among Bilderberg attendees.

Yet, as repeatedly stressed by *The Guardian*, the dilemma is general: no matter from what party, is it suitable that politicians debate world problems with magnates behind closed doors?

Arrest Bilderbergers?

When reporting on Bilderberg conference in Switzerland in 2011, *Die Welt* published an article of its Swiss colleague Reto Vasella (*Die Welt*, 16.6.2011). He mentioned that the upcoming meeting was sharply opposed by Swiss member of parliament Dominique Baettig. This controversial politician asked Swiss prosecutors to arrest several possible Bilderberg participants for their alleged previous political misdeeds. This threat was directed against US ex-president George W. Bush, but also former US foreign minister Henry Kissinger.

Coverage of Bilderberg conferences in French daily Le Monde

From 2010 to 2021, *Le Monde* covered only two Bilderberg conferences – those in 2018 and 2016. This negligence is even more disturbing, when one also consider the period before 2010. From 1990 to 2010, the newspaper did not publish even one single report on any of 21 Bilderberg conclaves that took place in these years. In several articles from this time, there are cursory general hints to Bilderberg phenomenon, but none of the individual conferences was covered. So, in the whole post-Cold War period from 1990 to 2021, *Le Monde* produced only two articles with Bilderberg as the main topic. This is clearly insufficient and one can hardly escape the conclusion that this silence was intentional (enforced?). In any case, *Le Monde* failed in the mission to inform the public. It cannot be ruled out that this failure might have been caused (also) by Bilderberg connections of some of *Le Monde*'s bosses.

Botched explanation

Le Monde reported on Bilderberg conference in 2018, but not in classical news article, but in a special type of text which is designed to explain some phenomenon (“les articles explicatifs des Décodeurs”). So, the piece mainly repeated general, basic and relatively known facts about Bilderberg – its origins, participants (their selection and composition), topics etc. (*Le Monde*, 8.6.2018)

The authors of the article showed no attempt of investigative journalism or critical approach. They just stated that at Bilderberg, politicians meet businesspeople behind closed doors. But they did not ask the logical question whether such nontransparent gatherings are appropriate.

The text stated that Bilderberg Group alimeted “numerous phantasms”. Yet, it was not added that the club also provoked legitimate criticism, which is not based on mere “phantasms”, but on real dark sides of Bilderberg conclaves. The article mentioned books of conspiracy theorists, but not of serious scholars. In this regard, *Le Monde* failed in its attempt to explain Bilderberg phenomenon.

Moreover, the journal wrote that some participants of Bilderberg conferences are representatives of media. However, the newspaper did not mention that its own editor and CEO attended Bilderberg gatherings. This could imply that *Le Monde* is in potential conflict of interest, when it comes to (unbiased and independent) reporting on Bilderberg.

Left-winger among billionaires

Luc Vinogradoff provided relatively good report on Bilderberg conference in 2016 in Dresden (*Le Monde*, 9.6.2016). He stressed that “nobody really knows what is really happening during the three-day meeting of Bilderberg Group”, because “the only public information is broad discussion topics and the list of participants”.

Vinogradoff quoted Skelton from *The Guardian* and admitted that (contrary to *Le Monde*) this newspaper sent its reporter directly to Dresden. Vinogradoff noticed that most of Bilderberg participants arrived in their private jets. Yet, he named only four out of 130 Bilderberg attendees. Instead, he used general depictions like “head of states and ex-ministers”, “sultans of Silicon Valley”, “captains of industry”. Yet, readers deserve specific

information; it means the names of (the most influential) politicians and businesspeople, who participated at the conclave.

Vinogradoff highlighted one atypical Bilderberg attendee – British left-leaning economist Guy Standing. At Bilderberg, this advocate of the universal basic income will have to sit “among CEOs billionaires and liberal bankers for whom the austerity is still the best option to save the economy”.

Yet, one of the topics of Bilderberg conference in 2016 was the so-called “precariat” – Standing's notion for the new social underclass that suffers most from precarious conditions on labor market. According to Vinogradoff, Standing was invited to Bilderberg to give presentation about precariat to “the rich and powerful”. This is ironic, because these same rich and powerful are those who helped to create precarious labor. Yet, this irony was not explicitly stated by *Le Monde*.

