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## The Global Political Economy of Right-wing Populism: Deconstructing the Paradox

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### Abstract

The rise of right-wing populism should be studied as a truly global phenomenon. Domestic and regional contexts are obviously crucial, yet a narrow focus on the domestic realm fails to capture some of the key constituents and paradoxical features of the rise and resilience of right-wing populist projects around the world. Therefore, right-wing populism and the way its contradictions are ‘managed’ ought to be understood within the context of mutual interactions between: 1) an economy-identity nexus and 2) a domestic-foreign policy nexus. A critical review of six controversial aspects of right-wing populism in the global North and global South is used to substantiate this main argument.

**Keywords:** right-wing populism; inequality; left-wing populism; economic grievances; cultural backlash

The term ‘populism’, both in its ‘left’ and ‘right’ variants, has attracted significant scholarly and public attention at a critical juncture when the existing international order is experiencing serious shifts and dislocations in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 (Eichengreen 2018; Inglehart and Norris 2017; Moffitt 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2016; Rodrik 2018; Verbeek and Zaslove 2019; Miller-Idriss 2019; Halikiopoulou 2019). The present article focuses on right-wing populism. It is based on the premise that an eclectic framework is useful in understanding the complexities and deconstructing the paradoxes of one of the most striking phenomena of our times, namely the rise of illiberal-authoritarian right-wing populist leaders and parties. A central proposition is that right-wing populism should be studied as a truly global phenomenon. Domestic and regional contexts are obviously important; yet, we argue that a narrow focus on the domestic realm fails to capture some of the key properties and paradoxical features of the rise and resilience of right-wing populist projects around the world. We claim that right-wing populism should best be understood through reciprocal interaction of economic and identity drivers within a domestic-foreign policy nexus. We review six controversial aspects of right-wing populist movements in the global North and global South to advance the key argument of the article.

First, right-wing populists, as highlighted in the literature, capitalise on anti-elite sentiments and growing disillusionment with the establishment. They project themselves as representatives of the ‘people’ against a minority of powerful elites. Yet, ironically, right-wing populists have an intimate connection with powerful business elites. Their political projects are also elite-driven, though effectively disguised under a strong rhetoric of anti-elitism, positioning themselves as supporters of the people against a narrow clique of self-interested elites. Second, economic and cultural factors are both significant in the rise of right-wing populism as a global phenomenon, suggesting that ‘economic anxiety vs cultural backlash’ may represent a false dichotomy. In fact, economic and identity considerations should be studied in an interactive fashion rather than in isolation, in terms of accounting for the rise and resilience of right-wing populist projects in government. Right-wing populists effectively combine economic growth and identity politics, based on religion and nationalism to construct cross-class electoral coalitions, which helps them survive despite apparent contradictions. Third, though there are some superficial similarities, right-wing populism and left-wing populism are fundamentally different phenomena. Fourth, we maintain that domestic politics and foreign policy, an aspect relatively underemphasised in the literature, are inherently interlinked in the modus operandi of right-wing populism. Right-wing populist leaders deliberately employ an aggressive foreign policy style as a means of boosting their legitimacy at home, managing contradictions through diverting attention, and expanding their support base. Hence, domestic politics and foreign policy linkages should receive particular attention in the study of right-wing populism. Fifth, along with the domestic-foreign policy nexus, another key proposition is that we need to go beyond the ‘nationalist-globalist dichotomy’ in studying right-wing populism. There is a kernel of truth in the proposition that right-wing populists are staunch nationalists and nativists. At the same time, however, they are inclined to project transnational visions based on their particular perceptions of national interest. They are intrinsically part of a global wave as they benefit from each other’s existence and resilience. Sixth, right-wing populists win elections and assume power with the explicit promise of reducing inequality and improving the material positions of the people who were ‘left behind’. Yet rampant inequality continues to be a pervasive feature in many right-wing populist experiments. The right-wing populism tends to display a high degree of resilience in power, especially in contrast to its left-wing counterparts, despite the inherently divisive nature of their politics and the serious economic challenges that brought them into power in the first place. This is a paradox that requires an explanation along with the question as to whether the global right-wing populist wave is a reversible phenomenon in contemporary politics.

The key reference points for this article are stylised comparisons drawn from the global North and global South. In all cases selected, right-wing populists are in power. They show strikingly similar patterns concerning the six main controversies highlighted in this article. However, the selected cases also diverge in terms of economic development and associated domestic institutional structures. The cases differ significantly when it comes to democratisation experience, developmental levels, robustness of institutional checks and balances, and the degree of income inequality. As such, they represent illustrative cases from developed, developing and intermediate states where right-wing

populists are in power. The primary cases from the ‘developed’ global North are the United States under the presidency of Donald Trump and post-Brexit-referendum Britain under the premiership of Boris Johnson. Key examples from the ‘developing’ global South include Russia under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Turkey under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as well as the more recent cases of India under the premiership of Narendra Modi and Brazil under the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro. We also add cases from the European periphery, ‘intermediate’ states, such as Hungary under Viktor Orbán and Poland under Jaroslaw Kaczynski.<sup>1</sup> The right-wing populists in power in these cases, which diverge in terms of economic and political development, are useful for illustrating the global nature of the phenomenon. That said, it should be clear from the outset that we do not aim to analyse these cases in which the phenomenon of illiberal-authoritarian right-wing populism manifests itself through a structured comparative research design. Rather, we try to demonstrate some striking aspects of right-wing populism in different cases to illustrate the global nature of the phenomenon and generate some propositions for further research.

