

THE GLOBAL RISE OF POPULISM



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Across the world, populism has become a prominent feature of the political landscape. In Europe, an anti-immigrant backlash against the 2015 migrant crisis helped fuel the rise of far-right, nationalist parties whose leaders often adopt a populist style. The Brexit referendum in 2016 appeared to be the highwater mark of the populist wave, but in Eastern and Southern Europe, and even in Scandinavia, populist parties continue to either govern or enjoy widespread popularity. In the U.S., Donald Trump used a populist style of politics, complete with demonizing immigrants and Muslims, to win the 2016 presidential election. Since taking office, his willingness to upend democratic norms has raised fears about the prospects for America's democracy. And in Asia, leaders like Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi have alarmed observers with their willingness to exploit populist appeals, even at the risk of provoking violence against vulnerable populations. This report provides a comprehensive look at the rise of populism and its implications for liberal democracies.



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Editor's Note All time references are relative to each article's publish date, indicated at the top of the article.

HISTORY'S POSTSCRIPT: THE POPULIST THREAT TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

JAN-WERNER MULLER | DECEMBER 2014

A quarter-century ago, a virtually unknown State Department official [published an article in a neoconservative policy journal](#). The title of the piece as well as its author would go on to acquire global fame—or perhaps notoriety. Critics did not hesitate to dismiss Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History?" Strobe Talbott, for instance, [called it](#) "the beginning of nonsense."

Yet the article, and the subsequent book that grew out of it, was often misinterpreted and misconstrued. Contrary to what has often been alleged, Fukuyama had not predicted anything like the end of all conflict. Rather, he had asserted that only liberal democracy was capable of fulfilling basic human aspirations for freedom and dignity. This claim has not been so obviously disproven today. The few self-proclaimed ideological alternatives to democracy, whether the Chinese Dream articulated by Chinese leader Xi Jinping or the Eurasianism of Russian President Vladimir Putin, do not exercise anything like the global attraction that fascism and communism enjoyed during the 20th century.

But this does not mean that all is well with the state of democracy. Democracy has a serious rival today that actually lays claim to many of the values democrats themselves endorse: populism.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, populism is not simply a matter of irresponsible policies or appeals to the downtrodden. Populism is an anti-elitist but, crucially, also an anti-pluralist form of politics. And despite the optimistic notions of many liberals,



No:632872.43 Date:26.02.2012 Credit:ALFRED/SIPA

ABOVE France's far right presidential candidate and National Front party president Marine Le Pen attends a political rally in Chateauroux, France, Feb. 26, 2012 (Sipa via AP Images).

populist parties are not just protest parties that always prove incapable of governing. Populist regimes have recently been consolidated in Hungary, Turkey and to some degree Russia, among other countries. These regimes are often supported by what political observers since Aristotle have liked to think of as the social backbone of democracies: the rising middle class. Fukuyama himself recently **affirmed the belief** that “middle-class societies . . . are the bedrock of democracy,” but they can just as easily be the bedrock of populism.

Populist rabble-rousers today rely on middle classes who increasingly feel like—and are portrayed as—threatened minorities. Less obviously, populist regimes try to create their own middle class and equate it with the “true” people as such. These regimes typically weaken checks and balances, colonize the state, crush independent civil society and almost always prove highly corrupt. But all of the above tactics, even corruption,

can be presented as benefiting a regime's protected middle class, and hence do not obviously discredit a populist government.

There is much confusion in public debate about what exactly populism is. This essay will offer a definition of populism and argue that populist regimes have their own coherence and even moral attractiveness for some middle classes, which liberal democrats had better understand if they want to effectively combat their most important challenger today.

What Is Populism?

Scholars have long found it difficult to agree on what populism is. The difficulties have been compounded by the fact that the word has meant very different things in different countries. In the United States, the term retains vaguely left-wing or progressive connotations: It originated in the late 19th century, when farmers started protesting against the political and financial elites of the Gilded Age, eventually forming the "People's Party." Many observers still think that populism must be "popular" in the sense of favoring the least advantaged—a sense that is reinforced by a glance at Latin America, where the advocates of populism have always stressed its inclusionary character in the context of what remains the most economically unequal region in the world.

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In Europe, on the other hand, populism has long had an exclusively bad name: It is seen as a synonym for xenophobia and associated with the extreme right. Especially today, elites are eager to tag their opponents as populists. To be sure, some of those labeled as populists, such as French National Front leader Marine Le Pen and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, have gone on the counterattack. They have proudly claimed the label for

themselves with the argument that, if populism means being for, and working for, the people, then they are indeed populists.

So it is difficult to tell from historical associations or present-day political labels who is and who is not a populist. Unfortunately, some commonly invoked, more objective-sounding criteria for identifying populists do not work either. Many observers think they can pinpoint populism by way of a particular, clearly identifiable class base, such as the petty bourgeoisie, the working classes or, more generally, the supposed “losers” of modernization or globalization. Empirical studies **do not bear out this picture**. Parties generally considered populist often have voters who do fit this sociological profile, but in many other cases they do not. Sometimes it is precisely the newly successful who adopt a social Darwinist worldview and treat less successful citizens as inherently inferior—or as not properly belonging to the polity at all. Supporters of populism are also not necessarily less educated, although they **tend to be overwhelmingly male**, at least in Europe.

Another common view of populism is that its supporters exhibit a distinct psychological profile. Populists are supposedly driven by resentment, by anxieties about a loss of status or even by paranoia. As with the sociological account, however, there is little empirical evidence to support the notion that resentment is an exclusive property of populism. Moreover, the psychological perspective tends to confirm the view of populists themselves, who often complain that, rather than taking their political claims seriously, liberal observers treat populism as a pathology. Liberals, it then seems, don't feel the need to understand what populists want; they only wish to get to the bottom of how populists feel.

Then there is the common claim that populism is characterized by obviously irresponsible and simplistic policies that pander to the public's short-term desires. For example, last year Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro **sent soldiers into electronics stores** to remove price tags with supposedly inflated

prices and replace them with lower ones, an inflation-fighting measure that even economists with deep sympathy for the Venezuelan masses probably would not endorse. Or consider former Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's **ill-fated rice subsidy scheme**, which gave government money directly to poor farmers but badly damaged Thailand's export economy. Still, there exist no clear-cut, objective criteria for distinguishing between responsible and irresponsible policies. Therefore, such a distinction cannot be used to clearly identify political actors as populists.

So what, then, is populism? Populism is a moralistic conception of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that opposes a morally pure and fully unified people against corrupt or in some other sense immoral elites. There is no populism without anti-elitism, but not every anti-elitist is a populist. In addition to being against existing elites, populists must also be anti-pluralists. Every genuine populist claims that they, and only they, can properly represent the real people, and that all other political contenders are essentially illegitimate. By implication, to oppose populists amounts to an implicit admission that one is corrupt oneself or does not belong to the people at all.

Consider Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who, after having been chosen by his Justice and Development Party as its presidential candidate this summer, **challenged his critics thus**: "We are the People—who are you?" The logic of populism is not a claim to represent the 99 percent; by casting opponents as inherently alien, it claims to represent the 100 percent. That logic is sometimes apparent even in the names populist parties give themselves, such as Thailand's Party for Thais or Finland's True Finns, which recently renamed itself as simply "The Finns," as if to bring out the exclusive claims to authentic representation of the people even more clearly.

Populists need a way to distinguish the moral and the immoral, the pure and the corrupt. “Work” often serves as precisely that distinction. In the U.S., for instance, one slogan deployed by the populist Tea Party proclaimed: “Redistribute my work ethic!” Often, right-wing populists pit the “hard-working folk” not only against self-serving elites, but also against the very bottom of society—those who are portrayed as not working but instead living off those who do. Right-wing populists typically construe an unhealthy coalition between the elite that does not really belong and marginal groups that do not really belong either.

In the U.S., such populists rail against both liberal elites and racial minorities, while in Central and Eastern Europe, the targets are left-liberal elites and ethnic groups such as the Roma—both of whom are also supposedly supported by an illegitimate outside power, the European Union. In Italy, “communists” and illegal immigrants are the enemy, according to the rhetoric of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and the Northern League. The controversy over U.S. President Barack Obama’s birth certificate made this logic almost absurdly literal: In the eyes of the “birthers,” the president is in fact a usurping foreigner, someone who does not belong and who has appropriated the office under false pretexts.

It is a mistake to think that populists advocate for more direct political participation. They do not have a problem with representation; they simply think that they are the only legitimate representatives of the real people. Behind this claim stands the further assumption that the people themselves have one common will that genuinely aims at the common good, and that in turn can be identified and implemented by the supposed one authentic leader of the people. Thus, as long as populists are in charge, the people can stay passive.

Erdogan, for instance, this year **campaigns with the slogan** “National Will, National Power.” During Berlusconi’s reign in Italy, the image of the ideal Berlusconi supporter was someone

seated comfortably at home, watching TV and leaving matters of state to the so-called Cavaliere, who would competently administer the country like a very large company. Then there is Orbán's government in Hungary, which in 2011 crafted a new, supposedly authentic national constitution after a sham process of "national consultation" by questionnaire, but felt no need to put that constitution to popular referendum.

In fact, populists almost never empirically verify the actual will of the people. When they are in opposition, they invoke a mystical "silent majority" that cannot express itself at the polls. Claims about what the silent majority truly wants cannot, by definition, be tested through regular democratic procedures. After all, the real people either dare not speak or are forced into silence by the elites who fail to represent them. This anti-pluralism and reliance on a notion of the people beyond existing democratic procedures also explains why populists so frequently refuse to recognize the legitimacy of an election when it is not in their favor and instead oppose the "morally correct" result that should have occurred to the actual empirical outcome.

Orbán, after losing the 2002 Hungarian elections, **claimed**, "The nation cannot be in opposition," thereby equating his party with the nation. In Mexico, left-wing candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador **argued after his failed bid for the presidency** in 2006 that "the victory of the right is morally impossible," and went on to declare himself "the legitimate president of Mexico." And Erdoğan, in the face of empirical evidence that Turkish citizens were protesting against his policies in Istanbul's Gezi Park last year, insisted that the protesters did not belong to the Turkish people.

Populism in Power

Conventional wisdom has it that populist parties are primarily protest parties and unable to govern, since one cannot protest

against oneself. While populist parties do indeed protest against elites, this does not mean that populism in power will necessarily become self-undermining. First of all, populists can still blame their failures in government on elites acting behind the scenes, whether at home or abroad, so protest can continue even when populists are nominally in charge. Less obviously, populists almost always adopt the same governing style: what political scientists call mass clientelism, or offering material benefits in exchange for political loyalty.

For instance, the late Jorg Haider, who led Austria's far-right Freedom Party, **would literally hand out €100 bills** to "his people" on the street. Of course, many parties reward their supporters. The difference is that populists can do so in perfect harmony with their belief that only some of the people—namely, their supporters—are actually the authentic people and hence deserving of benefits like welfare, or even just decent government. The same thought underlies the emergence of what scholars call "discriminatory legalism"—**summarized as "for my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law"**—in populist regimes. The crucial point is that populists can engage in mass clientelism and discriminatory legalism with a clean moral conscience. After all, the genuine people are deserving of benefits and the proper rule of law, and under populists, only the genuine people receive them. Given that populism is, above all, a moral conception of politics, it is supremely important for populists not to lose the moral high ground in the eyes of their supporters.

The claim to exclusive moral representation also explains why populist parties tend to colonize the state itself—again, justified by reasoning drawn from within the moral universe of populism and hence, again, with a clean moral conscience and continuous moral appeal to their supporters. If only one party truly represents the people, it follows that for the state to become the instrument of the people, state offices, and in particular the judiciary, must be filled with actors loyal to that

party. At the same time, it is not an accident that populist regimes tend to restrict media freedom and attack the last remnants of independent civil society. After all, an active oppositional society would contradict the claim that the regime exhaustively represents the people.

It is only logical that Putin and Orban, to take two examples, routinely accuse oppositional civil society of being dominated by “foreign agents.” The implication is that what looks like civil society is actually a foreign body, and what seems like a legitimate opposition in fact does not belong to the people at all. Populists might even end up creating the pure, politically homogeneous but initially fictitious people in whose name they had been acting all along, as their systematically intimidated opponents either fall silent or just leave the country. This has in fact been the case in both Russia and Hungary, from which, according to some estimates, around 500,000 citizens **have emigrated** in the past few years. Populists’ claim to exclusively represent the people then becomes something like a self-fulfilling prophecy: Once abroad, their opponents no longer count as part of the people.

Populism in power, then, will mean the appropriation of the state apparatus by political actors who, even in the face of persistent opposition, speak in the name of the whole. Notice the irony here: Populism in power always brings about, or at least reinforces, that which it most opposes and of which it habitually accuses established elites while populists are in opposition—exclusion of some parts of the population and the usurpation of the state. Yet none of these abuses of power, not even proven cases of corruption, will necessarily hurt their core support among the electorate. Populist capitalism is just another form of crony capitalism, but it is perceived as corruption and cronyism in the cause of a moral “us” and against an immoral or even foreign “them.” Hence it is a pious

hope for liberals to think that all they have to do is expose corruption to discredit populists.