Vinogradoff mentioned the expected protests against Bilderberg. He rephrased the main objection that demonstrators address to Bilderbergers isolated in police-guarded hotel: “If you have nothing to hide, why are you hiding so much?”

Directions for future research

Because of limited space, this chapter reviewed solely articles from 2010 to 2021. Yet, it might be interesting to go deeper in history. One can survey the timespan from the end of Cold War to 2021 or perhaps the whole period between first Bilderberg conference in 1954 and 2021. And of course, the future textual or content analysis should focus not only on newspapers, but also television, radio and internet.

Plus, this chapter encourages research on mass media of the country in which the individual conference took place. For instance, Bilderberg gathering in 2015 was held in Austria, so it would be interesting to see how Austrian mass media reported on the event. One could relatively tolerate if Austrian newspapers neglect reporting on Bilderberg conference in Denmark in 2014. But if they were silent (they were not) on Bilderberg conclave in Austria, then it would be clear betrayal of journalistic principles. The same logic applies for Swiss media (Switzerland hosted Bilderberg in 2019), Italian media (Italy hosted Bilderberg in 2018) etc.

Finally, coverage on Bilderberg from mass media should be compared with content produced by the so-called citizens' journalism. One example of this new type of media is the organization called *We Are Change*. This group of independent journalists, concerned citizens and activists states on its website: "By asking the hard questions the mainstream media refuses to ask, we shine a little more light on truth."

Conclusion

This chapter argues that at first glance, Bilderberg Group has no discursive/ideational power conceived as agenda-setting ability. Compared with other transnational elite clubs, Bilderberg Group has been least capable of visible agenda-setting. Strangely enough, this powerlessness is intentional, since Bilderberg Group never published any study, although WEF, Club of Rome and Trilateral Commission (and ERT) did it repeatedly and with success.

Nonetheless, it is possible that Bilderberg Group has shaped opinion implicitly through those mass media whose representatives (frequently) took part at the conferences. Testing of this hypothesis should become one direction of future research.

Discursive/ideational power revolves also around ability to manage its image or more generally, to gain visibility or invisibility, depending on what the given actor wants. Seen in this light, Bilderberg Group had significant discursive power. The network always preferred low public visibility and for many decades, it could achieve this goal – at the expense of the right to information.

Therefore, the story of Bilderberg Group amounts to a litmus test of press freedom. After decades of silence, Bilderberg is no longer a taboo in Western mass media. Yet, there are still conspicuous differences in the way how this elite network has been portrayed in various mainstream newspapers.

The Guardian proved to be the only real watchdog of democracy, because it provided the most vast and critical material on Bilderberg Group. It is the only journal which systematically produced original content that unveiled all the dark sides of Bilderberg conferences. Namely the space for lobbying, corruption and conflicts of interests, the incomplete and misleading information disseminated by Bilderberg organizers, the media suppression or complicity and the misuse of public funds to pay for the "protection" of these private gatherings.

However, while excellent in reporting, *The Guardian's* specialist on Bilderberg Charlie Skelton was sometimes weaker in argumentative and analytical parts. Some of his strong claims or assumptions were not sufficiently substantiated. Occasionally, he tended to exaggerate (as in the case of Bilderbergers' fear of losing power) and speculate (as in the case of Bilderbergers' alleged capacity to depose presidents) with little or no evidence as support.

Plus, Skelton did not elaborate on some crucial issues. He just mentioned Bilderberg Group's influence on European integration, but did not go into any details. For instance, he never cited sources which suggest that Bilderberg meetings “facilitated creation of the euro” (Richardson – Kakabadse – Kakabadse, 2011: 195).

Die Welt published almost as many articles on Bilderberg as *The Guardian*. Yet, the German journal often just reproduced descriptive reports from news agencies and did not come up with its own reportage, comments, analytical reflections, let alone investigations. Therefore, the content from *Die Welt* is not very thought-provoking.

Nonetheless, the analysis of *Die Welt* yields important counterintuitive findings. It shows that this right-wing newspaper provided much better coverage on Bilderberg than left-wing *Le Monde*. This fact challenges the presupposition that left-wing journals are more likely to report on Bilderberg, because right-wingers are generally not so alarmed, when it comes to elitism and meetings between politicians and businessmen. More importantly, the case of *Die Welt* undermines another stereotype. Critics and conspiracy theorists believed that silence of media about Bilderberg was caused by ties between Bilderberg and media bosses. Yet, *Die Welt* produced many articles on Bilderberg, although the newspaper is published by the media house Axel Springer, whose CEO Mathias Döpfner is member of Bilderberg Group's steering committee.