### **Right-wing populism as an anti-elite project**

Right-wing populists have a narrow majoritarian understanding of democratic politics. Their success is generally predicated on their ability to project themselves to represent the will of the ‘people’ – representing the majority – against the interests of the distant ‘elites’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2016). They are also successful in terms of undermining the opposition by juxtaposing them as representatives of the ‘establishment’ rather than the ‘ordinary people’. Anti-elite sentiment in the rise of right-wing populist leaders can be illustrated by several striking examples.

Trump proved particularly successful in projecting himself as a champion of ordinary Americans, notably the losers of globalisation and victims of rising economic inequality. During his campaign, he communicated with offensive discourse that emphasised anti-elite sentiment in which his rival, Hillary Clinton, was presented as a typical establishment figure, distant from the immediate interests and concerns of disenfranchised masses. Similarly, in the context of the Brexit referendum, anti-elite motifs were capitalised upon to tilt the balance in favour of the Leave campaign. In this case, the target of criticism was the distant EU technocrats and non-elected experts who were taking key decisions and working against the interests of ordinary British citizens. In his staunch critique, Michael Gove, a leading pro-Brexit figure, repeatedly stated that “people in [the UK] have had enough of experts” (Mance 2016). In the Turkish context, Erdoğan and his party, the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) capitalised on the conservative-religious sentiment of a broad segment of Turkish society with their strong anti-establishment attitude, this time targeting the secular elites – a key fault line that has been the dominant political cleavage of Turkish society throughout the Republican era (Öniş 2015). More recently, especially after the failed coup attempt of July 2016, the

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<sup>1</sup> The illustrative examples in this article exclude far-right parties in established democracies, although they are ideologically part of the same family and exert a deep impact on the strategies of centre-right parties in their domestic politics, swinging the political pendulum towards the right.

discourse has shifted towards a critique of foreign conspirators, first and foremost the political establishment in the US, with their domestic counterparts being positioned against the ‘national will’ (Arango and Yeginsu 2016).

Examples abound in other national contexts. In the case of Orbán’s Hungary, external ‘enemies of the public’, personified in the figure of George Soros whom Orbán describes as someone who “ruined the lives of tens of millions of people”, constitute the main target (Walker 2017). In Modi’s India, similarly, the target of criticism is internal, namely the elites associated with the Indian National Congress (widely known as the Congress Party), which dominated the Indian political scene for years as the first modern political organisation. Modi and his Indian People’s Party (*Bharatiya Janata Party*, BJP) have emerged since 2014 as a serious right-wing authoritarian populist alternative representing the will of the majority with an emphasis on exclusive Hindu nationalism (Chacko 2018).

This article maintains that even though these powerful populist leaders are able to exploit anti-elite sentiments, their power is firmly embedded in their tight, organic linkages to new elites and powerful business interests. Several striking examples could be offered in this context. In the case of Russia, as Natalia Lamberova and Konstantin Sonin (2018) empirically demonstrate, President Putin’s personal linkages to the privileged economic elites in the Russian-style state capitalism condition who controls power and wealth in the country, as there are strong ties between the leadership and the dominant economic and political groups in a vertically organised structure of interest intermediation. Ziya Öniş (2019) also demonstrates in the Turkish case that Erdoğan in the recent AKP era has been developing his own brand of state capitalism, whereby Turkey’s new economic elites in the construction, energy and media sectors, as the president’s key allies, are the principal beneficiaries of the emerging political model. Turning to the Brazilian context, Bolsonaro, appointing Chicago-trained neoliberal Paulo Guedes as his economic advisor, has positioned himself as a champion of business interests, thereby distancing himself from the policies of former president Inácio Lula da Silva and the Brazilian Workers’ Party (Morgan *et al.* 2018). It is clear that Bolsonaro’s strong anti-environmentalist stance, following directly in the footsteps of Donald Trump, is evidence of the support he receives from powerful business lobbies, whose interests are also in stark contrast with a tight environmental regulation agenda.

Trump is perhaps the most dramatic example of this paradox. Although he was elected on a pledge to help the poor, some of his key actions, such as major cuts in corporate tax rates, attempting to dismantle former President Barack Obama’s healthcare reforms and weakening regulatory measures on Wall Street, as well as his tough anti-environmentalist stance, illustrate the importance of powerful business interests undergirding his electoral success (Graham 2018). As a property tycoon, Trump is clearly an insider among elite circles, but is nevertheless able to present himself as an anti-establishment figure. Trump put it neatly in one of his speeches:

They call them the elite. These people. I look at them, I say, that's elite? We've got more money and more brains and better houses and apartments and nicer boats. We are smarter than they are. [...] They've been stone-cold losers, the elite. Let's keep calling them the elite. [...] Let's call ourselves the super elite (quoted in Graham 2018).