Populism: The Challenge for Democracy

Populists are necessarily against liberal checks and balances, minority rights and other standard elements of the rule of law, because, at best, their view of politics has no need for these features, and at worst, these elements supposedly obstruct the expression of the genuine popular will. Confusion arises, however, when populist leaders like the Dutch politician Geert Wilders or France's Marine Le Pen evoke seemingly liberal-sounding values such as freedom of choice or tolerance in their habitual attacks on Muslims. But as the Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde has pointed out, here liberal values essentially become nationalist values: They serve only to exclude. Liberal, ostensibly universalist rhetoric serves to extract the real people from the merely empirical people.

Populism is the major challenge to liberal democracy today. It is not a full-fledged political doctrine—Fukuyama is still right that no major ideological rival to democracy has emerged. But populism is dangerous precisely because it can look like a better way to implement core democratic principles such as popular sovereignty. Populists have a major advantage in building up continuous support, as they can engage in mass clientelism with a clean conscience. They can create their own middle class—dependent on the state, but also with a self-conception as hard-working, proper citizens, as opposed to the critics from abroad and the lazy underclass at home.

In a more recent work, "[Political Order and Political Decay](#)," Fukuyama has argued, "When the middle class constitutes only 20-30 percent of the population, it may side with antidemocratic forces because it fears the intentions of the large mass of poor people below it and the populist policies

they may pursue.” However, the middle class, even if it is very large, can itself become populist, not in the inclusionary or redistributive sense that Fukuyama employs here, but in the sense of citizens supporting representatives who appropriate the state in the name of a supposedly pure, hard-working people. This can be seen in the Anatolian middle class that has risen with Erdogan and in what are sometimes called the “urban villagers” in Thailand who generally supported Thaksin Shinawatra.

Populism, while not a doctrine, is a coherent proposition. Liberal democrats should stop assuming that populism will necessarily self-destruct because of irresponsible policies or some inevitable backlash from civil society. Instead, the first task for those who hope to thwart populism should be to work toward the very goals typically espoused by populists when they are still outsiders seeking power: an inclusive political system in which no voices are completely silenced. Liberals should also be willing to admit that sometimes anti-elitist rhetoric by populists might be very much justified. It is hard to deny, for instance, that there really have been self-serving oligarchies in Latin America; or that a military-monarchical complex in Thailand excluded many parts of the rural population; or that some of Orban’s predecessors in Hungary were perhaps a tad immoral and irresponsible; or that the old Kemalist Turkey was maybe not a perfect liberal democracy. But none of this legitimizes populist regimes that break with democracy altogether.

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DEMOCRACY DISMANTLED: WHY THE POPULIST THREAT IS REAL AND SERIOUS

ERICA FRANTZ | MARCH 2017

U.S. President Donald Trump campaigned as an outsider candidate, though under the banner of the Republican Party. His message was decidedly populist and continues to be: He alone can save the country from the challenges it faces; the elite and traditional establishment are dangerous and corrupt; the mainstream media cannot be trusted; and other tropes commonly used by populists.

America's election of a president promoting this type of message has led many experts on authoritarian politics to draw parallels between what's happening in the United States, a country with well-established and robust democratic institutions, and developments seen in authoritarian settings. After all, research indicates that democracy is weakened if it relies on the leadership of a single individual, as opposed to democratic institutions; if contestation is personality-driven, rather than structured by political parties; and if voters do not have access to reliable information via an independent media. A flurry of observers and pundits have therefore begun to question whether the U.S. is in the process of democratic backsliding or even has the potential to move toward autocracy in the years to come.

Trump's election is not an isolated occurrence. All over Europe, where democratic rule is the norm and has been for decades, populist candidates and parties have sprung to power in recent years, raising concerns of an authoritarian slide. Populist parties on the left and right now govern parliaments in

Greece, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Switzerland and are part of governing coalitions in Finland, Norway and Lithuania. In France, Germany and the Netherlands, far-right parties promoting xenophobic rhetoric are slated to make gains this spring, or have at least dominated campaign seasons with their fiery rhetoric that claims to salvage national identity. Though in recent years Europe's democracies have mostly proven resilient to the threat posed by populism, in a few places, such as Hungary and Poland, populist figures have been elected, leading to significant declines in respect for democratic principles, from press freedoms to judicial independence.

The challenge populism poses to democracy is perhaps more pressing in the developing world, given the shorter history of democratic rule relative to advanced Western democracies. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte won free and fair elections on a populist platform in 2016, at one point suggesting during his campaign that he would abolish Congress should he be elected. Since he took office, human rights in the Philippines have deteriorated rapidly, largely through an aggressive and brutal crackdown on drugs that has killed thousands of civilians and drawn international condemnation; the country is now one of the world's most dangerous for journalists. In the eyes of many, after [six years under a reform-minded president](#), the Philippines is now on the verge of a transition to dictatorship.

How do democracies old and new unravel, and what strategies do would-be autocrats use in the process? So-called authoritarianizations—transitions to dictatorships where democratically elected leaders dismantle democratic institutions to seize power—are becoming the dominant mode of democratic collapse, with populist platforms serving as a springboard to manipulate democratically won authority. This global trend is giving rise to the most dangerous form of authoritarian rule: personalist dictatorship, in which power is highly concentrated in the hands of a single strongman, with disregard for pre-existing institutions.



ABOVE Supporters of U.S. President Donald Trump gather during a rally, Denver, Colorado, March 4, 2017 (AP photo by Brennan Linsley).

How Democracies Fall Apart

While the descent into authoritarianism is hardly new, its current iteration differs from the autocratic slides that punctuated the 20th century. Chile offers one useful case study. In September 1973, with the backing of the United States, Chilean troops staged a coup d'état against then-President Salvador Allende, who came to power in

democratic elections in 1970. The Chilean military surrounded the presidential palace where Allende had retreated, and continued to attack it until he took his own life rather than be taken prisoner. The coup propelled Gen. Augusto Pinochet and a military junta into power, ushering in a long period of military rule that lasted until 1989.

The collapse of democratic Chile in 1973 is typical of the demise of democracies during the Cold War. A military coup was the dominant tool of choice for toppling democracies, and the transition to autocratic rule was generally abrupt and obvious.

Contrast that with the recent experience of Venezuela, another country in Latin America with a long tradition of democratic rule. Hugo Chavez secured the presidency in 1999, after winning democratic elections the previous year. Though Chavez initiated a number of controversial reforms, he won free and fair elections again in 2000, and Venezuela remained a democracy, albeit a flawed one, in the years that followed.

Between August 2004 and December 2005, however, Chavez slowly pushed Venezuela over the threshold to dictatorship. In August 2004, when the opposition amassed enough signatures to trigger a recall referendum, Chavez won the vote, which was deemed free and fair by international observers. He then began consolidating power. The Chavez-dominated parliament immediately passed legislation increasing the size of the

HOW DO DEMOCRACIES OLD AND NEW UNRAVEL, AND WHAT STRATEGIES DO WOULD-BE AUTOCRATS USE IN THE PROCESS?

Supreme Court and allowing the dismissal of judges by a majority vote. By the end of 2004, Chavez loyalists fully controlled the Supreme Court, and judges who opposed him in lower courts were rapidly replaced with regime allies. In addition, the government published a list of tens of thousands of individuals who had signed recall petitions, who were subsequently dismissed from public employment and other jobs or lost access to welfare benefits.

Venezuela's media faced new laws constraining reporting, and the government launched a campaign to intimidate "anti-revolutionaries." This crackdown, coupled with the widespread belief that the contest would be biased, led five opposition parties to boycott the election. Election observers noted the government's manipulation of the media, as well as an excessive troop presence at polling stations on Election Day. Chavistas, as his movement and followers were known, won all seats in the parliament, and Chavez further consolidated power in the years that followed, leading to a period of strongman rule that continues today, as Venezuela descends deeper into economic and political chaos.

The demise of Venezuela's democracy was slow and incremental. Identifying the specific date of the transition to autocracy is difficult and debated, due to the subtle way in which it occurred. The experience of Venezuela is not unusual today; on the contrary, it is illustrative of the way in which contemporary dictatorships gain control.

Data on authoritarian regimes show that coups were the primary threats to democracy for much of the post-World War II period. From 1946 to 1999, 64 percent of democracies **collapsed via coup**. But that started to change in the 21st century. From 2000 to 2010, authoritarianizations increased dramatically, representing 40 percent of all democratic breakdowns— equal in frequency to coups. With authoritarianizations occurring in the past few years in places

such as Bangladesh and Turkey, all signs point to this trend continuing. A shift is underway in how democracies transition to dictatorship, with authoritarianizations on track to outpace coups as the dominant mode of exit for falling democracies.

Authoritarianizations differ from most other forms of democratic breakdown, such as coups, revolts or foreign invasions, because they are takeovers of power carried out from within the state apparatus. Incumbent governments leverage their access to the instruments of power to consolidate control and stifle dissent. Compared to coups, which require careful planning and coordination, they are far less risky. About half of all coups fail, and the consequences of failure are typically severe. Authoritarianizations, by contrast, are relatively easy to execute. They typically involve a series of changes in rules and personnel that create a political environment in which opposition groups can no longer compete effectively.

Unlike other modes of democratic collapse, authoritarianizations **do not usher in a change in leadership** following the transition to dictatorship. This is important because most autocratic seizures of power are motivated by a desire to redirect resources from the previous ruling group toward its successor. With authoritarianizations, potential dictators often make efforts to protect incumbent interests and lash out against any moves to siphon resources away from them.

Occasionally, authoritarianizations are abrupt, such as with former Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori's "autogolpe"—Spanish for self-coup—in 1992. Fujimori won democratic elections in 1990, but seized unconstitutional powers and closed Congress and the Ministry of Justice two years later, initiating a period of authoritarian leadership. More typically, however, authoritarianizations involve subtle and multipronged strategies, such as the sequence of events that occurred under Chavez in Venezuela. Authoritarianizations therefore also differ from most other forms of democratic collapse because they are

often slow and incremental. Populism is now being used as a launching pad for such efforts.

The Populist Pathway

Populist rhetoric typically hits on a number of points: the need for strong and decisive leadership, the inability of established institutions and policies to deal with a country's problems, and distrust of—and, often, allegations of corruption against—experts and elites. The general message is no different today than it was in decades past when populism took hold across many parts of Latin America and Europe, often with destabilizing and deadly consequences.

At the same time, the strategies of today's populists have changed in important ways. Specifically, their method for consolidating power is no longer a quick and clean break from democracy, which can incite condemnation at home and abroad, but rather a subtle chipping away at democratic institutions. This method has become preferable in the post-Cold War political climate not only because the West now often rewards advocates of political liberalization and punishes countries experiencing coups, but also because increasing acceptance of the liberal democratic model among citizens worldwide has put pressure on governments to maintain the façade of democracy or risk losing their legitimacy.

Take the rise to power of strongmen like Chavez, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. These leaders took office through relatively free and fair elections, but once there, they leveraged widespread popular discontent to slowly undermine institutional constraints on their power, weaken opposition to their rule, and marginalize and splinter civil society. They shared a common populist playbook: place loyalists and allies in high positions in government, particularly in the judiciary and security services; censor or seize control of the traditional media and selectively

TODAY'S POPULISM IS GIVING RISE TO THE MOST DANGEROUS FORM OF DICTATORSHIP: PERSONALIST RULE.

arrest critical journalists; and use lawsuits and new legislation to sideline civil society and vocal opponents of their rule. Each of these tactics is subtle, but together they accumulate to generate an environment favorable to the government's consolidation of power and hostile to the mobilization of opposition. As a result,

today's populist-fueled authoritarianizations are giving rise to the most dangerous form of dictatorship: personalist rule.

One of the central tenets of the populist platform is the need for strong leadership in a political environment where established institutions are perceived as inept and unable to deal with pressing problems. Among today's populists, a strongman theme commonly underlies such campaigns. For this reason, when populist governments take action to implement their visions, leaders consolidate control in the executive; in Trump's case, for example, the traditionally influential State Department has been seemingly sidelined from decision-making.

The data support this. Evidence indicates that populist-driven authoritarianizations are increasingly propelling to power personalist dictatorships. Just under half—44 percent—of authoritarianizations from 1946 to 1999 led to personalist rule, but this portion increased to 75 percent in the period from 2000 to 2010. This is a dramatic rise. Yet, even where today's populist strongmen have not fully dismantled democratic systems, they frequently enjoy lopsided political power, as evidenced by Nicaragua under Daniel Ortega, Ecuador under Rafael Correa, Hungary under Viktor Orban and Poland under Jaroslaw Kaczynski.