Le Monde's coverage of Bilderberg conferences is the worst, in terms of both quantity and quality of the articles. This is surprising, because one would expect that left-leaning *Le Monde* could report on Bilderberg similarly extensively (and critically) as left-leaning *The Guardian*. Most importantly, one would expect that leading French newspaper should pay more attention to conclaves chaired by influential French businessman and aristocrat Henri de Castries.

Finally, all journals surveyed in this paper failed to notice that in the last two years, no Bilderberg meeting took place. This amounts to remarkable anomaly, because it is interruption of decades-long tradition of one conference per year. Such break should have been covered in at least short report. The cancellation of Bilderberg conferences in 2020 and 2021 suggest that the whole forum has uncertain future and could perhaps end its very existence.

Final comments on power and capital

Discursive/ideational power is represented mainly by epistemic communities with huge amounts of cultural capital, but not exclusively. This type of power is the prerogative of all actors who win in the struggle over ideas/words/symbols and their meanings/connotations and who have biggest influence on selection and flow of information.

It might seem counterintuitive, but discursive power can often be best traced by identifying things that are *not* part of the official/mainstream/legitimate discourse. For instance, we are not commonly talking about exploitation, although this topic must be interesting for most people (as employees). Hence, discursive/ideational power is important pillar of the whole neoliberal hegemony. Discursive/ideational power underpins the three consensus outlined in chapter 2, especially the market consensus.

Politicians and celebrities want to be part of the discourse, because for them, public visibility is the currency and sign of power or significance. Yet, other relevant actors manifest their power in opposite way – by remaining relatively invisible. This is the case of all behind-the-scenes-players, from PR agencies to lobbyists, from private elite clubs to secret services. Or hedge funds as the one owned by prominent Bilderberger Henry Kravis.

There can be various (mis)uses of discursive power. But it is always about marginalizing or tabooing certain topics and thus, in the end, about distorting discourses and perceptions. For example, especially in Czech public discourse, the notion “neo-Marxism” is commonly and deliberately associated only with (caricatured) cultural wars, not with focus on (transnational) capitalist class and class struggle from above (Azzellini, 2021; Smith, 2020).

Big discursive power is by-product of economic capital of media owners, many of whom have connections to Bilderberg network. Media managers plus opinion-makers with

privileged access to media have also big discursive power. This type of power operates mainly as influence on what content is disseminated. It could be that some media bosses with ties to Bilderberg Group discouraged, suppressed or manipulated reporting on Bilderberg Group. However, this chapter found that Bilderberg conferences were covered also by newspapers with links to Bilderberg Group.

Yet, discursive power shapes not only media content, but also scholarly publications. For several decades, Bilderberg Group was invisible not only in mass media, but also in mainstream academia. There are legions of books and articles on transnational non-state actors – and EU – but hardly any contain some information on Bilderberg Group (or other similar elite clubs). In the first place, decision to ignore something is intentional. Then the silence can reproduce itself more or less automatically.

Conclusion

Bilderberg Group as a Mirror

Summary of the chapters and overall scholarly contribution of the dissertation

To various extents, this dissertation has added value for International Relations, (political) sociology and media studies, mainly on empirical, but also on theoretical level.

The chapter 1 highlights the continuing relevance of sometimes overlooked neo-Marxism, which provides the theoretical framing of the dissertation. It shows that neo-Marxist approaches have much in common with feminism and even (neo)liberalism, which is normally seen as a competing school of thought. At the same time, the chapter admits that neo-Marxist rhetoric occasionally resembles some features of conspiracy theories.

The chapter argues that globalization has become the new grand theme of virtually all social sciences. It supports the uncommon view that globalization is an elite-driven phenomenon. Therefore, global elite should be at the center of scholarly investigations. In this context, the chapter concludes that neo-Marxism is best equipped to address the topic of global elite. The reason lies in the virtues of neo-Marxist concept of transnational capitalist class (TCC). The review of the literature on TCC is probably the most thorough one, because it also includes less known authors. The chapter stresses that neo-Marxists are the only academics who relatively systematically study transnational elite clubs. Origins of the TCC theory dates back to Stephen Gill's pioneering analysis of Trilateral Commission.

