

Global Populisms and Their Impact

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Post-communist Europe is both an example of the rise of populism, and perhaps a harbinger of a broader wave of populist influence on governments. In Poland and Hungary, populist parties are governing and dismantling the formal institutions of liberal democracy. In Slovakia and Bulgaria, populist rhetoric has permeated political discourse. Populist parties are also surging in popularity. In post-communist Europe, they have more than doubled their support, from an average of about 15% in the early 1990s to 35% by 2015.¹ In the more developed democracies of western Europe, populist parties that had around 5% support in 1970 now enjoy over 15% on average.

I argue that rather than analyzing “populism” per se, we should recognize that it takes different forms. Once elected, however, populists tend to enact their promises. As a result, populism everywhere poses a danger to liberal democracy—and it has actively corroded democratic institutions once its adherents are in office. If populism is defined as an anti-elite movement that expresses the general will of an organic and wholesome “people,” three deeply worrying implications follow immediately. First, the people have to be defined. Such definition necessitates the exclusion of some groups. In practice, this often means that specific (and often already vulnerable) ethnic, religious, or economic groups are left outside the boundary. The result is a populist conception of democracy as majority rule without minority rights. Second, those who disagree with a populist representation of “the people” are obviously not the “real” nation. The opposition (whether elite or popular) is thus by definition treasonous and treacherous. Third, precisely because popular rule is seen as unmediated and direct, populists hold a strong anti-institutional predisposition. This bias undermines the *formal* rules of the game. It further

1. To code parties as populist, I rely on both the parties’ stated programmatic and campaign commitments, and previous codings of parties as populist or unorthodox. See: Kevin Deegan-Krause and Tim Haughton, “Towards a More Useful Conceptualization of Populism: Types and Degrees of Populist Appeals in the Case of Slovakia,” *Politics and Policy* 37, no. 4 (August, 2009): 821–41; Tim Haughton, “Driver, Conductor, or Fellow Passenger? EU Membership and Party Politics in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 25, no. 4 (November 2009): 413–26; Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (September 2004): 542–63; Grigore Pop-Eleches, “Throwing out the Bums: Protest Voting and Unorthodox Parties after Communism,” *World Politics* 62, no. 2 (April 2010): 221–60; Lenka Bustikova, “Revenge of the Radical Right,” *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no. 12 (October 2014): 1738–65. I include all parties that claim to speak in the name of the people or the nation against a corrupt elite, including those that do so in the name of redefining the nation more narrowly (nationalist and some right-wing radical parties) and in the name of rejecting the existing liberal market and political model. Populist parties thus have elective affinities with protest parties: “nonorthodox” and “anti-establishment” parties, and their shared desire to “throw the bums out.” This coding is broader than right-wing extremist parties that are both highly socially conservative and highly nationalistic and narrower than “unorthodox” parties.

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erodes the *informal* norms of transparency, accountability, and deference to precedent that underlie democratic rule.

Another shared appeal of populism and populist parties is the dismissal of “elites” as corrupt, amoral, and self-serving. Such elites include other politicians, top government officials, central bankers, the media, and the “chattering classes.” Such elites, according to populists, are distant from the concerns of “real” people and cannot understand, represent, or address the people’s needs. The result is an emphasis on the division between a popular, positively-valued “us” and a corrupt, elite “them.”² Many politicians resort to this sort of elite differentiation: that they, unlike the rest, feel the people’s pain and can respond to it. The repeated invocation of a corrupt and monolithic popular elite, however, both further delegitimizes democratic legislatures and judiciaries—and lays the foundation for undermining the formal institutions.

Populisms, not Populism

Populism is a contested concept partly because there is no one populist template. Populism has taken on different forms across both historical and geographical contexts. For example, in Latin America, left-wing populism sought redistribution and state control of the economy. In southeast Asia (Thailand and Philippines), it has taken the form of a backlash against perceived corruption and disorder. In post-communist east central Europe, in contrast, it is generally a right-wing populism that seeks to protect these countries from what are seen as the twin cultural and political external threats of immigration and EU regulations.