This trend is troublesome because of the dangerous consequences of personalist rule. A large body of literature in political science suggests that personalist dictatorship is the most problematic type of autocracy. They are the most likely to pursue aggressive and erratic foreign policy agendas; to fight wars against

democracies; to initiate interstate conflicts; and to invest in nuclear weapons. Notorious examples include Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Idi Amin of Uganda, and the Kim family in North Korea. Moreover, personalist dictators often give voice to xenophobic sentiments and are the most likely to mismanage foreign aid. Among dictatorships, personalist regimes are the least likely to democratize. The proliferation of personalist rule emerging from populist-fueled authoritarianizations therefore spells trouble for democracy.

What's Next?

There are a number of underlying conditions that lend themselves to public support for populist candidates and parties. These include rising economic inequalities; perceptions of economic underperformance; frustrations with globalization, immigration and the influx of refugees that has increased amid instability in the Middle East and Africa; and the belief that the traditional political establishment is corrupt and inept.

There are few indications that these conditions are likely to change anytime soon. It is very possible that we will see a greater number of democracies backslide toward dictatorship via populist-fueled authoritarianization in the years to come.

Pushing back on the strategies populists pursue to consolidate power once elected to lead democracies, however, is often difficult. Common tactics include placing loyalists and allies in key positions of power, regardless of their competence; muzzling the traditional media and using alternative outlets to promote government propaganda; and using lawsuits and new legislation to target civil society and the opposition. Often, there is no single dramatic event that mobilizes a broad-based movement to counteract the government. Instead what occurs is an incremental erosion of democratic norms and institutions, generating only fragmented and small-scale efforts to oppose it.

Trump's actions since taking office are consistent with this playbook. He has installed close allies in his Cabinet, exhibiting

a preference for loyalty over government experience. He has lashed out against the mainstream media and barred traditional outlets from attending a press briefing, opting instead to use Twitter as a platform for disseminating his message. And he has challenged the legitimacy of efforts to oppose him, even alleging that his predecessor, Barack Obama, is behind protests against his presidency.

A long history of uninterrupted democratic rule, coupled with higher levels of economic development, is associated with a lower risk of a slide into dictatorship. As a result, democracies in the developed world, such as the United States and those across Europe, are likely to emerge from the populist wave more brittle, but intact. Their baseline risk of transitioning to dictatorship is lower than those of developing countries. But their propensity to backslide is not negligible.

A crisis, whether domestic or international, could easily set the stage for a more serious and damaging dismantling of democracies on behalf of incumbent populist governments. One need look no further than Turkey for a chilling example of this. Erdogan, who became president in 2014 and was prime minister for over a decade prior, had already engaged in a number of subtle maneuvers to consolidate control, including pressing for a stronger presidency, cracking down on the media, and misusing state resources for his own benefit. But after a failed coup attempt in July 2016, he seized the opportunity to more seriously target his opponents.

He immediately **declared a state of emergency**, in order “to remove swiftly all the elements of the terrorist organization involved in the coup attempt.” In the weeks thereafter, tens of thousands of Turks suspected of participating in the coup were arrested. Thousands of government officials were fired, and scores of media outlets were closed,

BELOW Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro delivers a state-of-the-nation address beside a poster of the late President Hugo Chavez. Caracas, Venezuela, Jan. 21, 2015 (AP photo by Ariana Cubillos).



building on a **legacy of a muzzled and partisan press** that Erdogan has taken to new heights. By the end of 2016, it is estimated that 37,000 people were arrested and 100,000 lost their jobs or were suspended from work. Such numbers are staggering.

In April, Turks **will vote “yes” or “no”** on a package of constitutional reforms that would create an executive presidency, institutionalizing the grasp on power Erdogan has accumulated over the course of his rule.

As the example from Turkey illustrates, would-be autocrats can use crisis events to initiate extensive crackdowns on opponents, simply by justifying such efforts as being in the interest of national security. Should crises occur in other populist-led democracies, it is possible that similar events would transpire.

A Real and Serious Challenge

The world has seen a wave of populist movements gain steam in recent years, in political contexts ranging from the Philippines to Poland. The evidence suggests that proponents of global democracy should take notice.

Events in countries such as Turkey and Venezuela illustrate how populist campaigns in long-standing democracies can be used as platforms for authoritarianization and the erosion of democratic norms and institutions. They also show how such processes can give rise to strongman rule, the most dangerous form of authoritarian government.

The challenges populism poses for global democracy are real and serious. A first step toward more effectively mitigating this threat, however, is identifying what is happening—and how—and why it matters.

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THE RISE OF IDENTITY POPULISM IS MAKING THE WORLD MORE DANGEROUS

STEVEN METZ | NOVEMBER 2018

A powerful wave of populism is sweeping the world, enveloping not only places like Latin America, where it has long held sway, but also Europe, North America and parts of Asia. Few experts saw this coming, and no one knows what its ultimate repercussions will be. But if historical patterns hold, this kind of populism, fueled by strident nationalism, may increase the chances of armed conflict both within and between nations. Much is at stake.

Populism is hardly new; it can be traced back as far as ancient Greece and Rome. It is simply a political strategy in which a leader builds a power base on marginalized or disempowered segments of society. To make this work, populist leaders implement policies and reforms that advantage the marginalized at the expense of the elite—or at least the parts of the elite that oppose them. Populism is intentionally disruptive, even revolutionary, as it challenges the status quo and undercuts the existing distribution of power and wealth.

Populism comes in several variants. Economic populism mobilizes the poor or working class against economic elites in pursuit of a more equitable distribution of wealth and concentrates political power in the hands of the populist leader. Its modern incarnation emerged in 19th-century America, and it has ebbed and flowed since then, especially across Latin America, where today economic populism, on top of an increasingly authoritarian government, has embroiled Venezuela in crisis. Another variant of populism is based on inclusivity,

IDENTITY POPULISM MAY INCREASE THE CHANCES OF ARMED CONFLICT BOTH BETWEEN COUNTRIES AND WITHIN NATIONAL BORDERS

seeking to bring politically marginalized groups more into the mainstream, as seen in the civil rights movement in America in the 1960s and the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa in the 1980s.

The populism growing in Europe and North America today is a different form fueled by strident nationalism that is defined by ethnicity, race and religion. Call it identity populism. It draws its strength, as William Galston of the Brookings

Institution has noted, “from public opposition to mass immigration, cultural liberalization, and the perceived surrender of national sovereignty” whether to “distant and unresponsive bodies” like the European Union or, in the case of the United States, to the more amorphous threat of globalization and increasing ethnic, racial, religious and ethical diversity.

In an ominous echo of 20th-century fascism and Nazism, identity populism stresses the inherent morality of an ethnically or racially defined non-elite class, claiming it is under attack by an impure and immoral elite seeking to destroy national values through multiculturalism and ethical decay. This idea of an epochal conflict between what the Nazis called the “volk”—the people—and decadent, globalizing elites has re-emerged in the stark ideas of white nationalist movements in the United States,

the rebranded National Front in France and the far-right Alternative for Germany. It exists more subtly among the populist-leaning mainstream parties on the political right, although some of them are dabbling more openly in this toxic ideology.

If it continues to extend its political reach, identity populism may increase the chances of armed conflict both between countries and within national

BELOW President Donald Trump speaks during a rally at Southern Illinois Airport, Oct. 27, 2018, Murphysboro, Illinois (AP photo by Jeff Roberson).



borders. There are several reasons why. First, identity populism is based on amplifying the differences between “us” and “them,” stressing ethnic, racial, cultural or religious differences and imbuing them with an ethical dimension—“we” are moral or pure, and “they” are criminal, diseased and simply evil. Phrasing like this, which filled Nazi and fascist rhetoric in the 20th century, is all too common today among populist leaders in Europe. And it slips into the statements of U.S. President Donald Trump and his enablers on Fox News and other right-wing media, especially in their **false depictions** of diseased and crime-ridden waves of immigrants trying to overrun America’s borders.

While seeing the world as divided in this way does not guarantee conflict, it does increase the chances of violence. It is always easier to use force against an opponent seen as less moral or less human and portrayed as a steadfast enemy of an ethnically or racially defined national culture. Even within nations, such binaries between segments of society deemed “moral” and “immoral” could spark conflict. The odds are that the world will see a new wave of civil wars and separatist movements facilitated, at least to a degree, by identity populism.

A second reason that identity populism increases the chances of armed conflict is its delegitimization of international institutions designed to prevent or limit war between nations, in favor of hypernationalism and a strident sense of sovereignty. One has only to look at Trump’s disdain for the United Nations and the European Union—both organizations explicitly created to lower the chances of interstate conflict. While the United Nations may be a deeply flawed organization, that is no reason to delegitimize international institutions wholesale, given the risks.

The third reason that populism may increase the chances of conflict is that populist leaders often cling ferociously to power, weakening democratic institutions and any limits on their own power. They often create a political system with some trappings

of democracy—perhaps rigged elections or a pliant legislature—that is in fact authoritarian. The result is both faux populism and faux democracy. Venezuela, Russia and Turkey are on this path today, and some European nations, like Hungary and Poland, may soon follow. History suggests that authoritarian leaders often distract attention from their failings by demonizing opponents at home and abroad, contending that only they can stave off their nation’s enemies. Again, this does not guarantee that there will be armed violence, but it certainly increases the chances, particularly when a populist leader’s grasp on power weakens.

Of course, not all populism is bad: Inclusive populism has historically led to more just societies from the United States to South Africa. But today’s identity populism is a different beast, an internet-fueled manifestation of malignancies that seemed vanquished in World War II. Day by day, it is making the world a more dangerous place.

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WHAT IF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY CAN'T RESOLVE TODAY'S CONFLICTS?

JUDAH GRUNSTEIN | JUNE 2019

Can the norms and institutions of liberal democracy still effectively arbitrate the issues driving debate in Western democracies?

The ideological movements roiling politics throughout Europe and the United States have been seen as a popular backlash against the elite technocratic policy consensus of Third Way globalization. But in some ways, they portend a new form of contesting politics that is fundamentally incompatible with the premises on which liberal democracy is based. These movements may be working within the system to achieve their aims for now, but in the long run, the battles they seek to join could represent existential threats to the system itself.

The tenets of liberal democracy are anchored by a quasi-religious commitment to political pluralism—the peaceful coexistence of opposing views, with decisions determined through votes and not violence. The spectrum of desired outcomes ranges from consensus at one extreme to alternating political power between ideological competitors at the other, with negotiated settlements among opposing interests somewhere in the middle. A school of thought known as agonism has also emerged to suggest that unresolved political tensions and conflict can contribute positively to the health of a democracy, provided they remain in the political arena.

In the postwar era, however, political debates in Western democracies have for the most part taken place within a field implicitly bounded by the historical memory of World War II and

the carnage of the 20th century in Europe. These debates have been dominated by competing policy agendas, particularly on economic issues such as industrial policy, redistributive policy and trade policy. Beginning in the late Cold War period and accelerating after the fall of the Soviet Union, debates over the size and purview of the state began to take on added prominence.

In practice, too, most competitive electoral contests have increasingly been decided not by the committed partisan faithful on the left and right, but by uncommitted or undecided voters in the middle of the political spectrum. The result has been an emphasis on moderation that favored consensus on the broad lines of policy, with negotiated settlements and the alternation of power reduced to minor technocratic adjustments around the margins. This rough consensus took the nominal form of a social democracy, but one characterized by more stark, technocratically imposed limits: limited income redistribution to fund limited social welfare protections in an

BELOW Planes from the Battle of Britain memorial flight pass over Arramanches, France, during a service to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the D-Day landings, June 6, 2019 (Press Association photo by Gareth Fuller via AP Images).



economic environment of limited regulation and limited barriers to international trade.

Many of the most surprising political shockwaves of the past decade have been a result of either the failure of this technocratic consensus or the resulting backlash against it. The global financial crisis and subsequent European debt crisis fit into the former category, and the rise of populism, nationalism and nativism across Europe and the United States in the latter

Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in the United States are the high-profile expressions of this backlash, but it is these underlying trends that pose a particular challenge for liberal democracy. The dividing lines in political debates are being drawn more around issues of culture, society and identity, rather than policy. Often, these are issues for which no clear consensus can emerge, given the maximalist and mutually exclusive objectives of the opposing sides. At its heart, the debate is no longer about what the governments of the United States and Europe should do, but what kind of nations these countries should be.

A recent [dispute among American religious conservatives](#) illustrates the degree to which the terms of the debate have shifted in recent years. While the so-called religious right has been a vocal political force on social issues in the U.S. since at least the

time of Ronald Reagan, they were also long seen as the Republican Party's dupes: Despite serving faithfully as the electoral foot soldiers needed to advance the GOP's business-friendly agenda, their social and cultural priorities perennially took a back seat once the GOP was comfortably installed in power.

Now, [a cadre of these religious conservatives](#) is calling for a radical rethink of their relationship not just to the Republican Party, but to politics in general. The result is an increasing

THE CURRENT BACKLASH HAS OPENED THE FLOODGATES NOT JUST TO POPULAR ANTAGONISM TOWARD LIBERAL DEMOCRACY, BUT TO ELITE CRITIQUES OF IT AS WELL.

willingness to **criticize liberal democracy as a fundamentally flawed instrument** for achieving their ends—a remoralized society based on their Christian values that explicitly calls into question the advances made by social progressives on issues like marriage equality and the social mores around sex and marriage.