In chapter 2, the TCC theory is directly applied to Bilderberg Group. The chapter (the article in which it was translated) is the first academic publication that thoroughly exploited data from the recently launched official Bilderberg Group's website. On this basis, it provides new reliable empirical findings – quantitative and qualitative insights into the locations and durations of seven Bilderberg Group meetings, composition of the attendees and topics of their discussions. Against this background, the general goals of the involved Euro-American TCC are tentatively deduced.

On theoretical level, the chapter offers further support for the thesis that some kind of TCC has developed, which is disputed even by several neo-Marxists, let alone other scholars. Specifically, the chapter argues that findings on Bilderberg Group corroborate the

existence of Euro-Atlantic TCC. Within this elite social network, the European fraction seems to be the most consolidated one. This conclusion is supported by four observations: 1) most Bilderbergers are Europeans, 2) most members of Bilderberg Group's steering committee (22 out of 34) are Europeans, 3) all post-cold War chairmen of Bilderberg Group conferences were Europeans and 4) most conferences took place in Europe.

The chapter 3 provides the first academic multifaceted estimate of post-Cold War power and intentions of Bilderberg Group. It came to balanced conclusions, namely that Bilderberg Group was and continues to be influential, but its power decreases.

The chapter surveyed two areas of which Bilderberg Group cares most – European integration and transatlantic ties. In 1990s, Bilderberg Group contributed to the creation of European monetary union, which counts as sign of influence. However, recently, the club has been powerless vis-à-vis Brexit, which is a blow to European integration project.

At the same time, Bilderbergers could not ensure the success of negotiations on TTIP, which would deepen the transatlantic bond, in its economic as well as geopolitical dimension. This is another sign of the decline of Bilderberg Group's power.

In addition, Bilderberg Group seems to be extremely weak in agenda-setting, especially when compared to other transnational elite clubs, namely World Economic Forum, Trilateral Commission and Club of Rome.

On the other hand, the chapter also found correlations suggesting that affiliation with Bilderberg Group has been positively associated with appointments to leading international institutions. This is one important area where Bilderberg Group continues to be influential. Such conclusion has also practical value, because it can serve as a basis for predictions. If someone appears at Bilderberg conference, it is more likely that he will get promoted in the future. This dissertation is the first scholarly investigation that underpins this claim with extensive empirical dataset. Some of the tables with names are in chapter 3, but the bigger part had to be included in separate chapter 4. This section elaborates more thoroughly on the research question whether, or to what extent, Bilderberg Group serves as career elevator.

The tables provide chronological or sequence evidence. Specifically, they show that there are dozens of mainly European politicians who *first* attended Bilderberg conference(s) and *later* became key ministers, prime ministers, presidents or top officials in international

organizations. Yet, this is true of only a small portion of all political participants. The majority of involved politicians have not achieved any considerable elevation. So the invitation to Bilderberg Group does not guarantee future career advancement.

Still, many big names belong to the group of politicians, who got promoted after their appearance at Bilderberg conference(s). Examples include both right-wing and left-wing politicians like Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, Stephen Harper, Pedro Sánchez, Alfred Gusenbauer, Stefan Löfven, Antonio Guterres, Jose Manuel Barroso, Ursula von der Leyen, Charles Michel, Christine Lagarde, Kristalina Georgieva, Jens Stoltenberg, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, Paul Wolfowitz, Robert Zoellick, Pascal Lamy.

However, the chapter 4 discerned big difference between national and international politics. For Bilderbergers, the second one is easier to influence or even manipulate. Though indirect, there are indicia that “factor Bilderberg” has some impact on nominations to international institutions. The current president of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen attended Bilderberg conferences prior to her appointment. The same is true for the current general secretary of NATO Jens Stoltenberg, the current general secretary of UN Antonio Guterres and the current managing director of IMF Kristalina Georgieva. Other current or former high officials of EU, NATO, IMF, World Bank or WTO also appeared at Bilderberg conference(s) before they were appointed.

Basically, there are two possible – and not mutually exclusive – ways how “factor Bilderberg” could have helped in at least some of these career successes. The relatively innocent way can be summarized as simple social capital enhancement. The problematic way revolves around patronization and lobbying.

