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From Democratization to Populism: On the Rise of Populism in Post-Communist Europe

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From Democratization to Populism: On the Rise of Populism in Post-Communist Europe
Tsveta Petrova, Columbia University

Over the past decade, a number of European populist parties have become increasingly competitive in key votes, and in Eastern Europe, these parties have not only come to power but also remained in office in consecutive elections. What has contributed to the rise of populism in Eastern Europe? And how has the region's distinctive communist and post-communist history influenced these developments? This essay briefly defines the phenomenon of interest and summarizes some of the most influential academic work on these questions.

Who are the populists in post-communist Europe?

Populism has been defined as a strategy of direct mobilization, rejecting the mediation of individual and societal interests through democratic institutions,[1] or alternatively, as an anti-establishment and at times moralist ideology[2] or rhetorical strategy[3]. The most widely-accepted definition of populism in the study of post-communist Europe conceptualizes the phenomenon as a thin-layered ideology that has anti-establishment but also moralist and monist elements (and that can be combined with other ideologies like nativism on the right and socialism on the left).[4] Populists tend to depict society as divided into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: people versus elites. Such populist mobilization, however, is not only anti-establishment but also moralist given the implied or explicit opposition of "the corrupt elite" versus "the pure people". Populists also claim exclusive representation – that they, and only they, represent "the people." And the denial of the existence of divisions of interests and opinions within "the people" allows such movements to reject the legitimacy of political opponents, sometimes even suppress civic and political opposition, and, eventually, such monism leads to a polarized, anti-pluralist political culture.

So who are the populists in post-communist Europe? Fidesz in Hungary, led by Viktor Orbán, and Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, led by Jarosław Kaczynski, have become posterchildren for contemporary populism in the region. PiS and Fidesz have explicitly positioned the "people" against the elites since the mid-2000s.[5] For example, PiS often contrasts "the nation" as a morally-upright community to the elite cartel ("uklad") of former Solidarity and former

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[1] Kurt Weyland, "Neopopulism and Neoliberalism in Latin America: Unexpected Affinities," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 31, no. 3 (1996): 3 and Kenneth Roberts, "Populism, Political Conflict, and Grass-Roots Organization in Latin America," *Comparative Politics* 38, no. 2 (2006): 127.

[2] Cas Mudde, "Populism," In Cas Mudde and C. R. Kaltwasser, *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* Cas Mudde and C.R. Kaltwasser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[3] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

[4] Mudde, "Populism."

[5] Béla Greskovits and Dorothee Bohle, "Politicising Embedded Neoliberalism: Continuity and Change in Hungary's Development Model," *West European Politics* 42, no. 5 (2019): 1069; Erin Jenne, "Is Nationalism or Ethnopopulism on the Rise Today?" *Ethnopolitics* 17, no. 5 (2018): 546; Seongcheol Kim, "Because the Homeland Cannot be in Opposition: Analysing the Discourses of Fidesz and Law and Justice (PiS) from Opposition to Power," *East European Politics* 37, no. 2 (2021): 332; and Milada Vachudova, "Ethnopopulism and Democratic Backsliding in Central Europe," *East European Politics* 36, no. 3 (2020): 318.

communist parties, which PiS claims is a self-serving, anti-Polish, western/liberal-communist-criminal mafia.[6] PiS also carried out the key policies in defense of the "nation" that the party campaigned on. In 2006, PiS passed a lustration law that made all public officials subject to scrutiny and tried to direct the Institute of National Remembrance to investigate victims of fascist- and communist-era crimes. And after assuming power in 2015, PiS changed the rules for naming judges to the Constitutional Tribunal, ordered a major purge of public radio and television, and abolished the political neutrality of the civil service, while also offering social welfare benefits consistent with its social-conservative values (child subsidies, minimum wage hike, and cash bonuses for retirees).[7]

Other regimes in the region have also copied some elements of the PiS-Fidesz populist playbook, especially around anti-elitism, opposition suppression, and redistribution. Some have also classified key right-wing parties in the Czech Republic (ANO), Bulgaria (GERB), Serbia (SNS) and Slovenia (SDS) as populist.[8] For example, Andrej Babis, the Czech Republic's Prime Minister, ran an anti-establishment and xenophobic campaign, and then quickly concentrated power in his own hands, while wooing senior citizens with higher pensions and generous public transport concessions and young parents with free school meals.[9] Others also point to left leaders, such as Slovakia's former Prime Minister Robert Fico of Smer-SD, whose social programs for the masses and xenophobic/ anti-refugees campaign has those scholars labeling him "the Orbán of the left".[10] Yet, others qualify leaders like Babis as "technocratic populists"[11] or point out that while leaders such as Fico and Babis have both resorted to demagoguery, neither has embraced the monist and moralist ideology that sets PiS and Fidesz apart from other regimes in the region.[12]

What are the factors contributing to the rise of populism in post-communist Europe?