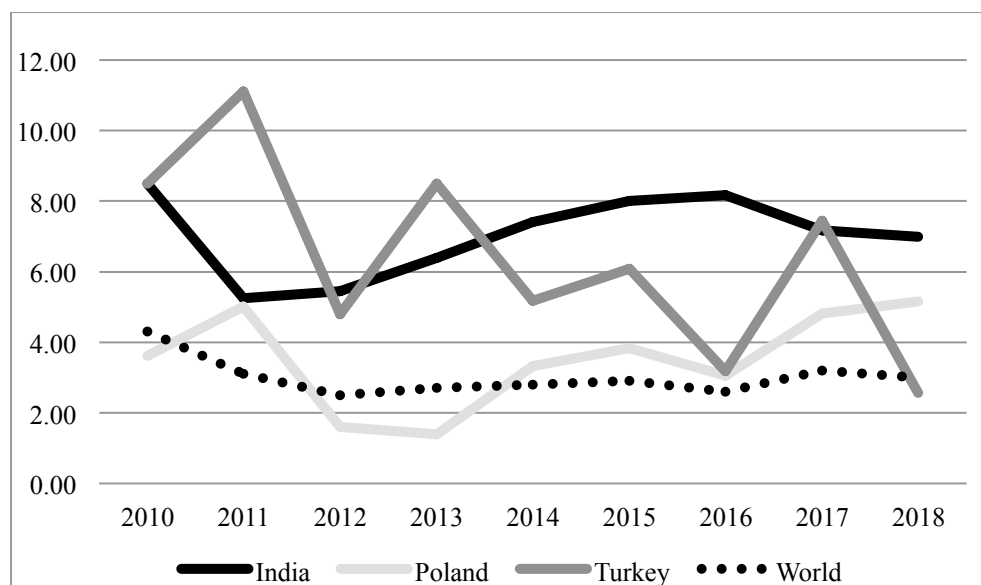
Similar examples emerge from the UK in the context of the Brexit campaign. Key figures such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, along with several other pro-Brexit politicians, were establishment figures in terms of wealth and upbringing; yet they were able to appeal effectively to the anti-establishment sentiments of the people at the opposite end of the social and economic spectrum (Kuper 2019). Right-wing populist leaders and their families are often susceptible to nepotism, which is quite at odds with their original anti-elite discourse although they run their campaigns on an anti-corruption platform. Furthermore, they often have dynastic inclinations. Examples of such tendencies are visible in the cases of the US, Brazil and Turkey, among others, where family members are appointed to key political positions or take advantage of close ties to the state, contributing to the further concentration of economic and political power.

### **The rise of right-wing populism: the interface of economy and identity**

There is a tendency in much of the literature on populism to make a clear-cut distinction between economic and cultural factors as primary determinants of right-wing populism. Our central claim in this context is that a sharp division between economic and identity-based motives is somewhat arbitrary and that isolated analysis of the two is often misleading. In effect, it is a complex mixture of both that explains the rise and extraordinary resilience of the right-wing populist leaders and their associated parties in a set of diverse national contexts.

Economic factors are central to explaining the achievements of right-wing populist projects. High and continuous economic growth facilitates a parallel process of vertical (using economic resources to finance supportive business elites) and horizontal redistribution (using economic growth to finance social assistance and economic opportunities for middle and lower segments of society) that help form an effective cross-class coalition crucial for continued electoral success. For instance, this has been a central element underlying the success and unusual durability of the AKP in the Turkish context. India under BJP and Poland under Jarosław Kaczyński's Law and Justice Party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, PiS) have also benefited from high rates of economic growth, which has allowed them to maintain popular support in a business-friendly environment by expanding the net of social assistance and raising the welfare of large segments of society (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Growth rates in India, Poland and Turkey under right-wing populist governments



**Source:** World Bank, World Development Indicators.

It is true that economic factors are important for illiberal-authoritarian right-wing populists to retain ‘performance legitimacy’<sup>2</sup> but, per se, they are insufficient to explain the populists’ success. The leadership factor is part and parcel of their ability to win broad-based political support because, as Weyland (2001, 14) underlines, populism is also a political strategy “through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers”. This, in turn, is effective to some extent because of its powerful appeal to improve the economic position of the ‘under-represented’ against vested interests, but also through the promotion of the identity claims of the majority, whose rights and liberties have hitherto been curtailed by the ‘establishment’.

In the Turkish context, for instance, Erdoğan enjoyed continuous popularity, partly because of robust economic growth and extensive social assistance, but also because the Sunni Muslim majority believed they enjoyed greater religious freedoms, which meant that they were no longer relegated to a subordinate position in Turkish politics and society. A major implication of this is that in a deeply divided society along the lines of “bounded communities” where “attachment to a specific political identity plays a central role for individuals” (Öniş 2015, 36), the AKP has sustained vigorous support even when economic growth has slowed down, which has certainly been the case more recently (Figure 1). In such an environment, in which economic and identity-related considerations are heavily intertwined, only an economic crisis of dramatic proportions, rather than mild reversals in growth and unemployment figures, would be able to tilt the balance in the direction of the opposition parties and candidates.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Performance legitimacy’ is related to the competence of the illiberal-authoritarian governments to ensure “economic growth, national accomplishments in science and technology, military achievements, or successful public-infrastructure projects” (Foa 2018, 136-7).