In the United States and Europe, the reemergence of nativist nationalism as a political force raises similar challenges. Who belongs to a polity and who doesn't, and identity claims in general, are questions that are ill-suited to the political arena, in part because there is no political answer to them, but also because they inflame passions that politics tends to exacerbate rather than calm. It is no coincidence that the European politicians who champion nativist nationalism, like Hungary's Viktor Orbán and Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński, are also vocally hostile to liberal democracy and, for that matter, base part of their political appeal on conservative Christian values and identity.

For three generations, the maximalist expression of these issues has been relegated to the political margins, almost exclusively on the far right. Mainstream political leaders in the U.S. and Europe have at times opportunistically resorted to veiled references to them through political dog whistles, but most tended to steer clear of them as central organizing principles for their platforms.

The reason was on display last week, at the 75th anniversary commemoration of the D-Day landings. The historical memory of World War II has served as a visceral reminder of what can happen when political pluralism fails. It also reinforced the legitimacy claims of liberal democracy as the most effective firewall against a repeat of the 20th century's darkest chapters. But with the passage of time, memories fade. One result is the hyperpartisanship on display in the U.S., and the zero-sum and bellicose rhetoric used to describe political "enemies" on both sides of the Atlantic.

Of course, much of liberal democracy's hagiography glossed over some of its anti-democratic structural elements designed

to keep populists marginalized, but which also facilitated the emergence of the elite consensus that so casually overlooked the impact of globalization on society's less affluent classes.

But what's so striking about the current backlash is that it has opened the floodgates not just to popular antagonism toward liberal democracy, but to elite critiques of it as well. Meanwhile, as liberal democracy's champions continue to fight a rearguard battle on policy issues, much of the real action has moved to social issues for which there is no compromise in sight.

Again, one side is arguing over what governments should do, while the other is arguing over what Western nations should be. It is hard to see how the political arena of liberal democracy might effectively resolve such a standoff, or survive its failure to do so.

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ASIA'S RISING POPULISTS COULD BE MORE DANGEROUS TO DEMOCRACY THAN THE WEST'S

JOSHUA KURLANTZICK | DECEMBER 2017

The rise of populist leaders and parties in Europe and the United States over the past two years has reshaped the political landscape from Budapest to Washington. Challenging elites as corrupt and disconnected from common concerns, these populists **claim to derive their legitimacy from the supposed will of the people** and usually use their influence to blame some “other” for the country’s ills. They have tried to upend post-Cold War norms on everything from free trade to the integration of Europe, raising fears in the West about the strength of the rule of law and even democracy itself.

But this intense focus has overshadowed the growing threat of populism in another major region of the world that is already susceptible to a higher chance of inter-state conflict: Asia. Unlike in the West, where populism is often still constrained by strong democratic institutions and norms, institutions in Asia are generally weaker and most Asian populists have little concern for the rule of law, so populism could actually prove more dangerous to democracy.

For all the worries about Donald Trump in the United States, or emerging populists in Europe like the far-right Alternative for Germany party, the places where populists have actually most threatened democracy in the West tend to be countries where democratic institutions were already fragile, before the arrival of populists who had no interest in keeping the existing system. In Hungary and Poland, for example, populist leaders **have**

politicized the courts, made elections less free and fair, and badly undermined media freedoms.

In Asia, most states where populism is rising are more similar to Hungary or Poland than they are to France, Germany or the United Kingdom. These Asian states are countries where institutions are weak and democracy can be easily dismantled.



ABOVE A protester splashes red paint on a picture of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte during a rally, Manila, Philippines, Dec. 7, 2017 (AP photo by Aaron Favila).

Thailand, where the 1997 Asian financial crisis battered the economy and undermined elites' popular legitimacy, in many ways has been patient zero for Asia's new populism. Over more than a decade of populist rule, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who took office in 2001, and his allies weakened Thailand's rule of law, undermined the judiciary and launched an extrajudicial war on drugs. The Thaksin brand of populism ultimately sparked a counterreaction from the

kingdom's conservative military, which launched one coup in 2006 and then took power in another coup in 2014. Still, if the armed forces ever allow a free election, Thailand's Thaksinite party could win control of parliament again, in large part because its economic policies, which helped many working class Thais, were highly popular. But Thailand's fragile democratic institutions are now totally shattered.

Other Asian leaders have since—wittingly or unwittingly—copied Thaksin's strategies. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, elected in 2016, won the presidency using Thaksinesque rhetoric. After the presidency of Benigno Aquino III, when growth improved but the Philippine government made few inroads into reducing inequality, Duterte portrayed himself as the authentic voice of the masses, vowing to personally lead a major law and order campaign and blasting entrenched elites. In office, Duterte has, like Thaksin, overseen a drug war using extrajudicial tactics, and also has declared martial law on the

southern island of Mindanao. He regularly attacks the media, and his government has overseen the prosecution of political opponents. And like Thaksin, Duterte also has embraced some progressive and popular economic policies, such as land reform. Many observers often compare Duterte to Trump, but in many ways he's really following Thaksin's lead in Thailand.

Indonesia, Southeast Asia's most influential country and, up to now, its most successful democracy, is also seriously threatened by the rise of populism. In the 2014 presidential election, the governor of Jakarta, Joko Widodo, known as Jokowi, defeated a former lieutenant general, Prabowo Subianto, whose campaign was almost stereotypically populist. Prabowo rode into one rally on an actual white horse, repeatedly suggested that he alone could solve Indonesia's challenges, and denigrated Indonesia's democratic reforms—implying that, if elected, he would govern as a strongman of the people.

Prabowo lost, but he appears to be gearing up for another run in 2019. He and his allies have made gains within Indonesian politics over the past two years, partly by allying themselves with conservative Islamists. Prabowo's favored candidate, Anies Baswedan, won the crucial Jakarta governor's election earlier this year against the incumbent governor, a Chinese Indonesian. Baswedan won in part because he was backed by a campaign of massive rallies demonizing Chinese Indonesians as "others." If

Prabowo runs for president, Asia Times [recently reported](#), he likely will portray Jokowi as a tool of Chinese Indonesians and of Beijing. Baswedan also may stand for president in 2019, likely running as a populist supported by Islamists and criticizing Chinese Indonesians and foreign investors.

Although Indonesia's recent democratic track record is better than that of Thailand and the Philippines,

POPULISM IN ASIA HAS OPENED FAULT LINES OF CONFLICT AT A TIME WHEN MANY COUNTRIES ARE ENGAGED IN A REGIONAL ARMS RACE.

Baswedan's popularity shows there is a public hunger for economic and political change—and for demonizing minorities. There may be enough anger, indeed, for a populist to defeat Jokowi, who is more of a pragmatist and technocrat. As in the Philippines, in Indonesia solid economic growth has not alleviated public dissatisfaction over inequality and corruption, which populists blame unfairly on Indonesian Chinese elites. Despite two decades of decentralizing political reforms, it seems likely that an Indonesian president who wanted to rule like an elected autocrat could do so.

Other Asian states are vulnerable, too. In Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi's weak civilian government has been eclipsed by the continuing power of the military, whose offensive against the Rohingya minority in Rakhine state appears sadly popular with much of the public. Army commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing may be gearing up to challenge Suu Kyi and her party in the next elections as a populist strongman.

And even in India, the world's largest democracy and arguably Asia's strongest, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has often governed as a populist. He won his office with a campaign that demonized the traditional elites who had mishandled the Indian economy in the early 2000s. His party stokes grievances against a Muslim "other," while Modi portrays himself as the sole leader who can solve the country's myriad problems.

India has far stronger democratic roots than most other states in South and Southeast Asia, and its institutions are resilient. Yet the media **has become increasingly submissive to the Modi administration**, as the government seems to be attempting to intimidate independent news outlets. The judiciary, too, is in Modi's crosshairs: In a speech on India's Constitution Day in November, Modi suggested that judges should be more supportive of government policies overall.

Asia's rising populism is worrisome not only because many of its democracies may be too weak to stand up to populists, but because it has opened fault lines of conflict at a time when many countries are engaged in a regional arms race. India and

China nearly fought a border war last year. China and Southeast Asian states regularly ratchet up tensions over the South China Sea. And there are multiple flashpoints in Northeast Asia, most of all North Korea.

The risk of conflict is magnified in Asia when countries that could go to war are run by true autocrats, in the case of China under Xi Jinping, or populists who operate like elected autocrats. In both cases, there are fewer checks on a government's ability to go to war than there would be in a strong democratic system. Both populists and autocrats tout their muscularity, a dangerous image to maintain that could turn minor conflicts into escalations.

It is not difficult to imagine that Xi and Modi, both of whom are consolidating power, could slip into another dispute that, unlike last year's border standoff, might actually lead to war. Nor is it hard to imagine Prabowo as the next president of Indonesia, whipping up a clash with Beijing over the South China Sea. Rising populism in an already tense region full of geopolitical traps could make Asia ripe for conflict.

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THE POPULIST WAVE WILL CONTINUE

JOSHUA KURLANTZICK | FEBRUARY 2019

A year ago, there were [premature predictions](#) that the populist wave would soon crest around the world. Yet sure enough, populists then won elections in Brazil, Italy and Mexico. Now, some political observers are again arguing that populism has already peaked, even though populist leaders like the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte maintain extraordinarily high popularity, with [one recent poll](#) showing Duterte's approval rating at 81 percent.

Populism "faces its darkest hour" in 2019, Gideon Rachman [recently predicted](#) in the Financial Times. Max Fisher [claimed](#) in The New York Times that populism had a "rocky" time in the West last year, citing, among other things, the Democratic Party's gains in the U.S. midterm elections and mixed election results for Poland's populist Law and Justice party in local elections. Fisher cited [Cas Mudde](#), a Dutch political scientist and leading scholar of populism, who "has predicted that the movement's once-meteoric rise will become 'modest' and 'uneven' in 2019, with more setbacks ahead."

To be sure, some populists in North America and Europe are struggling, whether in government or, like the far-right Alternative for Germany, to grow their appeal and build coalitions that could propel them to win local and national elections. Nonetheless, the populist wave seems more likely than not to keep rising this year and next, with potential new victories on the horizon.

One of the first countries poised for a populist resurgence this year is Thailand, even if the elections that will be held there on March 24 will not be fully free or fair. Thailand's military junta has



ABOVE Supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party in traditional attire shout slogans during a rally addressed by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the outskirts of Guwahati, India, Feb. 9, 2019 (AP photo by Anupam Nath).

severely repressed political activity

before the vote, passing a new constitution to entrench the army's power and trying to engineer a lower house of parliament controlled or de facto run by pro-military figures. Despite those obstacles, the populist Pheu Thai party and its allies, with a deep base of support, could still get a majority in the lower house. That might only lead to further chaos, if the army and its allies try to oust a new populist government.

Even in Western countries, populists managed to pull off some victories in 2018. The Alternative for Germany, or AfD, won enough of the vote in Germany's regional elections last fall to **take seats** in the parliament of Hesse, one of Germany's most powerful states. A populist coalition **triumphed** in Italy. A **study by The Guardian**, released late last year, showed that populist parties have more than tripled their share of votes in Europe in the past 20 years. "Two decades ago, populist parties were largely a marginal force, accounting for just 7 percent of votes across the continent; in the most recent national elections, one in four votes cast was for a populist party."

**EVEN WHEN
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Populists could soon make further inroads in Europe, with a coalition of right-leaning euroskeptic parties looking to make substantial gains in European Parliament elections in May. According to **a recent internal poll** by the European Parliament, those parties are set to increase their share of seats from 10 to 14 percent. Mark Leonard of the European Council on Foreign Relations **anticipates** that turnout for the vote will be much higher than normal, perhaps in part because of growing voter interest in the ideas of right-leaning populists, who hope to gain enough power in

the European Parliament to undermine it and other European institutions. As Leonard and others have noted, if the populist coalition wins enough seats to throw a wrench in the European Parliament's activities, it could further aid populist parties in individual European countries by watering down or blocking EU rules that help constrain the bloc's autocratic-leaning governments, such as in Hungary and Poland.

In Estonia, populists are **aiming to boost their vote share** in general elections in March and make the Conservative People's Party of Estonia one of the largest parties in parliament. A pro-Russian populist party **got the largest share** of the vote in neighboring Latvia's national elections last fall, although they are not in the governing coalition. In Denmark, which will hold elections by mid-June, the opposition Social Democrats have **inched closer to the populist positions** of the hard-line populist Danish People's Party, on issues like immigration. The Danish government has already **adopted a range of policies** influenced by the populists' positions, like linking social welfare payments to education in "Danish values" and putting certain migrants on a remote island. Despite those efforts, the Social Democrats, with support from the Danish People's Party, have a strong chance to win control of government this year.