Some of the early work on the post-communist transitions in Eastern Europe, informed in part by research on the democratization of Latin America, anticipated that the short-term costs of economic reform would lead to a populist backlash in the early 1990s. Whereas some authors

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[6] Anna Grzymala-Busse, "Global Populisms," *Slavic Review* 76, no. 1 (2017): 1.

[7] Wojciech Sadurski, *Poland's Constitutional Breakdown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[8] Mitchell Orenstein and Bojan Bugarič, "Work, Family, Fatherland: the Political Economy of Populism in Central and Eastern Europe," *Journal of European Public Policy* (2020): 1. Scholars of comparative populism have even broader operationalizations of populism and classify addition parties as populist: for example, Ataka (Bulgaria), VMRO-BND (Bulgaria), NFSB (Bulgaria); HSS (Croatia), HDSSB (Croatia), HSP (Croatia), HDZ (Croatia); Usvit (Czech Republic); Jobbik (Hungary); NA (Latvia); DK (Lithuania); SP (Poland), KNP (Poland); PP-DD (Romania); NSI (Slovenia); SNS (Slovakia) (Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Authoritarian-Populism* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019).)

[9] Seán Hanley and Milada Vachudova, "Understanding the Illiberal Turn: Democratic Backsliding in the Czech Republic," *East European Politics* 34, no. 3 (2018): 276.

[10] Jacques Rupnik, "Surging Illiberalism in the East," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 4 (2016): 77.

[11] Lenka Bustikova and Petra Guasti, "The State as a Firm: Understanding the Autocratic Roots of Technocratic Populism," *East European Politics and Society* 33, no. 2 (2018): 302.

[12] Sarah Engler et al., "Assessing the Diversity of Anti-establishment and Populist Politics in Central and Eastern Europe," *West European Politics* 42, no. 6 (2019): 1310.

expected sabotage by frustrated reform elites or by reactionary authoritarians,[13] others forecasted that the "millions of people, marginalized by the wager on the elite" would become "receptive to demagogues" and nationalism.[14] By the end of the 1990s, however, such concerns of democratic reversal were mostly replaced by concerns of inchoate democratization. Some argued that it was the early elite winners, not voters-losers, who wanted to stall the economies in the region in partial-reform equilibrium in order to continue to extract rents for themselves.[15] And the relative lack of disruptive political unrest was attributed to traditions of protest voting and opting out by turning to the informal economy as well as to the positive impact of European Union's accession political conditionality.[16] Given the shallowness of the resultant democratic socialization by the EU, however, by the mid-2000s, many started warning about democratic erosion in the post-accession period and the strengthening of extreme and nationalist parties (though not necessarily mainstream populist parties).[17] The mid-2000s indeed began a period of some democratic regression across the region, including the short-lived ascension to power of the populist Law and Justice party in Poland. The 2010s brought about the electoral resilience of the increasingly populist Fidesz party in Hungary.

Recent scholarship on the region has tended to look primarily to its distinctive history for explanations of the wave of populism in post-communist Europe. Those have emphasized both the supply and the demand side of the electoral process in the region, with some authors bridging and integrating these two types of accounts.

On the supply side, some look at the struggle over the nation between political centers and peripheries, the competition between populists and non-proximate parties that promote minority rights, and right-wing promotion of traditional values and minority assimilation[18]. Others discuss the failures of mainstream parties – to uphold the left's traditional social policy commitments and to contain the right's xenophobes and nativists – as a status quo that amounts to rule by a

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[13] Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[14] David Ost, "Shock Therapy and Its Discontents," *Telos* (Summer 1992).

[15] Joel Hellman, "Winners Take All: The Politics of Partial Reform in Postcommunist Transitions," *World Politics* 50, no. 2 (1998): 203.