The complex interaction between economy and identity can also be illustrated with reference to the Hungarian context, an observation that has broader applicability in other Eastern European contexts. The right-wing populist leader of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, has maintained his popularity by securing 53 percent (2010), 45 percent (2014), and 49 percent (2018) of votes in three subsequent elections even though economic growth has remained mediocre. Orbán has maintained his popularity by capitalising on an excessive critique of liberal values and relying on an attendant “system of national cooperation” that promotes communitarianism and anti-pluralism (Batory 2016, 292). By claiming that “Europe’s borders must be defended against the migrant invasion”, Orbán (2019) is able to project a vision of a homogenous and anti-migrant Europe. As a result, open borders are perceived as a threat to the essentialist portrayal of collective identity and national survival (Kinnvall 2015). Right-wing populist leaders like Orbán have been extremely effective in capitalising on the fears and anxieties of ordinary Hungarians, driven by identity concerns rather than purely economic considerations. For instance, according to a Pew Research Center survey (2016), 76 percent of Hungarians think “refugees will increase the likelihood of terrorism in their country” and 72 percent have “unfavourable view of Muslims.”

This brings an important element into the picture whereby right-wing populist parties and leaders are able to govern their societies: a strategy of continuous polarisation based on anti-pluralist discourse imbued with exclusive nationalism. The right-wing populist leaders’ ability to use religion and nationalism, as well as economic parameters, as a means of cementing different class interests into a coherent whole and ‘managing’ apparent contradictions is crucial for their electoral success. For instance, Putin utilises this strategy skilfully in the Russian context. Putin’s success has been due not only to the economic recovery following the disastrous shock treatment years under former president Boris Yeltsin, and the Russian economy’s struggles over the last decade due to domestic inertia and international sanctions. It has been due mainly to Putin’s ability to appeal to Russian national sentiment by placing the country back on the map as a returning global power (Sakwa 2017). In the Turkish context as well, Sunni-Muslim nationalism has been the tool with which Erdoğan exploits identity as a means of fragmenting opposition and maintaining a winning coalition in an environment where “only a tiny sliver of the electorate remains genuinely open to persuasion” (Esmer 2019, 124).

### **Right versus left populism: some fundamental differences**

There is a tendency in popular discussions to place ‘left’ and ‘right’ versions under the same umbrella, emphasising similarities and minimising differences. However, they are essentially different phenomena reflecting diverse political cleavages and economic grievances. In Europe, populism takes on a predominantly right-wing hue, whereas left-wing populism in Latin America has “always been strong [...] with vote totals between 15 and 30 percent” (Rodrik 2018, 24). To be sure, similarities exist at a rather superficial level. Popular, charismatic leaders also exist on the populist left, with the former Brazilian President Lula de Silva constituting a striking example. Left-wing populism also positions itself on the side of ordinary citizens against powerful economic interests represented by the domestic corporate elites and transnational capital. Strong anti-elite sentiment based on class divisions and income inequality remains at the very centre of the left-wing populist phenomenon.

Beyond these similarities, however, a closer inspection reveals some fundamental differences (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; Rodrik 2018). Exclusionary identity politics based on polarisation of society along national, ethnic and religious lines, which constitutes part of the illiberal-authoritarian right-wing populist nomenclature, does not exist in the mild version of left-wing populism observed both in the global North and the global South. We can suggest that left-wing populism is concerned not only with class divisions and economic inequality per se, but also tends to adopt a progressive-inclusive approach to issues relating to identity and multiculturalism. Left-wing populists tend to be much more progressive on fundamental issues relating to foreign policy and environment as well. On foreign policy, the emphasis is on diplomacy and international co-operation. On the environment and climate change, there is recognition of the urgency of the problem and the need to tackle it on a transnational scale. Brazil under Lula was a good example of the left-wing approach to issues relating to diplomacy, international cooperation and environmental activism.

Yet another crucial difference from its right-wing counterpart concerns relations with business interests. Right-wing populism has a strong, organic relationship with powerful segments of the business community. In contrast, left-wing populism tends to be distant from business interests. This represents an existentialist problem for left-wing populists as attempts to tax the rich to help the poor cause resistance and even backlash when organised business groups increasingly resist anti-neoliberal confrontation and social redistribution. The failure to sustain economic growth and establish cross-class alliances also seems to explain why left-wing populists prove to be less resilient in government. Even the most successful case of left-wing populism in the global South, the Brazilian Workers' Party under Lula, experienced serious political economy stalemates. The combined effect of economic, political and corruption problems paved the way for a pronounced authoritarian right-wing populist turn in Brazilian politics, with the election of Bolsonaro as the new president in 2018, with the strong backing of powerful business interests (see above). It is striking that Bolsonaro, shortly after taking office, received a warm welcome in Davos as a keynote speaker at the World Economic Forum. As the CEO of a multinational company touted, "if it is populist or not populist, we [the business community] don't care – it is a reform agenda that we think is good for the country" (quoted in Mudde 2019).

Left-wing populism also has an inherent tendency to fragment. It can provide a powerful critique of neoliberal austerity policies and the resultant inequality and social hardships in opposition, however, when in government, left-wing populists face a dilemma between confrontation and co-optation. The case of Syriza in Greece constitutes a vivid example of this inherent tendency. In the Greek context, confrontation meant breaking away from the Eurozone, whilst co-optation implied a reluctant acceptance of austerity policies, on the assumption that the costs of an alternative strategy based on confrontation would be much higher. The tendency towards co-optation fragmented Syriza, leading to its retreat in 2019 national elections, demonstrates that left-wing populism is prone to divisions and fragmentations.