With Belgium holding federal elections in late May, a strong showing could give populist parties there a place in the governing coalition. In Italy, the populist and increasingly popular League party, which is currently in a coalition government with the anti-establishment Five Star Movement, could **force an early election** and possibly take full control of government. In Spain, where elections are scheduled for late April, a far-right populist party might take seats in the national parliament for the first time. And in France, the far-right National Rally, previously known as the National Front, has drawn even in polls with the party of President Emmanuel Macron, **raising the stakes** if Macron fails to deal with political tumult in the country.

Across the Atlantic, Argentina, which is suffering from a deep and debilitating recession, could swing back to populist rule in

elections in October. President Mauricio Macri defeated a populist rival, former President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, four years ago, but he has failed to deliver on his economic promises and could lose in the fall to the Peronist party, which Fernandez and her late husband have dominated for nearly two decades.

To be sure, populists are not winning everywhere. The main populist setback in Europe this year appears to be in Greece, where the leftist Syriza party looks like it could lose elections in October to the center-right New Democracy. But even when populists do not win, they are pushing more centrist politicians to embrace their ideas and strategies, as seen in Denmark, and across Asia as well. In Indonesia, a country that seems ripe for autocratic-leaning populism, with continued high inequality, distrust of political elites and a history of strongman rule, incumbent President Joko Widodo is likely to triumph in April's elections, as he **leads most reputable polls**. Yet he has **embraced some unsavory tactics**, like fear-mongering and the demonization of minorities, probably to blunt the effectiveness of an alliance between Islamists and his political rival, former Lt. Gen. Prabowo Subianto, a man who likely would rule as an autocratic-leaning populist. Jokowi, as Widodo is known in Indonesia, has also watered down his early promises of economic reform, instead **embracing more populist measures** in the run-up to the election.

Meanwhile, in India, the ruling BJP, a Hindu nationalist party that has many populist characteristics, **has struggled** in recent state elections. It could be vulnerable in upcoming general elections, although polls still show it **ahead of the main Congress-led opposition**. The appeal of populist ideology, however, has led both the BJP and Congress to embrace populist, right-leaning positions ahead of the vote, potentially damaging India's democratic norms and institutions. Congress has played down its longstanding reputation for protecting minority rights and secularism in India. Meanwhile, the BJP's violent, Hindu nationalist rhetoric has sparked **a vigilante campaign** largely

targeting minorities, while the party has overseen growing attacks on the press and other classic populist tactics.

Once in office, populist governments, especially those with autocratic-leaning leaders, often prove to be both corrupt and incapable of effective governance—characteristics that can eventually turn publics against them. This disillusionment takes time, though, and often leaves countries **struggling to return to full democracy**. For now, voters in many countries still appear ready to put more populists into power, accelerating a global democratic regression and making it even easier for populists to win in the future.

Joshua Kurlantzick is senior fellow for Southeast Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations.

WITH EVEN FEWER CHECKS ON HIS POWER, WHERE WILL DUTERTE TAKE THE PHILIPPINES?

JOSHUA KURLANTZICK | MAY 2019

Although divisive internationally, President Rodrigo Duterte has remained popular at home in the Philippines despite a deeply illiberal streak. And with this week's midterm elections, he has amassed even more **political power**—probably more than any Philippine leader since dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

After pro-Duterte candidates **dominated** elections for the Senate—the only real remaining source of resistance to Duterte's agenda—his allies control both chambers of the Philippine Congress. There will now be even fewer constraints on Duterte, who has already been working to weaken the checks on his powers, including by reshaping the Supreme Court. By the end of the year, he will have appointed **12 of the court's 15 justices**.

What will Duterte do with this victory? Given the past three years, it is easy to imagine him using his expanded political powers to move the Philippines further from an illiberal democracy and closer to an outright autocracy, while also taking steps to entrench his influence well beyond the end of his term in 2022. Greater centralization of power not only threatens what is left of Philippine democracy; it could also hurt the economy, unsettling local and foreign investors.

Duterte's big win will have a lesser impact on foreign policy. Even though he is now in near-total control of the Philippines' political system, the country still has a weak hand to play regionally and internationally, though Duterte may be emboldened to defy the national security establishment's

GREATER CENTRALIZATION OF POWER UNDER DUTERTE NOT ONLY THREATENS WHAT IS LEFT OF PHILIPPINE DEMOCRACY; IT COULD ALSO HURT THE ECONOMY.

preference for close links with Washington.

The election results hardly could have been worse for the opposition. Although the opposition had many big names on its Senate slate, including former presidential candidate and Cabinet secretary Manuel “Mar” Roxas, its unified ticket **won none** of the 12 Senate seats it contested. With Duterte’s aura of invincibility magnified, any remaining political opponents may be cowed

during the second half of his presidential term.

The opposition is left stymied, with no clear path to recapturing popular support absent some massive misstep by Duterte. And the political situation may still get worse. In the run-up to the election, Duterte added many opposition politicians to a public **list** of people allegedly involved in the drug trade, and thus potentially targeted for extrajudicial murder. It remains unclear whether those listed as “narcopoliticians” actually have any links to drugs, but this type of tactic can chill political discourse, and it didn’t hurt Duterte at the polls.

Most likely, Duterte will ramp up this type of repression, including possibly pursuing more trumped-up charges against

remaining opposition politicians. He will likely continue narrowing the space for independent media, since he paid no price at the ballot box either for his campaign against reporters like **Maria Ressa**, probably the country’s most famous journalist and a founder of the investigative outlet Rappler. She was arrested, for the second time, in March. He may also try to reinstate the **death penalty** as part of his crackdown on crime.

BELOW Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, left, arrives for a meeting at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, April 25, 2019 (Photo by Kenzaburo Fukuhara for Kyodo via AP Images).



On domestic policy, Duterte has promised to **cut corporate taxes** to boost growth and attract investment, and he certainly now has the power to do so. But a tax cut probably won't be enough to spark much higher economic growth, and the Philippines continues to be hit hard by **inflation**.

Duterte otherwise shows no signs of building on the key areas of reform championed by his predecessor, Benigno Aquino III, like seriously cracking down on corruption. The Philippines' rating in Transparency International's annual corruption perceptions survey **has not improved** under Duterte. Indeed, more power in Duterte's hands might mean more graft in the second half of his term.

His centralization of power may also scare investors for other reasons. In the first half of his term, Duterte mostly left the details of economic policy to others, focusing instead on his drug war, foreign policy, and the unsettled situation in the southern Philippines. With even more power, and fewer restraints on him, Duterte could take over more decision-making on economic policy, an area where he knows very little and about which he **cared little** in the past.

Duterte's controversial plan to shift the country to a more federal system of government could further destabilize the country's politics and undermine growth. Although this plan, which requires changing the constitution, **has not proven popular** in polls, Duterte now has the numbers in Congress to push it through. The plan has some merits—Manila has been overly powerful, and other diverse and archipelagic countries like Indonesia have benefited from **decentralization**.

But a transition to federalism would probably be chaotic initially, and there are real worries that the constitutional change could allow Duterte to **prolong his presidency**, past the current limit of one six-year term, taking the Philippines back to an outright dictatorship. Or, he could use his power to **set the stage** for his daughter, just **reelected** as mayor of the southern city of Davao, to become president in 2022, creating the type of dynastic rule that has not served states in Southeast Asia well in the past.

Just because Duterte is more powerful doesn't mean he will conduct a smarter or more effective foreign policy. In fact, the reverse could be true, with fewer limits on him, and an ever more subservient team of allies and advisers.

The biggest foreign policy issue for Duterte remains balancing between the United States, the Philippines' treaty ally, and China, especially after Beijing's recent **brazen encroachment** on Thitu Island in the South China Sea, the largest of the Spratly Islands claimed by Manila. Between **January and March**, more than 200 Chinese fishing vessels reportedly sailed close to the island. The opposition tried to make Duterte's approach to China a major issue in the campaign, criticizing him for not driving a **tough enough bargain** on deals with Beijing for new investment, and over issues related to the South China Sea, where Duterte has vacillated between moving to accommodate China and pushing back. Of course, those charges didn't help the opposition win, but China's growing influence in the Philippines is still **generally unpopular** among Filipinos, putting something of a brake on relations with Beijing.

Still, given Duterte's own, longstanding anti-American instincts and his now increased power over foreign policy, he will probably swing at least somewhat toward Beijing again, especially if China's promised investments—including a potential **\$12 billion in deals** struck at the recent Belt and Road Forum—actually come through this time around. A Duterte-allied Senate will surely have less interest in conducting **investigations** into concerns about Chinese influence in the Philippines.

After the election results came in, presidential spokesman Salvador Panelo **told reporters**, "Undoubtedly, the Duterte magic spelled the difference." Duterte could maintain that magic for a long time.

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AFTER WHIPPING UP NATIONALISM TO WIN A LANDSLIDE IN INDIA, CAN MODI TONE IT DOWN?

SUDHA RAMACHANDRAN | MAY 2019

The Bharatiya Janata Party owes its dominating win in India's general election to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is being sworn in for the second time today. The right-wing, Hindu nationalist BJP seemingly sought every vote in his name, as if Modi were running in every electoral district in the country. It worked, as many voters made their decision based on who they wanted as their next prime minister, rather than as their representative in parliament. It helped, too, that the opposition remained divided and undecided on whom to project as its candidate for prime minister.

In winning 303 of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Indian parliament, the BJP not only secured a rare majority on its own for the second time in a row, but improved on its performance in the 2014 elections, when it secured 282 seats. Before 2014, it had been 30 years since a single political party had won enough seats in parliament to form its own national government. Modi's new government has even more power in parliament this time, since the BJP and its allies in the National Democratic Alliance have 351 seats in all.

In the run-up to the 2014 general election, Modi's promise to voters was economic development. Among other things, he pledged to create 10 million jobs and ensure that farmers would get at least a **50 percent profit over the cost of production**. Yet none of these dreams materialized, and the Indian economy has performed poorly under him. According to a leaked government

jobs report, **India's unemployment rate** stood at a 45-year-high of 6.1 percent in 2017 and 2018, compared to just 2.2 percent in 2011 and 2012, when the United Progressive Alliance, led by the Indian National Congress, was in power. Official figures show that India's agricultural growth rate fell from 4.2 percent from 2009 to 2014 to just 2.5 percent over the past five years. Rural distress was intense, and the Modi government's demonetization of high-value currency, as well as its chaotic implementation of a uniform sales tax, brought immense hardship to ordinary Indians.

If his 2014 electoral promise fell so flat, why did Modi do even better at the polls this time? As the economy deteriorated, Modi played up his strongman persona and skillfully deflected public attention away from economic woes and toward nationalism, patriotism and national security. A long-time member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a hardline paramilitary organization tied to the BJP, Modi is a champion of Hindutva, an exclusivist ideology that equates being Indian with

ABOVE Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses supporters at Bharatiya Janata Party headquarters, New Delhi, India, May 23, 2019 (AP photo by Manish Swarup).



being Hindu. Increasingly, that ideology has seeped more into his government. It has done little if anything to stop vigilante groups with links to the BJP that have violently attacked Muslims with alarming frequency. **Critics of Modi**, who have called him authoritarian, have been cast as “anti-nationals” by both the government and a sympathetic media; some critics have even been jailed.

Modi has always sought to project himself as a tough leader, one who would not hesitate to deploy military force against terrorists and their sponsors, especially Pakistan, India’s nuclear-armed neighbor. Earlier this year, he seized on the opportunity to play up that image and stir nationalist sentiment. In February, militants from Jaish-e-Mohammad, a terrorist group based in Pakistan, killed 40 Indian paramilitary personnel in a suicide attack on their convoy in the district of Pulwama in the Indian-controlled part of Kashmir. Hours after the attack, Modi warned Pakistan of a “befitting reply.” What he called his “**jaw-breaking response**” came two weeks later, when Indian air force jets bombed an alleged Jaish-e-Mohammad training camp in Balakot, just over the border in Pakistan. It sent an unmistakable message to Pakistan that Modi would use military force, including inside Pakistani territory, if Islamabad continued to support terrorist groups that target India.

It was a message that supporters of the BJP wanted to hear. A **surge in jingoism, stoked by Modi**, provided a shot in the arm to the BJP’s previously flagging electoral prospects. Modi focused on national security, even appropriating the Indian military for his election ads. Photographs of military personnel were featured on BJP posters, and BJP candidates even donned army uniforms while campaigning. The BJP hammered home the message that India was safe only in Modi’s hands. In a climate of fear and belligerent nationalism, a BJP landslide seemed more and more inevitable.

Soon after the victory, speculation was rife in India over which guests the government would invite to attend Modi’s second inauguration. For Modi’s first swearing-in five years ago,

the leaders of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation were all invited, signaling the priority the government accorded to its immediate neighbors. Pakistan's prime minister at the time, Nawaz Sharif, was one of those guests—a gesture that paved the way for two years of cordial relations between the two leaders. In late 2015, Modi made [the first trip to Pakistan by an Indian prime minister](#) in more than a decade, visiting Sharif at his home in Lahore on his birthday. But when an Indian air force base in Pathankot, near Kashmir, was attacked by suspected Jaish-e-Mohammad militants a few days later, the bonhomie quickly dissipated. Months later, Modi ordered “surgical strikes” against Pakistan, and ties plunged, reaching their nadir in the standoff earlier this year.