[16] Bela Greskovits, *The Political Economy of Protest and Patience: East European and Latin American Transformations Compared* (New York: Central European University Press, 1998) and Milada. Vachudova, *Europe Undivided: Democracy, Leverage, and Integration after Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[17] Milada Vachudova, "Tempered by the EU? Political Parties and Party Systems Before and after Accession," *Journal of European Public Policy* 15, no. 6 (2008): 861; Lenka Bustikova, "The Extreme Right in Eastern Europe: EU Accession and the Quality of Governance," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 17 (2009): 223; Tsveta Petrova, "Differential Impact of EU Enlargement on First and Second Wave Applicants: Europeanizing Political Parties in Poland and Bulgaria," Stanford CDDRL Working Paper No. 65 (2004); John Nagle, "Ethnos, Demos and Democratization: A Comparison of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland," *Democratization* 4, no. 2 (1997): 28.

[18] See, for example, respectively, Aron Hadas, *Intimate Rivals or Enemies of the Nation: Radical Right Movements and Transformative Populism,* (Ph. D. diss., Columbia University. , 2017); Lenka Bustikova, "Revenge of the Radical Right," *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no. 12 (2014): 1738; and Rachel Rappaport, *The New Right in Europe: Supply, Demand, and Electoral Performance: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of New Right Parties, 2000-2016* (Ph. D. diss., State University of New York at Albany 2017).

corrupt, self-serving elite cartel so that only a radical solution could ensure real representation of "the people".[19]

The most widely accepted account, however, points to party-voter re-alignment on economic policy.[20] These scholars argue that nationalist-populist parties have been more likely to arise and be electorally successful in countries where the main left parties moved to the center of the economic policy continuum (for example, by implementing austerity packages to demonstrate their disassociation from socialism and acceptance of market democracy as well as to comply with the recommendations/ conditionality of international organizations, such as the IMF or the EU). The enactment of neoliberal economic policies by mainstream left parties significantly decreased support for these parties, particularly among voters who suffered and/or perceived high levels of economic insecurity. As a result, such voters were open to the redistributionist-populist appeals of the radical right parties that recognized and took advantage of this representation opportunity. While some scholars see this discrediting of mainstream left parties as especially acute in the post-communist region given the socio-economic challenges of the transition from communism to market economy, others point out that the pattern of left-right programmatic de-alignment can also be seen in Western European countries, such as France and Germany.[21]

On the demand side, some argue that votes for populist parties are based on dissatisfaction with the political establishment and/or on ideological convictions and issue positions on socio-economic and socio-cultural issues. For example, some study the relationship between populist party support and populist, that is, anti-elitism attitudes.[22] Most students of post-communist Europe discuss the public's broader dissatisfaction with the transition process in the region and the economic and/or cultural grievances of voters that have motivated them to elect populists to power. Perhaps "the most widespread […account] tells of societies split between the winners and losers of the post-1989 era" [23] — a template that easily translates into the politics of "the people versus the elites".

For some scholars, this cleavage is socio-economic and the post-communist transition winners are the "big-city dwellers, the better educated, and the young. These are the main beneficiaries of a quarter-century of economic growth and the stalwarts of the market-liberal course that has predominated during most of that time. The losers tend to be voters from more rural areas, less educated, and older; to them, liberal democracy has not brought prosperity."[24] The transition from a command to a capitalist economy was very disruptive to such voters and brought about

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[19] Anna Grzymala-Busse, "The Failure of Europe's Mainstream Parties," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 4 (2019): 35.

[20] There are agent-centered and structural variants of this argument: for example, respectively, Binio Binev, *The Populist Syndrome: Critical Junctures and Parallel Paths in Latin America and Post-communist Europe* (Ph. D. Georgetown University, 2018). and Maria Snegovaya, *Ex-communist Party Choices and the Electoral Success of the Radical Right in Central and Eastern Europe* (Ph. D. diss., Columbia University, 2018).

[21] On the latter point, Sheri Berman and Maria Snegovaya, "Populism and the Decline of Social Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (2019): 5.

[22] Ben Stanley, "Populism, nationalism or national populism? An analysis of Slovak voting behavior at the 2010 parliamentary election," *Communist and Post-communist Studies* 44 (2011): 257.

[23]Rupnik. "Surging Illiberalism in the East."