## **Domestic-foreign policy linkages as a fundamental legitimating device**

This article argues that at the heart of the resilience of right-wing populism is the capability of populist leaders to divert public attention and ‘manage’ their apparent contradictions. It is in this context that an assertive foreign policy style must be considered a central feature of right-wing populism. Right-wing populists are more inclined to use coercive power as a central element of foreign policy. An aggressive foreign policy style with strong nationalist overtones is important as a domestic legitimating device. It is also an important tool for building broad-based political support. Aggressive foreign policy and active engagement often through the use or threat of force in regional conflicts can also become an instrument for shifting attention away from awkward domestic problems by putting the blame on ‘foreign powers’ or ‘external enemies’. A typical argument is that these external enemies have their allies in domestic politics, which collectively constitute a security threat to the state and the nation. This kind of argument then becomes a practical instrument for right-wing populists in their divide and rule tactics, positioning the ‘people’ or the ‘nation’ at large against its natural ‘enemies’, which in turn, provides a pathway for authoritarian interventionism and democratic backsliding in the name of growing securitisation and the introduction of heavy-handed law and order policies. Ironically, however, the active promotion of securitisation in quest of a ‘populist dividend’ often fails to provide national security and constructive foreign policy in the medium term. While helping bolster strong nationalist sentiment, a tense and polarised environment at home is often coupled with recurrent foreign policy crises, creating a sense of continuous anxiety. Furthermore, any kind of opposition to this type of confrontational foreign policy agenda imbued with national security discourse is particularly difficult, as there is the obvious danger of being classified as an ‘enemy of the state’ opposed to the basic interests and security of the state which, in turn, represents the will of the people – that is, the majority or the hegemonic bloc in society.

There are several striking examples of the tendencies mentioned above. Russia under Putin constitutes the most dramatic case of such aggressive foreign policy behaviour. Putin has been able to employ a confrontational and interventionist foreign policy with unexpected effectiveness in terms of boosting his domestic support base. Putin’s foreign policy agenda, designed to re-establish Russia’s great power status following the humiliating years of the Yeltsin era, have contributed enormously to his sustained popularity. It is worth noting, with respect to the argument of this article that Putin is able to use his ambitious foreign policy approach to bolster support at a time when the Russian economy has not been doing particularly well, with a sluggish 0.91 percent average annual growth between 2009 and 2018. According to a survey by Pew Research Center (2014), in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Crimea, “roughly eight-in-ten Russians (83%) said they have confidence in President Putin to do the right thing in world affairs”.

In recent years, Erdoğan and the AKP have also actively utilised foreign policy as a means of mobilising and sustaining nationalist coalitions (Balta 2018; Özpek and Yaşar 2018). Turkey’s recent foreign policy is based on strong anti-Western rhetoric. The foreign policy crisis associated with the Syrian civil war and the attendant migration issue is an illustrative case in point. Turkey adopted an

increasingly interventionist stance in the Syrian civil war, culminated in active military engagement since 2016. Within that context, unlike many of its European and especially Eastern European counterparts, which have adopted a tough stance against migration in the face of the refugee crisis, Turkey has followed an open-door approach accommodating almost 4 million Syrian refugees and, as claimed by Erdoğan, “spending \$40 billion” as of September 2019 (Özkan and Mutlu 2019). There is an obvious humanitarian element underlying Turkey’s approach to the refugee issue. Yet beyond the humanitarian dimension, with his open-door policy towards Syrian refugees, Erdoğan was able to claim the moral high ground against Western powers. This approach, combined with aggressive foreign policy rhetoric, contributed significantly to popularity at home, at least until very recently when the Syrian refugees started to become a political burden.

The linkage between domestic politics and foreign policy was also vividly portrayed in the context of Turkey’s recent economic crisis. The official rhetoric was to shift the blame onto foreigners as the main cause of the crisis. For example, sanctions imposed on Turkey by Trump for a certain time in 2018 were used as a major justification for this claim, even though the crisis that Turkey experienced was firmly rooted in economic instability and political mismanagement in the domestic sphere.<sup>3</sup> Turkish president, pointing out attacks on domestic currency in the summer of 2018, argued, “These are the missiles, the shots of the economic war opened against [Turkey]” (Yackley 2018). Though some of Turkey’s foreign policy initiatives in recent years may prove to be counter-productive in the long term, it appears that they paid a handsome ‘populist dividend’ at home in the short term.

India under Modi is another striking case of an assertive foreign policy style contributing to popularity and electoral fortunes at home. In recent years, the country’s president, Narendra Modi has been projecting the image of a more active and confident India, a key player in regional and global politics, commensurate with the country’s enormous size and rapid economic growth. Modi’s populist approach is in stark contrast to the more cautious foreign policy style adopted under the Congress Party (Plagemann and Destradi 2019). Admittedly, India under Modi differs from the Russian and Turkish examples discussed earlier insofar as it has not resorted to active use of force and has relied primarily on diplomatic initiatives. But especially in the context of the perennial conflict with Pakistan over the Kashmir region, there is the threat of the possible use of force. Indeed, during the summer of 2019, the Indian government revoked the autonomy of Kashmir, linked to its special status in the Indian Constitution (Gettleman *et al.* 2019). This was a remarkable turning point in Indian foreign policy, displaying its coercive face for the first time in recent history. Hence, developments relating to Kashmir clearly illustrate that India under Modi is moving in the direction of Russia and Turkey in utilising an aggressive foreign policy stance to bolster domestic popularity. Modi, like his Russian and

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<sup>3</sup> Turkey transitioned to a Russian-style hyper-presidential system with a referendum in 2017, which resulted in over-accumulation of political power and further weakening of institutional checks and balance mechanisms. The erosion of rule of law, dismantling of independent regulatory institutions and failure to transition from a construction-based extractive growth model to high-technology production conditioned the institutional aspects of the recent economic crisis in the country. For details, see Öniş (2019) and Kutlay (2019).