It's no surprise, then, that Sharif's successor, Imran Khan, is not on Modi's guest list for his second inauguration. Instead of inviting all the leaders from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, which would have included Khan, the Indian government turned to another bloc of neighboring countries that has the benefit of not including Pakistan: the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, or BIMSTEC. Modi is still looking to boost regional cooperation, albeit without Pakistan.

Although Khan called Modi to congratulate him on his victory, he may have to wait a while to do so in person. Having flexed his muscles against Pakistan over the past few months, Modi does not want to be seen rushing to embrace Pakistan at the first chance he gets, since it would anger the Hindu nationalist base that just helped him win an overwhelming reelection. Modi could use the upcoming summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization at Bishek, in mid-June, to meet Khan for a symbolic handshake.

The BJP was rewarded for adopting a muscular, nationalist posture in its election campaign. But avoiding diplomacy and other engagement, especially with a neighbor like Pakistan, is not in India's interest. It cannot hope to achieve its economic ambitions if it still has a festering conflict with Pakistan. That's

why Modi, with a huge mandate from his reelection, should pursue **informal backchannel talks with Pakistan**, aiming to secure some guarantees from Islamabad about border issues and other tensions, before hopefully moving on to more formal talks. Modi treated Pakistan as an enemy to get reelected; now he must quietly try and find a way to improve ties.

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ITALY'S POPULIST GOVERNMENT IS A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE. HOW LONG CAN IT LAST?

MARK GILBERT | JULY 2019

BOLOGNA—Italy's populist government has been in power for all of 13 months and already speculation is rife about its imminent demise. The [stability of this rowdy coalition](#) was in doubt from the moment it was formed. How could the anti-establishment Five Star Movement, or M5S, avoid falling out with its aggressive junior partner, the far-right Lega or League, and its leader, Matteo Salvini?

These doubts only grew when Salvini used his first year in office as interior minister and deputy prime minister to boost his own popularity, campaigning rather than governing. In the European Parliament elections at the end of May, the League took 34 percent of the vote, up from under 18 percent in the March 2018 general elections. The M5S, by contrast, collapsed from 33 percent to 17 percent. The League is now the senior partner in the government, although the M5S still has nearly twice as many seats in parliament.

There are many in the League who want to cash in their chips and try and force new elections this fall. Within the M5S, opposition to party leader Luigi Di Maio, Salvini's fellow deputy prime minister, is growing more vocal. Key members, notably Alessandro Di Battista, a journalist and writer who casts himself as the conscience of the M5S, have been urging Di Maio to return to the party's roots as an anti-establishment force.

Di Maio has tried to satisfy his critics by sniping at the measures that the League proposes. As a result, important parts of Salvini's agenda—notably flatter taxes and greater autonomy



ABOVE Italian Deputy Prime Ministers Matteo Salvini, right, and Luigi Di Maio during question time at the Chamber of Deputies, in Rome, Feb. 13, 2019 (ANSA photo by Fabio Frustaci via AP Images).

for Italy's northern regions—have been bogged down in the Cabinet. This state of affairs has strained relations between the two parties; not a day passes without an exchange of poisonous tweets or veiled threats. If the question of northern autonomy is not resolved, the government will surely fall. It is a touchstone issue for the men behind Salvini, elected officials from northern Italy who regard the League—formerly the Northern League—as a party that primarily promotes the interests of northern Italians.

Despite these obvious tensions, there are reasons to believe that the M5S and the League will remain in this unhappy arrangement, even with frequent flare-ups. Salvini and Di Maio have become adept at fighting but never quite walking out the door.

First, neither one has a better option. If the government were to fold, the League would have to resurrect the uncomfortable right-wing alliance with Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia and the

nationalist Brothers of Italy that contested the 2018 election. Forza Italia is indelibly associated with Berlusconi, even though he handed over more power last month to Mara Carfagna and Giovanni Toti. Carfagna is a capable politician whose early career as a model leads many to underestimate her abilities as a modernizer, especially over the issue of women's rights and the rights of sexual minorities. Toti is the president of the Liguria regional government. Both want to make Forza Italia less of an absolute monarchy. The party's old guard, who are resentful at being superseded by their erstwhile junior partner, are resisting such changes, and it doesn't help that Toti is a strong advocate of close cooperation with the League. Throw the Brothers of Italy into the mix—whose leader, Giorgia Meloni, is a feisty, nominally ex-fascist polemicist who regards Salvini as soft on immigration—and you have all the makings of a nightmare new relationship.

The M5S, too, has good reasons to cling to Salvini. What alternative does it have? The party could fight an election alone, but would stand to lose half or more of its seats, an unpopular option for the many M5S parliamentarians who are enjoying the perks of power. If new elections are called, Di Maio and many other leading members of the M5S would not even be able to run as candidates, since the party has a two-term rule for its elected officials that would be embarrassing to amend. If Salvini walked out of the government, the M5S might be tempted to make some parliamentary arrangement with the Democratic Party, whose new leader, Nicola Zingaretti, seems receptive to such overtures. But that option would make the M5S' endless polemics against such horse-trading in Italy's previous parliament seem hypocritical. It would also split the Democratic Party and weaken its recovery from the near-death experience of last year's elections.

The second reason for believing that the government will hold together is that it has been successful, at least by its own lights. The League promised that it would lower taxes on the self-employed, amend a much-hated pension law and improve "security," which in Italy is a euphemism for keeping migrants

DESPITE OBVIOUS TENSIONS, THERE ARE REASONS TO BELIEVE THAT THE FIVE STAR MOVEMENT AND THE LEAGUE WILL REMAIN IN THEIR UNHAPPY ARRANGEMENT.

out. Salvini has succeeded in doing all three, albeit at the cost of his reputation in Europe, especially over his decision to shut the ports to humanitarian ships bringing migrants to Italy. The M5S has also legislated in areas that it considers crucial, notably the introduction of a minimum income and a constitutional law reducing the number of parliamentarians. The much-feared **break with the European**

Union over deficit spending has not yet come to pass. Italy has kept its annual deficit at around 2 percent of GDP, though the League, in particular, would love to let public spending loose. Salvini regards Donald Trump's brand of populist economics—low unemployment, surging economic growth, big tax cuts—as a model.

Credit for the government's legislative record, though, should really go to Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, a dapper, low-key lawyer who has spent the past year mediating between the two volcanic parties that make up his majority. He is the quintessential fixer. If Conte can invent compromises that give both parties enough of what they want—for example, the introduction of a high minimum wage for the M5S, so long as it accepts greater northern autonomy—then the government might well endure.

The third reason the government could survive its hiccups is the president of the republic, Sergio Mattarella. It takes 60 days to organize elections in Italy, and before the president can dissolve parliament, there has to be the ritual *crisi di governo*, in which the president strives to find a political solution by shuffling ministers or changing prime minister. From Mattarella's viewpoint, nothing good can come from going to the polls. Any election would have to take place during the space in the calendar usually reserved for passing the budget. The electoral campaign would be dominated by demagogic promises of

higher public spending and lower taxes, which would spook the financial markets and the EU. If tensions continue to mount, Mattarella will use all the formal and informal powers of persuasion at his disposal to preserve the current situation, or some variation of it, in which Conte, Finance Minister Giovanni Tria and the EU keep a lid on the populists' penchant for excess. This kind of mediated populism on display in Rome is not perfect by any means, but it is better than the likely alternatives.

Mattarella's best efforts could be rendered null and void by a major split in the M5S, however. The party is not outright leftist, but many of its parliamentarians are internationalist, environmentalist and alienated by the League's pro-business, pro-growth, anti-immigrant rhetoric. It is possible that a substantial minority could defy the M5S' strict internal discipline and vote in parliament against League policies they don't like. When Di Maio can no longer deliver a reliable majority in parliament, the coalition will come to an abrupt end.

For all this turmoil, Italy isn't as unstable as its neighbors suggest. French politicians have a bad habit of remarking snootily on Italy's political antics, but there have been no yellow-vested rioters torching Rome's most exclusive boulevards, though people are burning the trash left uncollected by the inept, M5S-led city government. British politicians are equally patronizing toward Italy's democracy, but it is Britain that is crashing out of the EU, not Italy. By those admittedly low standards, Italy is experiencing a moment of relative calm and stability. The question is whether it will last.

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WHY POLAND'S POPULIST LAW AND JUSTICE PARTY KEEPS WINNING

ANNABELLE CHAPMAN | SEPTEMBER 2019

With most of the votes counted, Jaroslaw Kaczynski took the stage and declared victory. “Today is a very important day,” he told a packed room of members of his populist Law and Justice party in Warsaw. PiS, as the party is known by its Polish acronym, had just had its strongest showing ever in an election for the European Parliament. Despite high hopes from a broad coalition of opposition parties, **PiS won, with 45 percent of the vote**. The opposition alliance received a combined 38 percent.

But Kaczynski, addressing party insiders at its headquarters on a Sunday night in late May, had bigger plans. “We have to remember that the decisive battle for the future of our country will take place this autumn, and we also have to win—and win by even more than now.”

PiS has governed Poland since 2015, when, after eight years in opposition, it became the first party to win an absolute majority in a Polish election since the fall of communism in 1989. Over its four years in power, the party has moved the country in an increasingly illiberal direction, championing a socially conservative vision of Poland, accompanied by anti-immigrant and homophobic rhetoric and efforts to control the judiciary. The European Commission, the European Union’s executive branch, has **criticized reforms pushed by PiS** to strengthen its influence over the two highest courts in the country, calling them threats to the rule of law in Poland and by extension to the EU’s core principles.



ABOVE Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the leader of the Law and Justice party, addressing party members after the results of the European Parliament election were announced, in Warsaw, Poland, May 26, 2019 (AP photo by Czarek Sokolowski).

Yet despite these trends, which have raised alarms in Brussels and other European capitals, PiS remains the most popular political party in Poland, as the results of the election to the European Parliament confirmed. The election was seen as a test for [Poland's parliamentary elections on Oct. 13](#), which polls suggest PiS will win too.

The outcome of October's elections will have lasting implications for Poland, Europe and for democracy more broadly. For years, observers held up Poland's peaceful political and economic transition from communism after 1989, which culminated in NATO and EU membership, as a model of liberal democracy for other post-Soviet countries, such as Ukraine and Georgia, to follow. Yet political developments in Poland over the past few years have made it clear that liberal democracy and the freedoms associated with it are no longer the only game in town.

If PiS wins again this fall, it will be more difficult for observers in Europe and the United States to dismiss its success as a blip in Poland's post-communist history. Like the string of electoral victories in nearby Hungary by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who boasts of building an "illiberal state," continued political dominance by PiS will further dent the image of liberal democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. But given the party's track record and Poland's trajectory after the fall of communism, a deeper question remains: What is really behind PiS' rise and its continued appeal to Polish voters?

The PiS Paradox

In terms of its political agenda, PiS defies easy classification. Experts often describe the party as "right-wing" or even "far right," due to its members' socially conservative views and nationalist rhetoric. Indeed, its supporters consider themselves to be defending Polish values against "liberals" and "leftists," which they deploy as derogatory terms. The party's leaders have presented PiS as safeguarding Poland against migrants and refugees from the Middle East and Africa, as well as from LGBT people, among others.

At the same time, the party's economic policy draws on ideas associated with the left, like state interventionism and high social spending. Its flagship social program, known as 500 Plus, consists of a monthly stipend for all households with children. The government has proposed replacing the economic liberalism that characterized the post-communist years in Poland with what it calls "Polish capitalism," involving income redistribution in the form of generous social welfare benefits.

"Capitalism must be a social capitalism, pro-social but also creating good living conditions for entrepreneurs and companies," **Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki told an economic conference** in the southeastern city of Rzeszów in November 2017, when he was serving as the minister of economics and minister of finance.

Combining nationalism and xenophobia with the kinds of economic policies associated with social democrats might seem contradictory. But PiS has successfully merged them into an increasingly popular political program, as its continued support at the ballot box attests.

Party Divisions

PiS may articulate a steady political message, always hitting on jingoistic and euroskeptic tones, but the party is not monolithic. Yet Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the party's chairman, remains its uncontested leader—and a polarizing figure in Poland. Kaczynski, who co-founded PiS in 2001 with his twin brother, Lech, is credited with holding the party together. That includes after Lech, who was elected president in 2005, [died in a plane crash in Smolensk, Russia in 2010](#).

Although Kaczynski served as prime minister from 2006 to 2007 during PiS' short first stint in power, he has chosen to govern from behind the scenes since the party's sweeping electoral victory in 2015. On paper, he has no government function, beyond being a member of parliament and PiS party leader. For all his influence, Kaczynski is today one of Poland's least trusted politicians; in one recent poll, [39 percent of respondents said they distrusted him](#).