Top officials of Western-rooted international institutions are installed by politicians, not voters. Therefore, powerful representatives of Western-rooted Bilderberg Group can relatively easily intervene in the selection processes in favor of their club's fellows. This claim is supported by two examples.

First is Vernon Jordan, the former US member of Bilderberg Group' steering committee. Jordan meddled in the nomination process of president of World Bank and helped secure that another Bilderberger James Wolfensohn was appointed to this influential function. Second example is José Manuel Barroso, the current Portugal member of

Bilderberg Group' steering committee. Barroso lobbied for the candidacy of another Bilderberger Kristalina Georgieva to the post of UN General-Secretary. Additional indicia supporting the argument in chapter 4 are provided by Herman Van Rompuy's dinner with leading Bilderbergers Etienne Davignon and Henry Kissinger.

However, active interference is probably often not necessary. It is likely that in many cases, Bilderbergers are elevated simply due to their qualities and perhaps also because the others know of their extraordinary contacts (and backing). By participation at Bilderberg conference(s), politicians enhance their social capital and prestige. This increases the chance that their colleagues will choose Bilderbergers for some top jobs. The reason is not (so) conspiratorial, but rather sociological and psychological: attendees of Bilderberg meetings already demonstrated that they have access to important decision makers from both private and public sector. Successful networking with “high society” is always a welcome asset. The well-connected individuals are more likely to be respected and obeyed. This makes them more suitable candidates for leading positions. So it was probably in this sense that contacts cultivated at Bilderberg conferences helped von der Leyen in her unexpected appointment to the presidency of European Commission.

Indications on Bilderberg Group' influence in national politics are much weaker. True, there are deputies or mayors who *first* attended Bilderberg conference(s) and *later* became key ministers, prime ministers or presidents. But these career jumps were mostly the result of national elections or other endogenous factors. Still, in some instances, Bilderbergers appointed their club's fellows in governmental posts, as was the case of Manuel Valls, Emmanuel Macron and Édouard Philippe. From this French trio, most suspicious is the rapid elevation of Philippe. He participated at Bilderberg conference in 2016 as mere mayor, but already next year – under new president Macron – Philippe became prime minister.

Chapter 5 provides the hitherto most thorough review of mass media coverage of Bilderberg Group. Until 2010, mainstream Western press did not report on Bilderberg conferences. In recent decade, the elite network is no longer taboo, but attention dedicated to it varies across different newspapers.

The chapter undertook basic textual analysis of articles on Bilderberg that were published from 2010 to 2021 in three opinion-shaping European dailies – British *The Guardian*, French *Le Monde* and German *Die Welt*. The conclusion is that in terms of quantity

as well as quality of the articles, *The Guardian* stands out as the best source on Bilderberg, while *Le Monde* scored – surprisingly – as the worst.

The Guardian turns out to be the only journal which produced extensive and original content that exposed all the problematic aspects of Bilderberg conclaves. *Le Monde* published solely two articles on Bilderberg, although the meetings were chaired by French business heavy weight Henri de Castries. *Die Welt* covered almost all Bilderberg gatherings; regardless of the fact that the newspaper's publisher Mathias Döpfner is himself frequent Bilderberg attendee and even member of Bilderberg Group's steering committee. This finding contradicts the claim that mass media were/are silent on Bilderberg because of involvement of media bosses in Bilderberg network.

Bilderberg Group and the broader picture

Bilderberg Group is interesting not only as an isolated phenomenon. In a sense, it is a mirror of global trends. Specifically, the changing composition of the club's attendees can be seen as an indicator of broader geopolitical and socioeconomic shifts.

Take for instance the incorporation of participants from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), including four Czechs (Michael Zantovsky, Jiri Pehe, Karel Kovanda, Karel Schwarzenberg). This expansion of Bilderberg Group paralleled the post-Cold War transitions to democracy – and capitalism – in the post-communist region and its rapprochement with and final inclusion in EU and NATO.

Yet, Bilderberg Group's steering committee was not opened to newcomers from post-communist countries. The only exception is the Polish ex-minister Radoslaw Sikorski. But he lived in Britain for many years and has an American wife (the famous intellectual Anne Applebaum, who also attended Bilderberg conferences), so he is not a typical representative of post-communist region. This is another proof that on the societal level, CEE elites are not really integrated into Western networks, which implies that CEE countries are still not regular part of Western structures. In this connection, noteworthy is also the fact that no CEE state was chosen to host any of post-Cold War Bilderberg Group's conference.