Turkish counterparts, has been able to draw attention to external threats and enemies by framing foreign policy “as a boundary-drawing practice that demarcates the Self from the Other” (Wojczewski 2019), which has contributed to his overall popularity. According to a Pew Research Center survey (2017), for instance, 63 percent of the Indian public believes that the Indian “government should be using more military force” and 64 percent has “a *very* unfavourable view of Pakistan”.

Last, but not the least, US President Trump has used foreign policy initiatives to maintain his political popularity. His ‘America first’ strategy and the set of policies designed to restore the US as a dominant global power, such as withdrawing from the nuclear agreement with Iran, leaving the UN climate agreement, waging a trade war against China, and engaging in direct confrontation with Mexico over the future of NAFTA, are important sources of attraction at home. The foreign policy crises that Trump has triggered, such as recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel despite overwhelming global opposition, have helped divert attention from awkward domestic problems (Borger and Beaumont 2017). Many analysts would clearly regard these initiatives as costly for long-term American interests. In the short term, however, his overt promotion of American interests, narrowly defined, have helped Trump gain the support of a significant section of the American public.

### **Beyond the nationalist-globalist dichotomy**

The preceding sections have demonstrated that exclusive nationalism tends to be a unifying element of right-wing populism and, when used in foreign policy, instrumental to diverting public attention. The examples of right-wing populist leaders highlighted so far display a strong and unequivocal commitment to the promotion of national interests at all cost, both in rhetoric and in practice (Plagemann and Destradi 2019). But all forms of populism – including its right-wing variant – represent a backlash to certain negative aspects of globalisation. In that sense, right-wing populists are sometimes described as ‘anti-globalist’ since they want to implement measures that try to limit the impact of globalisation on their national economies and societies. The columnist of the *Financial Times*, Gideon Rachman (2018), for instance claimed, “The contest between globalists and nationalists will be a central theme of world politics.”

The most striking right-wing populist leader whose policies can be described as anti-globalist is Trump, who already projected a protectionist stance during his rise to the presidency. In office, some of his promises have been translated into concrete practice. These include raising tariffs against Chinese imports, renegotiating the terms of the NAFTA with Mexico, with the alleged objective of protecting American firms and workers against foreign competition (Rodrik 2018). Trump’s anti-integrationist stance extends well beyond protectionist measures. It also involves a tough anti-immigration stance popularised by the construction of a wall to prevent large-scale migration across the Mexican border. Similar ideas have been implemented with equal vigour in a different geographic context, the European periphery. Hungary under Orbán has also adopted some extravagant strategies, including translating the ‘Trumpian wall’ into concrete reality with a barbed wire fence restricting even a limited number of refugees from entering the country.

We suggest, however, that right-wing populists are ‘selective anti-globalists’ at best, and more often ‘selective globalist’ as they do not categorically reject integration into the global economy, which renders the ‘nationalist vs globalist’ dichotomy rather simplistic and somewhat misleading. We need to extend our horizons beyond the nationalist vs globalist divide to be able to capture the complexity of right-wing populism as a truly global phenomenon. The key proposition is that right-wing populists have a different vision of globalisation and an alternative role for their countries in a redefined global context. Ample evidence exists to support this claim. For many of the key leaders of the global South, such as Erdoğan, Putin or Modi, the main objective is an alternative path to global governance with respect to the previously dominant Western-led international order with its associated set of economic and political governance arrangements. The phenomenal rise of China in recent years and the counter-example of a seemingly successful model of authoritarian capitalist economies juxtaposed against the increasingly flawed varieties of Western democratic capitalism sets the context in which right-wing populist leaders approach globalism (Bremmer 2010; Kurlantzick 2016; Öniş 2019; Kutlay 2019).

Erdoğan, in the Turkish context, for instance, could be described as a ‘selective globalist’. He is globalist in the sense that he wants Turkey to play an active role in both a regional and global context – through significant humanitarian aid amounting to USD8 billion annually allocated to five continents as part of an ambitious global-oriented foreign policy approach. In particular, he envisages a strong leadership role for Turkey in the Middle East and North Africa. Beyond immediate neighbours, however, Erdoğan sees Turkey as a key member of the global South, whose future is closely tied to an expanded version of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Within the BRICS, his key reference point or model appears to be authoritarian BRICS, namely the Russia-China axis epitomised by his quest to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Öniş and Kutlay 2019a, 243).