Aware of his divisive image, Kaczynski has made sure to tap milder figures to lead the government. When PiS came to power in 2015, he made Beata Szydlo, the party's deputy leader, prime minister. A coal-miner's daughter in her 50s, Szydlo became the face of PiS' generous welfare policies, which were introduced by her government. Then, when Kaczynski decided the

COMBINING NATIONALISM AND XENOPHOBIA WITH ECONOMIC POLICIES ASSOCIATED WITH SOCIAL DEMOCRATS MIGHT SEEM CONTRADICTIONARY, BUT PIS HAS SUCCESSFULLY MERGED THEM.

moment was right, he replaced her in December 2017 with Morawiecki, then the finance minister and deputy prime minister—perhaps to give the government a fresh face that could potentially court moderate urban voters. Szydło was allowed to stay on in the Cabinet, where she continued to be the mouthpiece for PiS' economic policies until she was elected to the European Parliament this year.

The 51-year-old Morawiecki makes for a striking contrast to Kaczyński. With his smooth manner, fluent English and background as a banker, Morawiecki has a relatively unusual profile for PiS, which he didn't even join until the spring of 2016. Yet he embodies a tension between his worldly image, which has him courting other bankers in London, and his role in the nationalist government in Warsaw.

On multiple occasions, for instance, Morawiecki has personally defended PiS' overhaul of the judiciary. These reforms began with the Constitutional Tribunal shortly after PiS came to power. The PiS-led government appointed five new judges to the court, which reviews the constitutionality of laws, and claimed the sitting judges chosen by the previous government under the centrist Civic Platform party were illegitimate. It then passed a law severely curtailing the tribunal's powers.

PiS later passed a law lowering the retirement age for judges on the Supreme Court from 70 to 65, **which forced more than two dozen judges**—a third of the entire court—to step down. Under pressure from the EU, **PiS last fall reversed that controversial provision** on judges' retirement age. **Speaking to an audience at New York University** in April, Morawiecki compared the sweeping restructuring of the Polish judiciary “to the French one in the post-Vichy France,” referring to the postwar French effort to weed out anyone who collaborated with the Nazis during World War II.

This unusual arrangement, in which Kaczyński runs the show from behind the scenes while figures like Morawiecki publicly defend the party's illiberal policies, helps explain the PiS

government's ability to not only weather the criticism it has faced from Brussels, but also to emerge unscathed domestically. Kaczynski is not directly accountable for the government's actions, and if the government needs a facelift, he can replace the prime minister with a different figure, as he did in 2017. Could that dynamic change after October? Jaroslaw Gowin, a deputy prime minister, **recently suggested that Kaczynski himself** could become prime minister after the elections this fall.

For all its political advantages, Kaczynski's informal hold on power also presents a danger for PiS itself, over the question of succession. As party chairman, Kaczynski has no obvious successor. According to a poll conducted in May 2018, there is no consensus as to who could potentially replace him. Just 14.4 percent of respondents named Morawiecki, followed by other senior figures in PiS. Most people—42.8 percent—**responded "hard to say."** These results reflect the unique role that Kaczynski plays within the party. He has held PiS together for almost two decades. It is unclear whether Morawiecki, or anyone else, could manage to do the same.

So when the day comes, Kaczynski's departure from politics could ultimately mean the party's demise, exposing it to a potential split between more moderate conservatives and church-backed hard-liners, for instance. Speculation about the party's future mounted last summer when **Kaczynski temporarily vanished from politics**, ostensibly to undergo knee surgery.

Family and Nation

Despite slip-ups and minor scandals along the way, PiS has maintained its lead in the polls, partly because of its social programs. The **500 Plus program** introduced in April 2016—which provides a 500 zloty, or \$150, monthly payment to all families with more than two children, and to low-income families with any number of children—was expanded this

summer. It now applies to all families with any number of children, regardless of income. PiS' other social programs include a one-off bonus pension payment to retirees. And a new law that will exempt most workers under the age of 26 from paying income tax goes into effect this fall.

Alongside its popular welfare policies, PiS has sought other ways to mobilize voters, responding to events in Poland and abroad. Its 2015 electoral win coincided with the height of the refugee crisis in Europe. In the run-up to the vote, PiS politicians effectively stoked fear of migrants and asylum-seekers from North Africa and the Middle East, presenting them as a threat to national security, often in baldly xenophobic and racist terms. At a pre-election rally in October 2015, Kaczynski even alleged that migrants carry "parasites and protozoa." PiS presented itself as the only party capable of protecting Poland from an influx of Muslim immigrants, a message that resonated among part of the electorate.

Anti-immigrant and homophobic rhetoric taps into the broader nationalist and traditionalist sentiment that PiS represents, which shapes the rest of its ideological project.

Four years on, PiS is using a new target to mobilize voters: the LGBT community. This past March, Warsaw's liberal mayor signed the "LGBT+ Declaration," which proclaimed the city's acceptance of the LGBT community and pledged to establish shelters for LGBT teens rejected by their families, as well as anti-discrimination and sex education at schools, among other provisions. PiS presented the initiative as an attack on the family, a claim its traditional ally, the Catholic church, supported. In a statement published in March, the Polish Bishops' Conference called non-heterosexual partnerships "completely alien to European civilization."

PiS has successfully exploited a mistrust of the LGBT community among certain voters, especially within its core electorate outside Warsaw and other big cities. In Poland, opponents of same-sex marriage outnumber supporters, according to polls, though more than half of Poles do support

civil partnerships. At the same time, according to many polls, including one most recently in July, over three-quarters of respondents **oppose adoption by LGBT couples**. PiS' defense of the heterosexual family unit complements its social programs that help families in material terms.

As the October elections approach, anti-LGBT sentiment on the Polish far right has intensified. In the lead-up to Pride month, *Gazeta Polska*, a pro-PiS weekly, distributed stickers with the words "LGBT-free zone" printed on them, while some local PiS leaders declared their municipalities "LGBT free." A Pride march in the eastern city of Bialystok was **violently attacked by far-right groups**, who threw flash bombs, rocks and glass bottles at participants. Some PiS politicians responded to the violence by suggesting that further Pride marches should be canceled.

"These types of marches caused by environments trying to force non-standard sexual behaviors arouse enormous resistance," Dariusz Piontkowski, the minister of education, **said in an interview with the Polish news channel TVN24**, after the violence in Bialystok. "Therefore, it is worth considering whether in the future such events should be organized.

This anti-immigrant and homophobic rhetoric taps into the broader nationalist and traditionalist sentiment that PiS represents, which shapes the rest of its ideological project. Last year, PiS politicians reformed a law that would it make a crime to suggest any kind of Polish complicity with Nazis during World War II. In doing so, PiS was able to frame itself as the one party that would **protect Poland's reputation and legacy**.

The Opposition Divided

In the struggle to govern Poland, PiS' main challenger is the centrist Civic Platform party, known as PO in its Polish acronym. Co-founded in 2001 by Donald Tusk, the current president of the European Council, PO led the Polish government from 2007 until 2015. Although the two parties broadly agree on certain

issues, such as EU and NATO membership, they differ sharply on economic policy as well as their style of politics. While PiS wants Poland in the EU, it wants an EU on its own terms, with more power for member states rather than for supranational institutions that it sees as unaccountable. While in power, PO adopted a liberal approach to the economy as well as a mild, pragmatic approach to politics. PO's focus on gradually improving Poles' living standards through continued economic growth—what Tusk called “warm water in the tap”—contrasts with PiS' more ideologically driven politics.

With the fall elections approaching, the PiS-PO rivalry continues to define Polish politics. Despite various changes over the past four years, PO has managed to remain the leading party in the anti-PiS opposition. In the European Parliament elections in May, PO led a broad anti-PiS alliance, known as the European Coalition, which comprised the rural agrarian Polish People's Party, PO's junior coalition partner in government between 2007 and 2014; and the center-left Democratic Left Alliance, along with other smaller parties. Despite this joint effort, the PiS still managed to win. Although the results were relatively close, liberal observers still deemed the European Coalition's result disappointing.

PO's strong pro-European credentials generally give it something of an advantage over PiS in elections to the European Parliament, given PiS' strained relationship with the EU and voter base outside Poland's major cities. That made PiS' electoral win in May even more symbolically significant.

After the European Coalition defeat, several weeks of soul-searching ensued, as opposition parties considered whether they should run again in a coalition or on their own. Their dilemma reflected tensions within the anti-PiS opposition, including on matters such as LGBT rights, which have been at the forefront of the political debate in recent months. Ultimately, the Polish People's Party decided to run separately from PO to appeal directly to rural, more conservative voters, a constituency that it competes for with PiS. This means that the opposition will run

against PiS in three main blocs: a PO-led centrist one; a much smaller, more rural-focused one led by the Polish People's Party; and a third bloc made up of left-wing parties.

On the opposite side of the political spectrum, PiS has faced some pressure from extreme far-right groups, but not enough to threaten its position. In the European Parliament elections, far-right groups and leaders ran together as an anti-immigration and euroskeptic alliance called the Confederation. Among other things, it strongly **opposes the payment of restitution for Jewish property** seized during or after World War II. The Confederation failed to gain mass appeal, though, finishing with less than 5 percent of the vote in the European elections, below the threshold for a seat in the European Parliament. The result suggests that it is unlikely to be a major force in the elections this fall, though its existence still represents a troubling stream in Polish politics.

What to Expect

Barring a major surprise, it appears likely that PiS can count on reelection. In scheduling the election for Oct. 13, Andrzej Duda, the PiS-allied president, chose the earliest date possible, which suggests that PiS wants to keep the electoral campaign short, giving the opposition less time to mount an offensive.

From its relatively comfortable position, PiS will likely emphasize the popular, less controversial aspects of its four years in power, such as its recently expanded 500 Plus program and other social welfare benefits. At the same time, it will continue to present itself as the only party capable of protecting Poles from purported threats, whether that means Middle Eastern refugees or LGBT people.

If PiS does win again, it will have longer-term implications, and not only in Poland. Domestically, it will mean that the party has found a successful formula for staying in power, blending nationalist and traditionalist elements with generous welfare policies—as long as it has the money to fund them. Kaczynski

will continue to steer politics, most likely from the party's headquarters in Warsaw. Within Europe, the PiS government will no doubt continue to challenge Brussels on matters such as judicial independence. This ongoing dispute, which has been dragging on for several years now, exposes the EU's limited ability to protect the rule of law in its member states. From a broader democratic perspective, PiS' endurance further challenges the idea of 1989 as "the end of history" in Central and Eastern Europe, forcing political scientists and practitioners to update their paradigms to understand the current situation.

But PiS is not infallible. It will keep facing internal tensions, between its political and economic agenda, and among its most hard-line members and more moderate conservatives. Whenever Kaczynski is no longer party chairman, a potential leadership contest over succession looms. How the party handles these challenges will determine its ability to continue winning over voters, with lasting consequences in Poland and beyond.

Annabelle Chapman is a Warsaw-based journalist. Her articles have been published in The Economist, Politico Europe, Foreign Affairs, Newsweek, Foreign Policy, Quartz, Monocle and the Financial Times, among other publications. She holds a doctorate on communist-era Poland from the University of Oxford.

CAN SLOVAKIA REALLY TURN BACK THE POPULIST TIDE IN CENTRAL EUROPE?

TIM GOSLING | APRIL 2019

The election of Zuzana Caputova as Slovakia's first female president last month was a landmark in more ways than one. The win by the 45-year-old lawyer and activist represented a liberal turn in Central Europe, where right-leaning, populist governments have been in power for several years.

Much of the news coverage since Caputova's victory has framed Slovakia as a great liberal hope that could push back populism and resurgent nationalism in the region, if not across the continent. But can this small state, which has [endured political upheaval](#) over the past year, really deliver on that lofty promise?

The election of Caputova, a single mother and political novice, was driven by a protest movement unleashed by the killing of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancé, Martina Kusnirova, back in February 2018. The murder is widely understood to have been [provoked by his reporting](#) on organized crime and political corruption. In early April, a former soldier, Miroslav Marcek, confessed to the brutal murders. The details of the criminal conspiracy behind the assassination, including suspected ties to the government, continue to shake Slovak society as they emerge.

"The investigation," Caputova [told The Washington Post](#) last week, "is producing more and more information about the links between crime and representatives of our justice system."

But while Slovakian politics, dominated for over a decade by the nominally left-leaning Smer party and its leader, erstwhile Prime Minister Robert Fico, have been upended since Kuciak's murder and Caputova's election, no one's sure where the pieces

will land. Otilia Dhand, a Slovak-born political risk analyst at Teneo Intelligence, says she's watched the swooning by journalists and commentators abroad over Slovakia after Caputova's win "with bemusement."

There's no hiding, though, that Smer is on a downward spiral. The party appears fatefully damaged by the systemic corruption and cronyism that have accompanied its rule. Support for the party peaked in the 2012 general election, when it won 44 percent of the vote, allowing it to form Slovakia's first and to date only single-party government. Polls taken since Caputova's victory point to support for Smer dropping rapidly; it now sits **below 20 percent** for the first time in more than a decade.