That said, the most recent populist upsurge shares some common roots. The first of these is the impact of *technology*. In the short-term, technology has served as the instrument to both network political actors and obtain access to domestic politics for international hackers. Social media allows politicians to mobilize their constituencies directly, bypassing the traditional media that also serves as a check on political ambitions and behavior. In the longer term, the automatization of many routine tasks (ranging from truck transport to radiological reviews) will create even further disturbance in the labor market, creating millions of un- or under-employed workers whose economic anxieties and lack of prospects makes them attractive targets for populist ideology.

Less clear is the role of the recent economic crises of 2008 or 2011. The new post-communist EU members were far less affected than the rest of the EU by the crisis (the rate of GDP growth *increased* in the new member countries between 2002 and 2012, even as it dropped among the older members.) Conversely, populists gained support in countries largely unaffected by the crisis (Finland), and did not always arise where the crisis was severe, as in

2. Margaret Canovan, “Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy,” *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (March, 1999): 2–16; see also Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist”; Paul A. Taggart, *Populism* (Buckingham, Eng., 2000); Ben Stanley, “The Thin Ideology of Populism,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 1 (January 2008): 95–110; and Kurt Weyland, “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics,” *Comparative Politics* 39, no. 1 (October 2001): 1–22.

Ireland or Portugal. Moreover, we do not see a spike in the post-2011 elections in populist support. SMER (Direction—Social Democracy) in Slovakia won the 2012 elections, but so did the liberal PO (Civic Platform) in Poland in 2011. Finally, the electoral ascendancy of many populists predates the economic crisis. Indeed, in some countries, such as Poland, Belgium, Denmark, or Norway, populist parties *lost* electoral support in 2011–13. This is not to say that the economic crisis had no effect: but its impact is neither consistent across countries, nor does it explain the greater support for populists in the new member countries.

A second aspect is the perceived failure of *elite competition*, and specifically, of the center-Left, the traditional representatives of vulnerable classes and sectors. The center-Left has made two controversial moves: first, starting in the 1990s it pursued “third way” economic policies. These left trade unions behind and created an elite consensus on the desirability of international economic integration with far less focus on those harmed. Second, the center-Left has focused on identity politics that, in their critics’ eyes, privilege increasingly rarefied group demands at the expense of a uniting language of equal rights and opportunities for all.

A third set of shared characteristics in the recent populist upsurge is their focus on *sovereignty, identity, and immigration*. One salient aspect of populist rhetoric in Europe, for example, is the critique of EU regulations as taking away national sovereignty and failing to respect local cultural and political specificities. Electoral data shows that populists sharply gained ground in European countries as European integration took off, with another peak when the negotiations over the post-communist expansion began. Another catalyst for European populists has been the rise in immigration. When immigrants came to Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, they did so from and to specific countries. The numbers were limited by the host countries (whether Algerians in France or Turks in Germany), and citizenship rights were generally limited. Immigration in the 21st century has come in multinational waves, and individual countries have been less able to manage it using the same tools that had worked earlier. EU integration here has meant greater labor mobility (not just immigration from outside of the EU, but within: an estimated 1 million Poles live in the UK), and a far greater backlash against a perceived impotence of domestic governments to manage and control this immigration.

Critically, these threads interact. For example, technological changes have led to a transformation of the labor market—and the easy scapegoating of immigrants as the beneficiaries. In another example, the rise of social media has made fake news and direct communication with supporters the basis for the mobilization of supporters—and a channel for influence by, and coordination among, international actors.

Populists as Rulers

Once in office, populists tend to do two things: they fulfill their campaign promises, and they tend to retain the controversial commitments that brought them into power in the first place. There is little evidence of a “moderation-inclusion” mechanism that would curb populists once in office.