Orbán is another striking example of the selective globalist tendencies of right-wing populist leaders. Orbán has clearly been influenced by the rise and growing influence of the Russia-China axis in a shifting global context. Yet, he has no intention of following the path of Brexit and departing from the European Union. Instead, he wants to be part of a coalition that seeks to transform Europe from within. Orbán’s vision is a mono-cultural and Christian Europe, driven by common economic and security interests with normative values such as liberal democracy and human rights, gender equality, and environmental justice increasingly sidelined (Öniş and Kutlay 2019b, 13). Indeed, Orbán’s vision of the EU has a neat counterpart in the visions of Erdoğan and Putin, where Europe remains important as a predominantly economic partner. Thus, right-wing populists should also be considered globalists, but of a different type, with a rather different normative stance that diverges sharply from a typical Western understanding of globalisation, drawing on liberal democracy and unfettered markets. Based on these examples, one could offer the following proposition: right-wing populist leaders prefer a different path to globalisation, where key decisions on global governance are taken through intergovernmental bargaining in a post-liberal international order in which international institutions are increasingly undermined and sidelined. It is important to underline at this point that the right-wing

populist leaders are increasingly visible on a global stage as they present themselves to their societies not only as national but also as thoroughly global figures. Hence participation in G-20 or BRICS summits, for instance, is significant not only in terms of influencing key issues of global governance, but also in projecting the image of influential world leaders, that bolsters their popularity at home.

The global nature of right-wing populism also explains its resilience. Right-wing populist leaders thrive in an environment where similar leaders and policy styles are prevailing in other national contexts. In a way, they form an emergent transnational coalition of like-minded leaders, who take key decisions at global platforms such as G-20, through their mutual interaction. Being part of a powerful coalition obviously feeds into domestic politics. The global nature of the illiberal-authoritarian coalition means that it is also difficult to oppose and circumvent (Öniş and Kutlay 2019b). It was quite striking but not coincidental that Orbán was the only leader from the EU to take part in Bolsonaro's inauguration ceremony in the distant setting of Brazil (Phillips 2018). Likewise, the build-up of strong personal relationships between Putin and Erdoğan, Orbán and Putin, and Orbán and Erdoğan, among others, has been widely publicised.

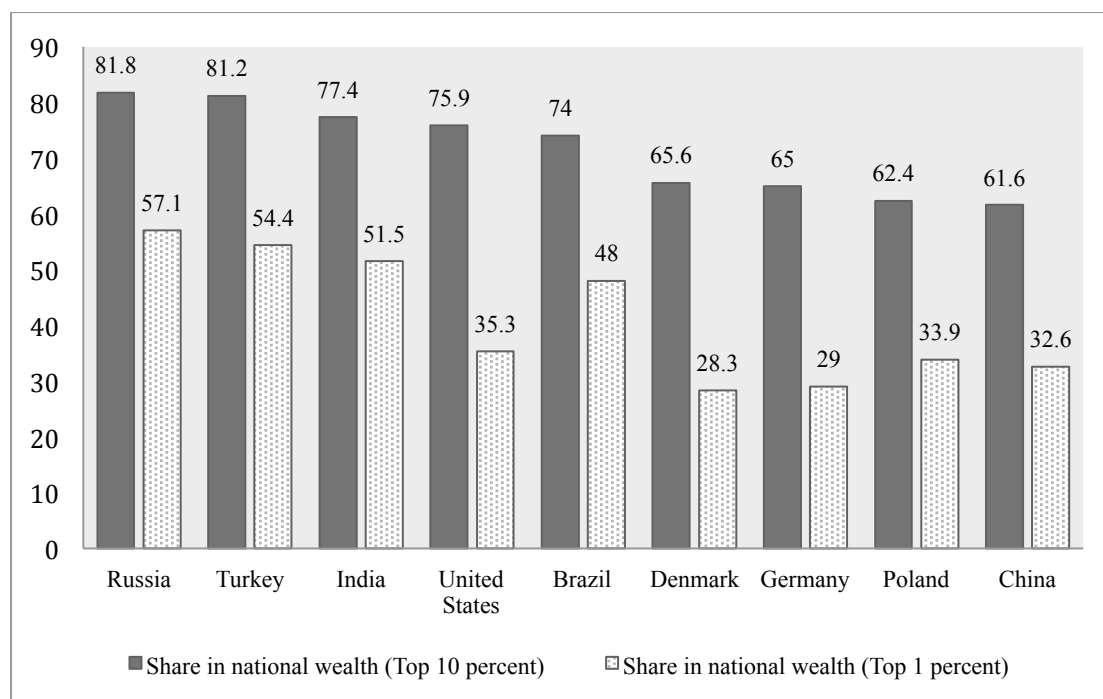
### **Does right-wing populism overcome the problem of inequality?**

The selective globalist nature of right-wing populist leaders bring one of the most important problems associated with neoliberal globalisation to the fore – that is, income and wealth inequality. The relationship between increasing inequality associated with hyperglobalisation and the rise of a populist wave is a subject on which considerable ink has been spilled (Eichengreen 2018; Judis 2016; Rodrik 2018, 18-25).<sup>4</sup> Since the global right-wing populist wave has thrived on the concerns and fears of the underprivileged masses, a legitimate question to ask is the extent to which right-wing populists in government have been able to deal with the problem of inequality. The data suggest that there is no evidence that right-wing governments perform well in reducing relative inequality in their respective societies. Indeed, significant income and wealth inequality persists in countries where populists have been in power for extended periods of time. For instance, Russia and Turkey appear to be at the top of the list in terms of wealth inequality (Figure 2). In the context of the global North, the US is characterised by a much higher degree of inequality than Western Europe.

