



SYMPOSIUM

Is Nationalism or Ethnopolitism on the Rise Today?

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In the lead article of this issue, Florian Bieber assesses the common claim that nationalism is on the rise globally. His answer is that there is no consistent evidence for the growth of nationalism anywhere, with the possible exception of the attitudes of Chinese and Japanese people toward one another. Bieber reviews recent global and regional trends using data from the OSCE, World Values Survey, Eurobarometer, Afrobarometer, Pew, among others, to show that there is little to no empirical support for a global increase in nationalist public attitudes, support for nationalist parties or nationalist policies, nor has there been a global uptick in nationalist violence. In fact, Bieber notes that the global level of nationalism today does not begin to compare with that of the early 1990s in Europe, where the collapse of communism and Soviet suzerainty led to a wave of national secessionism and minority discrimination across the region.

I agree with Bieber's overall assessment, with one important caveat. The aggregate level of nationalist sentiment around the world need not have increased for its aggregate *impact* to have increased. All that is needed is state leaders who combine nationalism with the revolutionary impulse of populism to amplify the effects of nationalism at the regional or even systemic level. When such populist nationalists (hereafter, *ethnopolitists*)¹ gain access to political power, we are more likely to see transgressive politics that mix revolutionary fervor with exclusionary goals, such as achieving national independence, redeeming national irredentas or expelling migrants or foreigners. In contrast to the everyday ritualized 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995), transgressive nationalism can have knock-on effects for the region or even the world as a whole. Investigating the importance of this configuration requires distinguishing between the two concepts so as to explore the nature of their intersection.

Definitions of Nationalism and Populism

Bieber defines nationalism as an ideology that 'values membership in a nation greater than other groups ... seeks distinction from other nations, and strives to preserve the nation and

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give preference to political representation by the nation for the nation' (3). This echoes Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation as an imagined community that is imagined as *flat*, *horizontal* and *lateral* with boundaries beyond which lie other nations (1991). Moving from ideology to action, nationalist *sentiment* or *movements* are actuated by the perception that the political boundaries of these flat units do not coincide with cultural boundaries (Gellner, 1983, p. 1). Such movements follow the logic of in-groupism that can be inclusive—a multiethnic, civic variety that seeks to elevate the 'national self' through policies of economic nationalism, for example. At its extreme, in-groupism can also lead to what Bieber terms 'virulent' nationalism—the closing of borders to refugees or migrants (Mudde, 2007) or the reinforcement of domestic ethnic hierarchies (Mylonas, 2012). In a warning against Orientalism, Bieber notes that even countries based on civic identities—such as the US and UK—are susceptible to extreme forms of nationalism, as seen in election of US President Donald Trump and the UK vote for Brexit in 2016.

Bieber may be right that nationalism is not on a uniformly upward trajectory. However, populism, another highly antagonistic ideology, may be having multiplier effects on nationalism in foreign and domestic politics alike. Populism can be defined as 'an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people," versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonte general* of the people' (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). Populist parties and discourses have increasingly entered the mainstream, reaching even the highest political offices. Examples include the right-wing populist governments of Sebastian Kurtz in Austria, Narendra Modi in India, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, the PiS in Poland and Nikola Gruevski in Macedonia. At the same time, there has been a rise of left-wing populist governments, particularly in Latin America in the form of the late Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, Evo Morales of Bolivia, Rafael Correa of Ecuador, and Cristina Kirchner of Argentina. The current 'populist *Zeitgeist*' is the result of a growing economic divide between the rich and poor, increasing social distance between the lower classes and the moneyed political class, the loss of public confidence in liberalism and government institutions and the elevation of folk 'conspiracy' theories through mass communications (Mudde, 2004). These conditions have created a political demand for populist political messaging across numerous countries. In Europe, meanwhile, Rupnik (2007) put the rise of populism in both new and old EU member states down to the constraints of EU integration, which 'emptied' mainstream parties of their programmatic distinctions and empowered radical political forces that argue forcefully that national interests should come before EU mandates.

Despite their first-order commonalities, populism and nationalism function along orthogonal lines, defining the boundaries of competing visions of the sovereign community (see Figure 1).² While nationalists mobilize along 'in-out' *horizontal* cleavages that pit the national self against the national other, seeking to narrow the horizontal boundaries of the imagined sovereign to exclude out-groups (Wimmer, 2004), populists mobilize along 'up-down' *vertical* cleavages that pit 'the people' against the elites or the establishment (for similar formulations, see Brubaker, 2017; De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Jansen, 2011; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014).