[24] Rupnik, "Surging Illiberalism in the East" and Joanna Fomina and Jacek Kucharczyk, "Populism and Protest in Europe," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no.4 (2016): 58.

unprecedented unpredictability. Because most post-communist governments in Europe were eager to integrate with the West as a means to sovereignty, peace, and prosperity, these governments embraced economic reforms that undermined many of the social protections guaranteed before 1989. Even states like Hungary that implemented strong welfare programs to assist with the negative transition consequences were forced to cut those programs to meet the various EU's accession and post-accession reform criteria.[25] Some authors further point out that after the global financial crisis, populist parties began to break from the neo-liberal consensus and converge around an economic program based on a conservative developmental statism that draws from both conservative and socialist roots.[26] Given the openness and dependence of many post-communist markets on foreign direct investment primarily from the West, their economies suffered again during the 2008 crisis when such investments decreased substantially. This in turn eroded the public's acceptance of neoliberalism and heightened concerns about the global neo-liberal model reigning in their countries as well as about income (and power) disparities between Europe's east and west.[27]

Another related argument in this tradition is that neo-liberal economic reforms have led to a steady erosion of the state, limiting its ability to benefit society and instead making it porous to private financial interests. This therefore afforded populists an opportunity to promise non-corrupt governance and delivery of public goods to a narrowly defined group of people who should receive them.[28] The legacy of high public expectations for what a state should do developed during the communist era have helped motivate voters and helped populists who adopted 'paternalistic' economic policies.[29]

Other scholars of post-communist Europe contextualize the split between the winners and losers of the post-1989 era as <u>cultural</u> polarization. For these authors, the right-versus-left divide has been replaced by a split between national conservatives and pro-European liberals […and it is this] culture war—rather than the economy—that has weakened liberalism and facilitated the slide toward "illiberal democracy."[30] Some find "a combination of Manichean worldviews and authoritarianism" that puts trust in a strong leader, who can instill social order and stability, rallying voters "around the leader of the tribe and reject[ing] the other tribe." [31] Alternatively, populist leaders are argued to promote a more inclusive definition of political community,

[25] Bermond Scoggins, "Identity Politics or Economics? Explaining Voter Support for Hungary's Illiberal Fidesz," *East European Politics and Societies*. (First Published September 24, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325420954535.

[26] Orenstein and Bugaric, "Work, Family, Fatherland," and I. Colantone and P. Stanig, "The Trade Origins of Economic Nationalism: Import Competition and Voting Behavior in Western Europe," *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 4 (2018): 936.

[27] Rachel Epstein, "The Economic Successes and Sources of Discontent in East Central Europe," *Canadian Journal of European and Russian Studies* 13, no. 2 (2020): 1.

[28] Abby Innes, "Draining the Swamp: Understanding the Crisis in Mainstream Politics as a Crisis of the State," *Slavic Review* 76, no. 1 (2017): 30; A. Neundorf and S. Pardos-Prado, "The Long Shadow of Communism: Explaining the Threat to Democracy in Central-Eastern Europe," (Paper presented at APSA 2018, August 30 – September 2, 2018).

[29] David Ost, "Down With 1989! The Peculiar Right-Wing Backlash Against 1968 in Poland," *East European Politics and Societies* 33, no. 4 (2019): 1.

[30] Rupnik, "Surging Illiberalism in the East," and Ivan Krastev, *After Europe* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

[31] Peter Kreko et al., *Beyond Populism. Tribalism in Poland and Hungary* (Political Capital, Hungary, 2018).

incorporating those stigmatized by post-1989 neoliberalism as unable or unwilling to adapt to the rapid changes brought about by the post-communist transition.[32]

Others in this tradition see the public's cultural conservative grievances as a backlash against the opening of the communist bloc countries to the hegemonic normative influence of the international system, especially the EU's socially progressive accession requirements and protection of ethnic, political, and social minorities. Some point to the heightening of welfare chauvinism in the wake of the post-communist transitions in the region that incites cultural grievances towards ethnic minorities at home and immigrants from abroad (as groups not part of the 'nation' or 'true people').[33] Others discuss that to many post-communist citizens, these reforms have served to undermine their national values and led to the giving up of traditional national culture for a "Western" identity.[34] As a result, such voters have strongly supported populists claiming to be upholding the moral foundations of their polities and harshly criticized the EU for its normative and policy "overreach" and for not giving the post-communist countries much voice in EU governance.[35]

Other cultural explanations go beyond ideology and look instead "at the pent-up animosity engendered by the centrality of mimesis in the reform processes launched in the East after 1989. […] Hence, it is not entirely mysterious why the "imitation of the West" voluntarily chosen by East Europeans three decades ago eventually resulted in a political backlash" given that the mimics looked up to their models while the models looked down on their mimics.[36]

How have populists mobilized support in post-communist Europe?