Put differently, as compared to other transnational elite clubs, Bilderberg Group remains the most westernized one. Nonetheless, even Bilderbergers occasionally invite

Chinese representatives, albeit in microscopic numbers. As Peking's role on world stage increases, Bilderberg Group too has to adjust at least a little bit.

Bilderberg Group as corroboration of Marxism

Bilderberg Group mirrors the global power shift from organized labor to organized capital. At the beginnings of the conferences, Bilderberg Group's steering committee invited also trade unionists, albeit in small numbers. After the defeat of communist threat in 1989, trade unionists started to disappear and at recent Bilderberg conferences, none of them were present. The virtually only exception is the conference in 2017, where two trade unionists (Frank Bsirske from Germany and Andrew Stern from USA) took part.

The exclusion of trade unionists is not the only sign of the dominance of capital. It can also be seen on the selection of chairmen. In almost all Bilderberg Group's conferences, (former) politicians used to be the chairmen (Dutch prince Bernhard, British PM Alec Douglas-Home, German president Walter Scheel, NATO's secretary general Peter Carrington, EU commissioner Etienne Davignon). But in 2012, Davignon was replaced by Henri de Castries, director of finance giant AXA.

Businesspeople also prevailed quantitatively. In 1950s, politicians, diplomats and other government officials formed the biggest part of Bilderberg participants. Now, there are more attendees from private sector as documented in chapter 2. All these findings are in line with neo-Marxist theory, which stresses the structural dominance of capital and which sees Bilderberg Group as one of the forums of TCC.

Bilderberg Group as challenge to Marxism

The dissertation also revealed limitations of neo-Marxism. As shown in chapter 1, many neo-Marxists attribute significant power to TCC. The interests of TCC are portrayed as a driving force behind many processes, including economic integration and foreign policy.

Yet, Brexit and TTIP's failure seriously challenge such claims. In both cases, business interests did not prove to be the most powerful one. Big business (and by extension, Bilderberg Group) opposed Brexit, but could not stop it. The same big business (and by extension, Bilderberg Group) championed TTIP, but could not push it through.

This powerlessness of TCC is even more puzzling, if we look at politicians who bear responsibility for Brexit and TTIP's stalemate. Paradoxically, Brexit has been a flagship of Conservatives, right-wing party, which is by definition supposed to side with business. TTIP was “killed” by Trump, a billionaire right-winger with some overseas business interests and European ancestry, who was expected to be a tribune of corporate agendas.

Hence, neo-Marxists face a tough and embarrassing question: How does it come that neither Conservatives nor Trump acted as “agents of capital”? More generally, is TCC really so cohesive and/or powerful?

As to Bilderberg Group, the question is similar: why has this club been unable to preserve the deeply embedded and seemingly irresistible consensus among Euro-Atlantic elites? Brexit and TTIP's failure undermined all three types of consensus outlined in chapter 2 – the internationalist (globalist), the pro-integration and the pro-free-market/free-trade consensus. Ironically, in case of TTIP, the backlash to economic globalization came from the USA, which profited from globalization disproportionately.

Trump did not attend any Bilderberg conference and it is not clear why. He was probably never invited. But it is also possible that he declined the (hypothetical) invitation. In any case, Trump's collaborators participated at Bilderberg conferences, especially at the conference in 2017, which took place in US Chantilly. This gathering was attended by three Trump's men – the secretary of commerce Wilbur Ross, the national security advisor Herbert McMaster and the assistant to the president for strategic initiatives Christopher Liddell. Moreover, Trump's relative and advisor Jared Kushner appeared at Bilderberg meeting in 2019. Plus, the billionaire investor and Trump's supporter and advisor Peter Thiel is member of Bilderberg Group's steering committee. Even if only via these people, Bilderbergers had “channels” for communication with Trump. Yet, they obviously could not persuade him to change the more protectionist and isolationist White House policies.