Although both discourses serve to reframe sovereignty more exclusively, populists seek to *lower* the sovereignty's imagined borders (excluding 'elites' representing domestic and international power structures from political representation). Populists' calls for direct

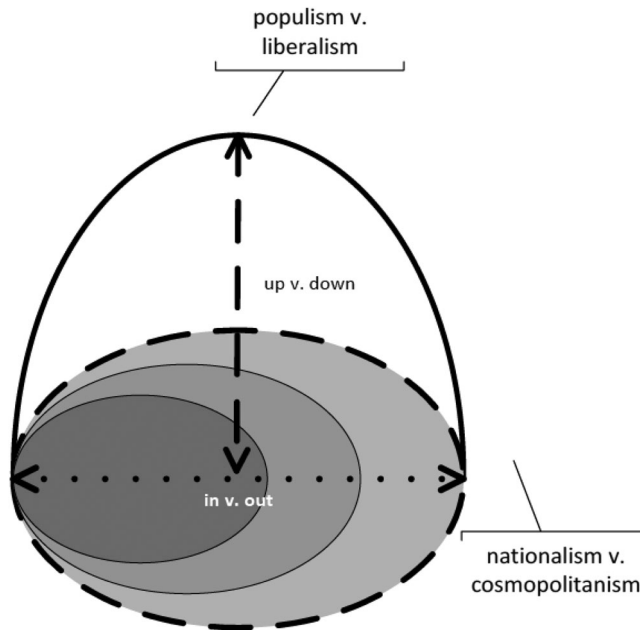


Figure 1. (Re)framing sovereignty

majority rule are in direct conflict with liberal guarantees of minority rights and republican representation from above (Canovan, 1999, p. 7). By contrast, nationalists seek to *restrict* the sovereignty's horizontal borders (excluding or marginalizing 'national others' and pitting one's own nation against 'other nations'). Wimmer (2004) writes that national identities can be highly exclusionary, functioning as systems of dominance that favor the national in-group. Alternatively, they can be highly inclusionary, even cosmopolitan to the extent that they favor porous borders and generous immigration policies. To see that these frames operate along orthogonal lines, one need only consider the set of *non-nationalist* (mostly left-wing) populists such as the anti-globalization movements of the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Indigadados Movement in Spain and the Occupy Movement in the United States. Non-nationalist populists appeal to a singular global or 'transnational people-as-underdog' (De Cleen, 2017; Moffitt, 2017; see also Pelfini, 2014). It is where populism and nationalism concatenate in a single political system that we can see multiplier effects that go beyond the effects of either nationalism or populism alone.

The Rise of Ethnopolitism

What happens when nationalism is co-articulated with populism in a single political system? The answer lies within the mobilizational logic of each. Nationalist politicians use symbols to mobilize the population against perceived foreign or domestic threats related to the *ethnos*. Hence, nationalist governments are more likely to adopt policies that tilt the playing field toward members of the national in-group—both inside and outside the state's borders. Examples include Moscow's support for Russian separatists

in Donbas and Crimea; and Belgrade's support for Serbs in Kosovo and Bosnia in the 1990s. The variability of this support demonstrates that demography is not destiny—countries may choose to intervene on behalf of their so-called ethnic kin or they may take a more neutral position of non-support (Laitin, 2001; Saideman, 1998, 2001).

By contrast, populists in power mobilize their constituents by drawing tighter vertical boundaries around the *demos*; hence, populist leaders are more likely to adopt policies that challenge the domestic and international political establishment—challenging mainstream political institutions and withdrawing the state from existing international alliances and commitments by laying the groundwork toward more personalistic rule (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Roberts, 2007; Urbinati, 1998). Populist governments tend to create revisionist states who require alternative sources of support, leading them to withdraw from international commitments and challenge global constraints (Balfour, 2016; Dodson & Dorraj, 2008). In Latin America, populist regimes of the mid-century used import substitution industrialization (ISI) to advance their economies, sheltering them from competition from more advanced economies.³ Populists in government might also defect from domestic and even international systemic norms, which in the west includes modern, secular values. What underlies *all* populist governments in Latin America is not a strong (certainly not virulent) nationalism, but rather anti-hegemonic policies aimed at overthrowing the international establishment.

Ethnopolitists *combine* the demagoguing of national outgroups with the demagoguing of elites. The populist metanarrative holds that 'the people' who are politically affiliated with the leader and exploited by domestic and global 'elites.' The nationalist metanarrative holds that the subset is members of 'the nation' who are threatened by 'enemy nations' or 'national others.' Ethnopolitism blends these threats by propagating narratives whereby enemies from *beyond* (migrants, immigrants, ethnic minorities) couple or even conspire with enemies from *above* (the EU, UN, IMF, 'global elites' or foreign powers) to undermine or even de-nationalize the nation-people. This is one reason conspiracies involving the George Soros—the left-leaning Jewish billionaire philanthropist known for backing liberal causes—feature so prominently in contemporary ethnopolitist rhetoric. Such theories hold that immigrants, refugees and others are not so much desperately vulnerable individuals fleeing from chaos or hardship in their own countries, as they are political set pieces in a premeditated plot to destroy nations-as-people. The resonance of such theories helps to explain how vicious attacks against such marginalized groups become thinkable.

