Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism

Results in Brief

Populism’s threat to democracy in the EU

A wide-ranging investigation into populism finds that it hybridises with local culture and politics to produce markedly different forms, informing the different strategies needed to combat it.

Populist politicians have taken power in Czechia, Hungary and Poland in recent years, and right-wing populist movements have gained momentum in France, Spain, the United Kingdom and elsewhere. In Hungary and Poland, this has been accompanied by an erosion in the rule of law, and an increase in the persecution of minorities, greater authoritarianism and democratic backsliding.

“The threat is deadly,” says principal investigator Jan Kubik from Rutgers University in the United States and University College London. Contrary to what Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán seeks to achieve, he adds: “There is no such thing as illiberal democracy.”

The EU-funded POPREBEL (Populist rebellion against modernity in 21st-century Eastern Europe: neo-traditionalism and neo-feudalism) project seeks to investigate
Popular rebellion

“Populism promises democracy to a specific group of people,” explains co-investigator Richard Mole, professor of Political Sociology at University College London. “Populist leaders are not seeking to represent or act in the best interests of all citizens.”

The pair say that the rise of populism can be attributed to a combination of social and economic factors. “The universal factor is related to dramatic changes in culture, society and politics, and the move away from traditional ways of understanding sexual roles and family models,” says Kubik. The resentment of people hit by this cultural shift was then ignited by the 2008 economic crisis.

POPREBEL found populist tendencies interact with local politics and culture to produce different systems. The pair describe Hungary under Orbán as a prime example of the neo-feudal system, in which economic activity is tightly intertwined with politics.

Populism in Poland is strongly influenced by a nationalist Catholic identity, while in Czechia, there exists technocratic populism, which is less myth-loaded and symbolically overcharged as other forms.

LGBT persecution

The rise in populism has led to increased persecution of women, migrants and LGBT citizens. Because of the majoritarian understanding of democracy, “The voices of minorities are not heard, and they are presented as enemies of the people,” notes Mole. “This legitimises violence against people who are different.”

The duo adds that populism goes hand in hand with a discrediting of science. “Liberal democracy puts a lot of demands on its citizens, who need to learn how to think critically,” adds Kubik. “It looks very bleak for democracy if a large number of people are talking about microchips in vaccines.”

The combative rhetoric surrounding populism also lends itself to violence against institutions, as evidenced by the 2021 attack on the United States Capitol, warns Kubik. “Seeing your political competitors as mortal enemies produces the belief that one’s whole existence is in danger. We are sliding into what was happening in Europe in the late 20s and early 30s.”
The researchers say that more education is needed to instil in citizens a better understanding of their rights and responsibilities in liberal democracy. “I hate to say this, being born under communism, but when the collapse of liberal democracy becomes a real possibility, we may need to censor more radical voices, as happened with Trump in the United States,” remarks Kubik.

However, Mole predicts that the tide will eventually turn on populist politicians. “Populism has been shown to be a vote winner, but eventually all populists have to make good on promises of sunlit uplands. When they don’t, people will look elsewhere.”

Keywords

POPREBEL, populism, Hungary, Orbán, Czechia, Poland, illiberal, nationalism, violence, authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, minorities
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