General theoretical contribution of the thesis

On the most general level, theoretical contribution of this dissertation may lie in the very fact that it highlights the significance of the concept of transnational capitalist class (TCC). Authoritative overviews of IR theories usually contain chapters on (neo-)Marxism, but these chapters often do not include any information on the debate on TCC (Burchill et al., 2005:

110-136). Surprisingly, TCC is not at all discussed even in some overviews of Marxist research agendas, which is the case of the monumental *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism* (Bidet – Kouvelakis, 2008).

The chapter 1 omitted (neo-)realist IR theory, but this school of thought can also enter into productive dialogue with neo-Marxist accounts of TCC. This dialogue might extend and refine influential (neo-)realist versions of alliance theory (Walt, 1987; Snyder, 1990). In this theory, (neo-)realists focus mainly on (external) factors like the nature of international system, geography, states' national (foreign policy) interests, configurations of (military) power and “balance of threat”. This is legitimate and makes perfect sense from (neo-)realist point of view, but neo-Marxist perspective could add new dimension. To put it simply: the concept of Euro-Atlantic TCC suggests that Euro-Atlantic alliance is not only based on states' calculations and power and balancing logic, but also on (strong) social connections on the level of (not only) elites. Also for this reason, Euro-Atlantic alliance might endure even if external conditions significantly change. In this light, one should read the ties between NATO and Bilderberg Group.

Fairbrother (2014) evaluated two competing theoretical explanations of the rise of (neoliberal) globalization. According to his interpretation, one stream sees businesspeople as the primary agents of globalization, while the other emphasizes the role of (right-wing) economists/technocrats. Importantly, the concept of TCC (in Sklair's variant) can subsume both these groups under one heading. Businesspeople as well as economists are fractions of one same class that is behind the triumph of global capitalism. As Fairbrother recognizes, in some countries (the developed one), businesspeople were the key driver of proglobalization changes, while in other countries (the developing one), the initiative was primarily in the hands of economists/technocrats. So, in different places, different types of power/capital stood at the beginning of the process. But at the end of various pathways, there always emerged globalized capitalism that prioritizes economic capital/power.

Contribution of the thesis to debate on power and capital

Existing neo-Marxist research on (US) elite networks seeks to “add to a better understanding of how the power of elites is linked to the power of states, or how public power is connected to private power.” (van Apeldoorn – de Graaff, 2016: 4) This thesis has similar ambition,

especially in chapter 3. But each chapter adds something to debate on power by outlining workings of different form of power and capital. Or perhaps more: the relative primacy of one specific power and capital in certain domain.

Neo-Marxists emphasize the role (primacy) of economic capital. There are good reasons for this prioritization. Economic capital is the most stable as well as easily convertible type of capital. Economic capital can relatively smoothly translate into direct or indirect political power. On the contrary, politicians who have only political power can be and are often deposed or forced to resign. Social capital may quickly decrease or even disappear if its possessor loses reputation (as happened to former prominent Bilderberger Conrad Black), so others no longer want to be connected with him. But ownership of productive assets is “eternal” (unless some communist revolution wins, which is extremely unlikely) and can be easily transmitted to other generations.

In other words, politicians gain and lose offices – usually in short timespans that rarely exceed two decades. In contrast, company owners can manage their entrepreneurial empires for the whole life. So, in the long-term macro-social perspective, Swedish PMs Fredrik Reinfeldt or Stefan Löfven are mere episodes, whereas Swedish magnate Jacob Wallenberg (his family) is constant element. Therefore, it is not surprising that (Marcus) Wallenberg is member of Bilderberg Group's steering committee, whereas Reinfeldt or Löfven never belonged to this exclusive inner circle of power (although they participated at Bilderberg conferences as documented in chapter 4). The same can be said about other magnates and prominent Bilderbergers like (Giovanni) Agnelli from Italy, (David) Rockefeller from U.S. or (Ömer Mehmet) Koç from Turkey.

Despite of this, it is a shortcoming that social capital is relatively overlooked by neo-Marxists and also in all studies on Bilderberg Group and TCC. So another theoretical contribution of this dissertation may lie in chapter 4, which highlights the role of social capital. TCC theory is not directly applied in this chapter, since proponents of TCC do not elaborate on how members of the elite help each other in professional life. But research in this direction can provide further evidence of the cohesion of TCC and common interests of its members.