While not on the rise everywhere, Bieber concedes that in some places the fortunes of nationalist *parties* may be on the rise. In recent decades, most of these parties have taken an ethnopolitist form—or what Mudde (2007) calls the populist radical right. Although most far-right parties have not increased their overall share of the vote in their respective countries, they are entering government at a greater rate. Populations appear somewhat more attracted to ethnopolitist (or authoritarian populist) discourses in the wake of global and national crises, such as the Great Depression, the end of the Cold War and collapse of communist and, most recently, the Great Recession in 2007–9 (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015). These 'movements of crisis' (Kerbo, 1982) have given rise to extreme ethnopolitist impulses in dozens of countries.

Nonetheless, ethnopolitism does not grip every society, nor even the same society all the time. As implied in Bieber's model, sovereign crises tend to set them off. Events or structural shifts can destabilize societies, leading to a higher level of anxiety and motivation to alleviate that anxiety. 'People see groups as providing them with security and safety as well as status and prestige in return for their loyalty and commitment.' Druckman writes that this in-group

bias is ‘more extreme in competitive situations where there is an incentive to favor one’s one group’ (1994, p. 63). During periods of heightened insecurity, political agents emerge to fulfill grass roots demands for policies with an in-group bias. Political [sp!] leaders who advocate excluding those who are perceived as material or existential threats to the nation-people tend to enjoy considerable popularity during such times. Inglehart and Norris (2016) further find that in western societies perceptions of cultural threat—the backlash thesis—appear to be more important drivers of populist attitudes than economic grievances.

When ethnopopulists gain access to state power, they tend to foment paranoia about, and dehumanization of, out-groups. This can lead to draconian state policies aimed at policing the boundary between in- and out-groups. In March 2018, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary gave a national address in which he declared that Hungary was being ‘invaded’ by ‘foreigners from other continents who don’t speak our language, respect our culture, our laws or our way of life,’ warning darkly that the globalist Soros network had a plan to ‘replace’ native Hungarians with migrants from the Middle East and North Africa (Witte, 2018). After the election, the Hungarian parliament passed ‘Stop Soros’ legislation that imposed criminal penalties on NGOs that attempt to assist ‘illegal migrants’ in any way. In 2015, Poland’s Jarosław Kaczyński alerted Poles that refugees would spread infectious diseases in Poland via ‘various parasites and protozoa’ that are common to ‘other continents’ (Cienski, 2015). Russian President Vladimir Putin proclaimed that the leaders of the post-Soviet transition ‘did not have the courage, or the responsibility or the political will to successfully and insistently defend the territorial integrity of the Motherland’ (Bridge, 2012). In the United States, meanwhile, President Donald Trump launched his campaign in 2015 by declaring that Mexicans crossing the US border were ‘bringing drugs,’ ‘bringing crime,’ and ‘raping people,’ allowing that ‘some’ might be good people (Times Staff, 2015). More recently, he conflated immigrants and refugees with the Central American MS-13 criminal gang, calling them ‘animals’ and laying the groundwork for more radical policies on the US southern border (Taylor, 2018). This brief review shows that even if the concatenation of populism and nationalism remains relatively infrequent, it can have outsized policy effects that extend well beyond the country in question.

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Bieber may be right that nationalist sentiments or even support for nationalist parties has not increased on aggregate in recent years and may even be in retreat in some societies. Nonetheless, this does not mean that there has not been an increase in the aggregate *effects* of nationalism, particularly when combined with populism and/or authoritarian impulses. National defense animated by revolutionary fervor can lead to highly transgressive policies such as barring the entry of refugees or immigrants, ‘rescuing’ co-ethnics abroad or discriminating against low-status ethnic minorities at home.

Notes

1. I define *ethnopolitism* as a discourse that equates ‘the people’ with ‘the nation’ and holds that sovereignty should be an expression of the will of the ‘nation-people.’ This stands against Madrid (2008), who uses ethnopolitism to refer to inclusive party organizations in Latin America that embrace numerous ethnic groups under a common multiethnic identity.
2. The vertical axis in Figure 1 juxtaposes populism (which holds that only the majority should rule) against liberalism, which argues for a rule-of-law system that continually adjudicates among competing political interests (Müller, 2016; Hawkins, 2010; Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2016).

3. See, for instance, Roberts, 1995; and Dornbusch & Edwards, 1991. See Weyland (2001) for an excellent critique of these overly specific definitions of populism based in the unique experience of Latin American populism.

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