First, populist promises are not empty ones. Thus, promises of a crack-down on drug use (Philippines), financial support for families with children (Poland), new constraints on immigration (the United States), strong law and order initiatives, a new relationship with Russia, and new energy policies (Hungary) are all enacted. This is especially the case with highly salient and controversial policies that gained the parties support in the first place. When it comes to the nitty gritty of less noticeable and more complex policies, such as economic policy, populists tend to broadly continue the policies of their predecessors and to respect the obligations of international alliances.³ The prominent fulfilment of popular promises means that populist support can be surprisingly resilient: for example, despite enormous international and domestic criticism, the Polish PiS (Law and Justice Party) maintains a steady 35–38% in public opinion polls.⁴ Yet precisely because these policies are often enacted with little consideration for the rule of law or for formal institutions, they have corrosive effects. Among the most dangerous of populism's consequences are its erosion of *formal* democratic rules and liberal institutions. These destructive effects of populist rule include the takeover and taming of formal institutions designed to protect the rule of law and liberal democracy (for example, the takeover by the ruling party of the Constitutional Courts in Poland and Hungary), and the imposition of new legal constraints that undermine liberal norms (such as constitutional changes, limiting the freedom of the media, and financing of only loyal NGOs). These legal and formal maneuvers have been used to undermine the opposition's legal standing as well as limit criticism, transparency, and accountability.

Just as importantly, however, such governments have also made a point of undermining *informal* democratic norms, including conflict of interest laws, financial transparency, respect for the opposition, access and accountability to the media, and preventing party loyalty from becoming the basis for the awarding of tenders, contracts, and government responsibilities. Here the damage may go deeper and be far less reversible: such norms and informal rules are the product of decades of elite and popular interactions and the shaping of expectations that govern political behavior. Once such trust and consensus disappear, they do not return easily.

The most egregious case of populist undermining of democracy took place in Hungary, as exquisitely documented by Kim Lane Scheppele.⁵ Fidesz began to transform the political and legal institutions of Hungary once it won

3. Ivan Krastev, "The Strange Death of the Liberal Consensus," *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 4 (October 2007): 56–63; György Gyulai, 2013. "Fico's Slovakia: The Force Restrained," *Hungarian Review* 4, no. 2 (March 2013): 37–47, especially 38, also at http://hungarianreview.com/article/ficos_slovakia_the_force_restrained (last accessed April 25, 2017).

4. The same cannot be said for Fidesz: its failure to resolve the economic woes of Hungary has meant its standing in public opinion polls has dropped over time.

5. Kim Lane Scheppele, *New York Times*, December 19, 2011, at <https://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/19/hungarys-constitutional-revolution/>; March 9, 2012, at <https://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/10/first-lets-pick-all-the-judges/>; March 11, 2013, at <https://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/12/guest-post-the-fog-of-amendment/>; and February 29, 2014, at <https://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/02/28/hungary-an-election-in-question-part-2/> (all last accessed April 25, 2017).

in 1998, only to gut them after its return to office in 2010 with a precise and fundamental transformation of political institutions. To review the familiar and depressing litany: a new, self-serving Constitution was passed in 2011 by the Fidesz-dominated parliament, which included extensive supermajority requirements, and created a power structure for establishing autonomous bodies that could “curtail the parliament’s powers,” in the words of the Venice Commission.⁶ The Constitutional Court was gutted (with the 4th amendment to the new Constitution invalidating the past 20 years of judicial precedent), new early retirement ages for judges introduced (which would force the retirement of 300 of the most experienced jurists within the year, according to the Venice Commission Report), and judicial appointments centralized (with the final decision left to one official—the wife of a party leader of Fidesz). Universities and religious groups were brought under control with registration and other requirements, a new media law gave the media board the power to bankrupt any media outlet, new electoral laws skewed the playing field to the governing party (with cumbersome electoral thresholds, constraints on diaspora votes, and changes in the districting and registration laws), and so on. In a blatantly self-serving move, the ruling party ensured its potential to blackmail future governments: decisions concerning budgets and other parliamentary laws could not pass without a 2/3 majority, ensuring that Fidesz could hold hostage future governments even if in the opposition. EU criticism of these moves was denounced by the government and used as evidence of its Hungarian nationalist credentials.