Some students of post-communist Europe have also studied how populists in the region mobilize support while in opposition and in power. PiS and Fidesz, for instance, have continuously

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[32] Petra Burzova, "Towards a New Past: Some Reflections on Nationalism in Post-socialist Slovakia," *Nationalities Papers* 40, no. 6 (2012): 879.
[33] Ost, "Down With 1989!"
[34] Frank Furedi, *Populism and the European Culture Wars: the Conflict of Values between Hungary and the EU* (London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2018); Zsolt Enyedi, "Paternalist Populism and Illiberal Elitism in Central Europe," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 21, no. 1 (2016): 9 and Zsolt Enyedi, "Right-wing Authoritarian Innovations in Central and Eastern Europe," *East European Politics* 36, no. 3 (2020): 363.
[35] Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, "Imitation and Its Discontents," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (2018): 117-128; Anna Meyerrose, "The Unintended Consequences of Democracy Promotion: International Organizations and Democratic Backsliding," *Comparative Political Studies* 53 no. 10-11 (2020): 1547; Simona Guerra and John Fitzgibbon, "Not Just Europeanization, Not Necessarily Populism: Potential Factors Underlying the Mobilization of Populism in Ireland and Poland," *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 11, no. 3 (2010): 273; and Andrés Santana et al., "At odds with Europe: explaining populist radical right voting in Central and Eastern Europe," *East European Politics* 36, no. 2 (2020): 288.
Given the EU's role in supporting the early democratization of post-communist Europe, some scholars have also examined how Brussels has served as a bulwark against the rise and resilience of populists, often finding that the Union is ill-equipped to deal with systemic violations of its common values. Moreover, Fidesz' position in the Hungarian party system, for example, has been documented to have endowed it with strong European transnational links which outlasted the party's own turn to populism and continued to dampen EU action (for instance, Batory, Agnes. "Populists in government? Hungary's 'system of national cooperation'." *Democratization*. 23. 2 (2016): 283.).
[36] Krastev and Holmes, "Imitation and Its Discontents."

mobilized support through both political and civic campaigns. Having marginally lost the 2002 election, Orban called on his supporters to organize "civic circles" that would "raise the Nation" through education and protest activities. Tens of thousands of organizations were set up throughout Hungary with hundreds of thousands of members helping rebuild the party and practicing political participation in key referendums in Hungary. This movement initially mobilized the country's socially conservative middle class but over time helped put together an electoral bloc which also included the working class and the poor. After coming to power in 2010, Fidesz used the state to support the movement and continued to use the movement to mobilize voters in the streets and in key votes.[37] Similarly, arguing that "the Nation cannot be in opposition," PiS has continuously mobilized and practices "elite replacement" in a coalition of socially conservative groups affiliated with or sympathetic to the Church, the nationalist intellectual circles looking to bring a "great Poland" back on the European stage, and eventually also labor unions representing workers who have been disadvantaged in the post-1989 era.[38]

This essay documents the persistent and evolving, civic and political mobilization by populist leaders. Despite the accumulating work on this phenomenon, there are still many understudied questions. For example, an important question for future research is that of the resilience of populism in post-communist Europe: why do citizens choose to keep populist parties in power and how does the party-constituents relationship evolve over time? Another related avenue for future research on this topic is: how do opposition parties and civic movements at home and abroad respond to the rise and resilience of populist movements? And finally, as with other types of regime change, an important but difficult to document dynamic is the demonstration and diffusion effects[39] underpinning the populist wave in the region.

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[37] Greskovits & Bohle, "Politicising embedded neoliberalism".

[38] David Ost, "The Attack on Democracy in Poland and the Response of the Left," *The Nation*, July 19, 2018; Stanley Bill, "Counter-Elite Populism and Civil Society in Poland: PiS's Strategies of Elite Replacement," *East European Politics and Societies* 20, no. 10 (2020): 1; and Alexandra Seehaus et al., "Who Is a Right-Wing Supporter? On the Biographical Experiences of Young Right-Wing Voters in Poland and Germany," *Qualitative Sociology Review* 15, no. 4 (2019): 212.

[39] For those effects in previous waves of regime change in post-communist Europe, see Valerie Bunce and Sharon Wolchik, *Defeating Authoritarian Leaders in Postcommunist Countries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).