Fico was forced to step down in the political firestorm around Kuciak's murder, but he still lurks in the background. His presence is driving intense internal party rivalries, and local party structures are said to be collapsing beyond Bratislava.

Caputova assumes a presidency that is largely ceremonial. The real battle for Slovakia's political future will be parliamentary elections, which are due by this time next year. In a fractured political landscape, nationalists, populists and even neo-Nazis will join revived liberals in jostling to fill the void left by Smer's decline.

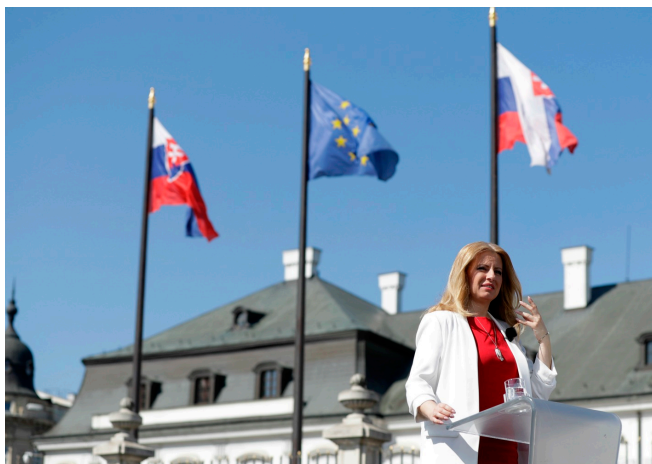
Two recently launched liberal parties—Progressive Slovakia, co-founded by Caputova, and Civic Democracy, or Spolu—have been the main beneficiaries of the protests over Kuciak's killing. Polls show support for their coalition has risen to around 14 percent.

Despite the optimism it brought for liberal forces in Slovakia, the presidential election also illustrated that deep support for radical parties on the right persists.

Outgoing President Andrej Kiska is the "wild card" on the liberal side, says Andrej Matisak, an editor at the Slovak daily Pravda. Kiska has spent the past five years as the last liberal standing in the four Central European countries that make up the Visegrad Group. Viktor Orban is busy dismantling democracy in Hungary; Poland's ruling Law and Justice party seeks to isolate the country within its own deeply nationalist

DESPITE THE OPTIMISM IT BROUGHT FOR LIBERAL FORCES IN SLOVAKIA, THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION ALSO ILLUSTRATED THAT DEEP SUPPORT FOR RADICAL PARTIES ON THE RIGHT PERSISTS.

BELOW Slovakia's newly elected president, Zuzana Caputova, arrives for a television interview in front of the Presidential Palace in Bratislava, Slovakia, March 31, 2019 (AP photo by Petr David Josek).



and conservative worldview; and in the Czech Republic, power is captive to populists and oligarchs.

Kiska announced in May 2018 that he would quit the presidency, despite polls suggesting he would comfortably win a second term. He spent the months since then hinting that he was weary of politics and would leave it altogether. He was a keen supporter of Caputova's campaign, but shortly after her win he revealed plans to launch a new party to fight for real power in parliament.

A poll by the AKO agency suggests his party could attract as much as 40 percent support in next year's parliamentary elections. That would be a remarkably high figure in Slovakia's fragmented political environment, and would also drain support from Progressive Slovakia and Spolu.

But despite the optimism it brought for these liberal forces, the presidential election also illustrated that deep support for radical parties on the right persists in Slovakia. Stefan Harabin, a reactionary judge and former justice minister, came third in the race with about 14 percent of the vote, on a platform promising to protect Slovakia's Christian heritage and culture against, as he put

it, Islam, homosexuality, the European Union and NATO. In one presidential debate, he **attacked Caputova** as a "lover of migration" who "would accept foreign armies in Slovakia" and represented "gender ideology."

Marian Kotleba, the leader of the far-right People's Party-Our Slovakia, known as the LSNS, was right behind him in fourth. Kotleba and his party openly harbor neo-Nazi views, yet he still took over 10 percent of the vote for president,

and added the Roma to Harabin's list of Slovakian enemies.

Voter turnout, at just over 40 percent in the second round, also raises questions. Many nationalist and populist voters stayed at home rather than support either Caputova or her Smer-backed rival, Maros Sefcovic, who was tainted in their eyes by his recent role as a vice president of the European Commission.

This right-wing bloc of voters is likely to have a bigger say in next year's parliamentary election. Smer lost its moderate supporters a long time ago. Those that remain are attracted by Fico's populist stances on immigration and the media. If Smer continues to decline, its supporters would likely go to other parties with similar views.

"Voters favoring a 'strong leader' still support Smer, but as soon as an alternative emerges elsewhere, they'll be off," Dhand predicts.

There are potential wild cards on the right as well as in the center. At the end of April, Slovakia's Supreme Court will rule on a bid by state prosecutors to ban Kotleba's pseudo-fascist party on the grounds that it aims to overturn democracy. The LSNS currently commands support of around 10 percent, so its demise would open up even more space on the extreme right on top of Smer's decline—space that a new party could try to seize. Kotleba has transformed from a cartoonish neo-Nazi with a penchant for marching in black uniforms into an effective party leader, though still one who likes to praise Slovakia's collaboration with the Nazis. Harabin also has political traction despite his intolerant views.

"The court decision on LSNS is a potential black swan," says Matisak. "It's very unclear what could happen on the right if the party is banned, but there will be a plan. Everyone's trying to figure out how to secure these voters sitting to the right."

Amid this shifting landscape, littered with potential land mines, the only certainty seems to be that Slovakia's politics will be even more volatile—and perhaps less liberal than Caputova's victory might suggest.

As Matisak says, “the Kuciak murder blew everything up.” More than a year and a presidential election later, and with a major parliamentary election looming, political parties are just starting to dig through the rubble.

Tim Gosling is a Prague-based journalist who has covered the Central European region for several years. He has contributed to Politico Europe, Deutsche Welle and the Financial Times, among other publications, and also provided analysis on the region for the Economist Intelligence Unit and IHS Markit.

AMID PROTESTS, CAN HUNGARY'S OPPOSITION FINALLY UNITE AGAINST ORBAN?

TIM GOSLING | JANUARY 2019

Protests sparked by a new law that allows employers to demand 400 hours of overtime from workers each year, which critics have dubbed the “slave law,” have put Hungary’s disparate opposition parties side by side on the streets and in parliament. They need to expand this cooperation if they’re going to mount a serious challenge to Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s corrupt, authoritarian government.

Passed in December, the “slave law” would essentially move Hungarian workers to a six-day work week, with pay postponed. The measure is Orban’s way of softening the effects of a severe labor shortage for multinational corporations, with which he maintains close relations, without backing down on his anti-immigrant crusade, the cornerstone of his domestic political support.

Not for the first time, however, Orban’s confidence has tricked him into pushing the limits. More than once since taking power in 2010, he has climbed down on specific issues that have brought Hungarians into the streets. But now there’s a risk the opposition could unify and mount a more concerted challenge to his power.

Cooperation among Hungary’s numerous opposition parties began on Dec. 12. As Orban’s ruling Fidesz party sought to ram the overtime measure through parliament, opposition lawmakers from parties spanning the political spectrum, from the nationalist right to socialists, came together to block the podium. Crowds quickly gathered outside the giant neo-Gothic parliament building on the banks of the Danube River.

The protests have persisted since then, and political parties remain unusually prominent alongside the NGOs and civil organizations that have traditionally led demonstrations against Fidesz. It has quickly become clear that the “slave law” was only the spark, and that the target of the protests is now the Fidesz government itself.

Over three consecutive terms, Orban has used populist fear-mongering and economic handouts to build his self-described “illiberal democracy.” The prime minister is regularly accused, both by his domestic opponents and critics within the European Union, of dismantling Hungary’s political system, abusing the rule of law and building a fiefdom. He has engineered control of the media, judiciary and wide swaths of the economy. Claims that he sits at the center of a massive web of corruption are standard.

However, helped by an economic boom—one that is largely EU-driven—Fidesz still enjoys a huge advantage over its rivals. Even with the protests, polls taken in December showed that Fidesz enjoyed 35 percent support—a lead of more than 25

BELOW A protester holds a sign mocking Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban during an anti-government march in central Budapest, Hungary, Dec. 21, 2018 (AP photo by Marko Drobnyakovic).



points over the nationalist Jobbik, its closest rival. And although it's relatively easy to protest single issues side by side, having opposition parties cooperate at the level needed to bring down Orban is another thing. They remain weak and poorly organized, and many have little in common except their dislike of Fidesz. Mutual antipathy and self-interest reign.

A call in early January by the leader of the Socialist Party, Bertalan Toth, for a single list of candidates for May's elections to the European Parliament looks to be little more than "a PR move" to suit his own party, according to Andras Biro-Nagy, a political scientist and the co-director of Policy Solutions, a think tank in Budapest.

Last April, despite efforts in some quarters to bring the opposition together, Orban and Fidesz claimed its third straight parliamentary majority, winning 133 of 199 seats. Opposition leaders across the spectrum now say that election was a game-changer.

The scale of Orban's victory was a shock, admits Marton Gyongyosi, the vice president of Jobbik and the leader of its parliamentary faction. Fidesz has been so successful at selling its xenophobic message in recent years that Jobbik, which formally espoused a far-right agenda, has been forced to temper its "national radical" roots to seek support closer to the center of the political spectrum.

Former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany, who was in office from 2004 to 2009 and is now the leader of the social liberal Democratic Coalition, or DK, says the result jolted the opposition into the realization that it must adapt in order "restore democracy."

But perhaps most importantly, opposition voters are now demanding cooperation, which is creating a seismic shift inside the Hungarian opposition.

Jobbik was founded on the back of anger against Gyurcsany's Socialist Party government and its links to free-

“WE CAN’T JUST CONTINUE ACTING AS WE HAVE OVER THE LAST EIGHT YEARS AS A DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION, BECAUSE THIS ISN’T A DEMOCRACY ANYMORE.”

market business interests. Ahead of last year's parliamentary elections, Gyongyosi still insisted that his party's voters would never tolerate any cooperation with the former prime minister. Now, he has changed his tune. "Ferenc Gyurcsany is no longer the greatest threat to this country," Gyongyosi says in an interview. "The only way to defeat the Orban regime is to let bygones be bygones."

Gyurcsany's position is also changing. "We have always aggressively opposed any cooperation with Jobbik," he told WPR. "But in the last eight months, the attitude of voters has changed, and they are demanding cooperation regardless of ideological differences."

"The events in parliament on Dec. 12 changed things," says Biro-Nagy. "The opposition parties have crossed the mental threshold to cooperation." Upcoming local elections this fall "are the last opportunity to gather positions and resources before the next parliamentary vote in 2022," he adds. "Most are struggling financially, but they have a chance to win the major cities if they work together."

But it's not all so cut-and-dried. Some rivals claim Jobbik's refusal to commit to full cooperation in the upcoming European Parliament elections is a way to protect its status as Hungary's main opposition party. Gyongyosi insists Jobbik is now committed to cooperation, but that it's unrealistic to expect Hungary's parties to live together politically. "Municipal elections are centered on local issues and largely free from political ideology," he says. "We'd be stupid not to work together."

Gyurcsany, in turn, claims that multiparty talks are already underway over which party will fight Fidesz in which constituency. Both he and Gyongyosi also say that there are concrete plans in the works for a joint campaign—if not joint lists—for the European Parliament elections.

The parties won't get to test their newfound commitment to unity in a general election until 2022, but they are still discussing strategies for how they can work in the national parliament in the

interim and try to maintain the momentum of anti-Fidesz feeling in the country for the next two and a half years.

“We have until the new session opens in mid-February to wade through numerous ideas,” says a source from one party, who asked to remain anonymous in order to speak frankly. “We’ve shown that cooperation on the streets and in the parliament works. We can’t just continue acting as we have over the last eight years as a democratic opposition, because this isn’t a democracy anymore.”

“You can’t design these political moments perfectly,” Gyurcsany admits. “But they can instigate new political movements and leaders. It’s hard to say which parties will emerge victorious, but we have no choice now but to fight together.”

Biro-Nagy is more upbeat. With the right strategy, he believes, the opposition can take advantage of the timing. “The opposition has lived without success for 12 years, and its voters have become demoralized, believing Fidesz can’t be defeated,” he says. “A good showing in the local elections would let them use the time to prepare for parliamentary elections with a totally different dynamic, and perhaps convince them to unite for that vote.”

For the moment, though, Orban doesn’t appear to be sweating. He has stuck to his usual game, painting the protesters as traitors in the pay of a globalist conspiracy.

“Opposition groups remain weak and divided,” Zoltan Kovacs, a government spokesman, insisted last month. He warned Hungarians to beware of “a small minority of foreign-trained activists, representatives of losing political parties” and “Soros network putschists,” referring to the Hungarian-born billionaire philanthropist George Soros, Orban’s favorite liberal bogeyman. All of them, the spokesman **declared**, are “hell-bent on toppling a popular, democratically elected government.”

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