Last but not least, social capital seems to be the key for understanding why someone was (repeatedly) invited to Bilderberg conference(s). Among the attendees, there are also

ex-politicians, who no longer have political power. Participants also include businesspeople not as wealthy as some other magnates, who never appeared at any Bilderberg conclave (e.g. Koch brothers). This strongly suggests that it is primarily social – not economic or political (let alone cultural) – capital what opens door into Bilderberg Group (and other similar elite networks). So, if elites from post-communist Europe want to be invited more often (and not in small numbers), they must enhance their social capital.

Here, it should be stressed that analysis on Bilderbergers and “revolving door” relates to important “snow-ball” and “spill-over” effects in capital accumulation. Once someone has one type of capital (ideally economic), it is easier for him to acquire other forms of capital. Obviously, wealthy individuals have fewer problems to finance their education (cultural capital) and to gain contacts among influential people (social capital).

The TCC theory was not directly applied in chapter 5, because proponents of TCC do not explore media contents. Nonetheless, this chapter has also some broader theoretical connotations. It suggests that important part of the overall power of (not only) TCC is the ideational/discursive power. This form of power can (try to) secure that information about sensitive issues (e. g. private elite clubs and (semi-)secret societies, class struggle and contradictions of capitalism, background of 9/11 and "deep politics" in general) do not fully penetrate into public debate, but remain on its margins. Thus, the chapter highlighted one relatively overlooked manifestation of power – the ability to become invisible. For several decades, Bilderberg Group managed to stay under the radar. However, this has changed as the review of media coverage demonstrated.

Summary of policy and public relevance of the dissertation

Last but not least, the present dissertation can also have positive political and social impact, since it weakens the appeal of conspiracy theories. So far, Bilderberg Group has been (mis)analyzed mainly by conspiracy theorists, who claimed that the topic was tabooed (or whitewashed) in mainstream academia and media. The very existence of this dissertation proves the opposite. In other words, the balanced and nuanced approach of this thesis can help to cultivate debate on Bilderberg Group and by extension, hopefully, on other controversial and sensitive issues. These include, for instance, the challenging of the official

version of the 9/11 attacks (Hughes, 2020) and inferring that coronavirus probably leaked from Chinese (bio-warfare?) laboratory (Wade, 2021).

Final remarks: rethinking conspiracy theories

Combating conspiracy theories will not be effective, unless everyone takes these approaches seriously – as one possible hypothesis, that deserves honest testing, not automatic rejection. True, most conspiracy theories cannot be proved, but at the same time, they are often not totally implausible. One has to be prepared to admit that some conspiracy theories might have at least grains of truth. The problem of conspiracy theories is that they combine these grains with speculations, exaggerations and distortions (or outright lies) or that they demonize things that need not be necessarily (so) bad.

Conspiracy theories about Bilderberg Group are perfect case to illustrate this point. These theories usually revolve around the accusation that Bilderbergers want to establish (totalitarian) one world government. Yet, even respected *Encyclopaedia Britannica* concedes that among many other topics, the idea of one world government was really discussed at Bilderberg. The issue was raised by Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who at that time served as director of IMF: “In 2010, at the Bilderberg Conference (...) Strauss-Kahn controversially proposed to attendants the introduction of a global currency backed by a global central bank.” (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Dominique-Strauss-Kahn>) Of course, central banks are state's institutions, so if a global central bank should emerge, some sort of global (one-world) government would have to be established as well.

However, this evidence supporting conspiracy theories (“grains of truth”) should not be overestimated. It is probable that Strauss-Kahn's proposal did not receive much approval. After all, Bilderbergers are primarily capitalists and global capitalism seems to need the current state system. According to Rodrik (2017), “The nation-state remains the best foundation for capitalism,” because “When it comes to providing the arrangements that markets rely on, the nation-state remains the only effective actor”. Plus, in the absence of common global state, capitalists can play one state off another during the (“race to the bottom”) competition (“bidding wars”) to attract investments (Oman, 2000: 10). In any case, 12 years after the incriminated Bilderberg conference, there are no signs that any global central bank is arising.

More principally, one should not panic that the idea of one-world government is discussed among politicians and businesspeople. Before, it has been debated among academics (Wendt, 2003; Craig, 2008) and nobody demonized this scholarship. It is possible that one-world government is bad (and even dangerous) idea, but the discussion about it is legitimate and has long tradition. And like it or not, intensifying globalization inevitably puts this question on the table – in one way or another.

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