Poland after 2015 has followed the Hungarian template in both sequence and targeted institutions. Having gained an absolute majority for the first time, the Law and Justice Party (PiS) began first with a controversy over the Constitutional Court: the new government refused to seat judges nominated by the previous, and instead insisted both on naming the replacements and curtailing the power of the Court. PiS then attacked the media, with directors of the public TV and radio stations and critical journalists being fired and replaced. Its leaders then announced a civil service purge that would verify at least 2,000 civil servants for their loyalty and ideological identification. True to its electoral promises, the party passed a law that gave around \$125 per child to each family, and pursued a tightening of an already very strict abortion law. Most recently, in February 2017, the PiS government announced it would transform the electoral districts of metropolitan Warsaw, long a stronghold of the liberal PO opposition, and enlarge it by adding the much more pro-government suburbs, thus diluting the power of the opposition.

In both Poland and in Hungary, the populist turn has also meant revising history in the name of rebuilding a more legitimate regime, which also serves to eliminate swathes of opponents from political life. Thus in Poland, PiS attempted to introduce a “fourth republic” that would eliminate traces of the elite cartel (“układ”) between former Solidarity and former communist

6. European Commission For Democracy Through Law (Venice Commission of the Council of Europe), *Opinion on the New Constitution of Hungary*, 87th Plenary Session (Venice, 17–18 June 2011), 1–29, here 19, at [http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD\(2011\)016-e](http://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/default.aspx?pdffile=CDL-AD(2011)016-e) (last accessed April 25, 2017).

parties that PiS claimed was a self-serving, anti-Polish, liberal-communist-criminal mafia, and which happened to encompass PiS's political opponent. To that end, PiS passed a lustration law in 2006 that made all public officials subject to scrutiny. Only individuals born after August 1, 1972 were exempt, a threshold driven apparently by a fear of teenagers collaborating with the secret services of the communist government as it crumbled. The law allowed duly-elected officials to be recalled by appointed officials, and instituted a principle of retroactive justice.⁷ PiS further tried to direct and use the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), founded in 1998–99, to investigate and memorialize the victims of both fascist and communist era crimes.

In Hungary, the 2012 Constitution proclaimed the 1949 Communist Constitution invalid, which not only gave grounds for ignoring Constitutional precedent, but made a political statement regarding all those who participated in the communist system. The Orban government also opened the House of Terror in 2002, a memorial to the victims of “both the Nazi and the Communist terror,” whose exhibits graphically equate the Fascists with the communists, both as illegitimate, foreign regimes of terror. This move implicated the MSzP, the successor to the Hungarian Communist Party that had reinvented itself as a moderate social democratic party, thus conveniently undermining it as the chief competitor for Fidesz. By equating Fascism with communism, and insisting that both were foreign impositions, the historical project both ignores Hungarian home-grown communists and fascists (and the responsibility for them), delegitimizes opponents, and brackets decades of Hungarian history. In a more direct move, Fidesz proposed an amendment that would hold the MSzP (as the successor to the communist party) responsible for the crimes of the communist era, and in effect outlaw its main competitor. It would also establish a National Memorial Commission, a la the Polish National Institute of Remembrance, to investigate the “functioning of the communist system, and the role of individuals and organizations holding the powers of the communist regime.”⁸ In short, populists are both sincere in their policy promises and are ready to consolidate their power by undermining both formal institutions and informal norms.

Populism is on the rise in both post-communist eastern Europe and across the developed democracies of western Europe and the United States. Even as they take different forms and have different goals, these movements share in common a worrying suspicion of the formal institutions of liberal democracy, a skepticism regarding broader definitions of nation and citizen, and above all, a distrust of political elites that claim to represent interests and cleavages. Once in office, as Poland and Hungary show, populists enact their campaign promises, eroding the very democracy that brought them to power in the first place.

7. Krzysztof Jasiewicz, “The Political-party Landscape,” *Journal of Democracy* 18, no. 4 (October 2007): 26–33, here 31.

8. “Transitional Acts of Hungary’s Basic Law” December 2011, at <http://lapa.princeton.edu/hosteddocs/hungary/The%20Transitional%20Acts%20--%20Constitutional%20Addendum.pdf> (last accessed April 25, 2017).