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<sup>4</sup> An alternative strand of literature criticises the “economic grievances” argument by advancing the hypothesis that right-wing populism should best be understood as a “cultural backlash” against post-materialist values, that is, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism (Inglehart and Norris 2017). Gidron and Hall (2017) also frame populism as a “social integration problem”.

**Figure 2.** Distribution of national wealth

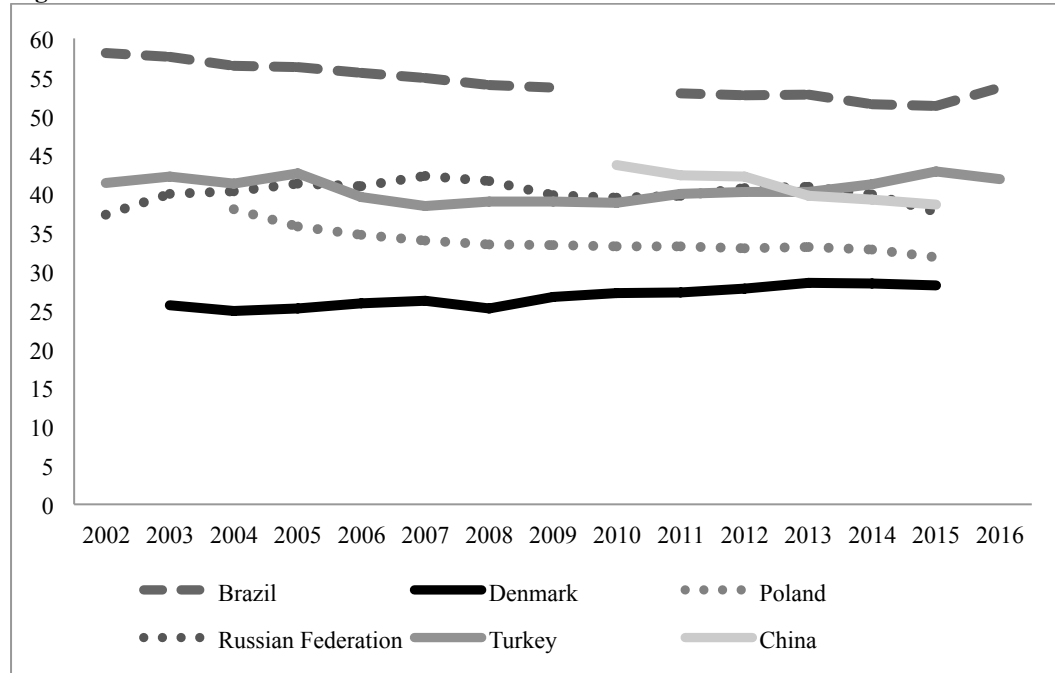


**Source:** Based on Credit Suisse Global Wealth Databook (2018). Brazil retrieved from 2016 report.

The only serious case of a significant reduction in relative income inequality measured by the Gini coefficient,<sup>5</sup> admittedly from an initial base of extreme inequality, was accomplished by a left-wing populist government in Brazil during the golden age of the Brazilian Workers' Party rule in the early 2000s. The Lula government, as Pereira (2015) demonstrated, was able to engineer significant redistribution through major cash transfer programs such as *Bolsa Familia*, which "strengthened the citizenship rights of the poor". As a result, millions of people were lifted out of poverty and the Gini coefficient dropped over a short period by a serious margin (Figure 3). True, Lula was helped in achieving such growth and significant redistribution over time by a favourable international liquidity environment and commodity boom (Saad-Filho and Morais 2018) – a trend also observed in the rapid economic recovery of Putin's Russia and the expansion of the middle classes in Turkey. The political turmoil that Brazil encountered in the 2010s, however, created a serious backlash to the years of left-wing populism and the most striking example of social democracy in the global South. Brazil's authoritarian neoliberal turn under the right-wing populist Bolsonaro suggests that many of the gains of the previous decade could be reversed. In any case, in spite of the favourable impact of the Lula years, Brazil continues to be a high income-inequality country.

<sup>5</sup> The Gini coefficient is a single number that takes a value between 0 and 1 – the higher the value, the greater the degree of income inequality.

**Figure 3.** Gini coefficient – selected countries



**Source:** World Bank Development Indicators.

In many cases where powerful right-wing populists are in power there is a simultaneous process of horizontal redistribution – that is, expansion of social expenditures oriented towards large segments of society – and vertical concentration – that is, significant expansion of wealth in the top layers of society. Russia under Putin constitutes a striking example of this dual pattern of horizontal redistribution and vertical concentration. Oligarchs at the top with close connections to the regime have been the principal beneficiaries. Yet, the recovery and growth of the Russian economy, especially in Putin’s early years in the 2000s, again, as in the Brazilian case helped by a favourable international context and rising oil prices, allowed large segments of the population to benefit from this process. Similarly to the rise of the conservative middle class that formed the backbone of the AKP phenomenon in Turkey, the new middle classes in Russia constitute the foundation of Putin’s continued popularity.

At this point, this article proposes reversing the direction of the causality between right-wing populism and income inequality: authoritarian right-wing populism may be conceptualised more effectively as a tool for managing capitalism in the face of pervasive inequalities in a new age. Admittedly, right-wing populists utilise economic growth and social assistance in their quest for tackling societal inequalities. But clearly, their aim is not redistribution on a major scale to fix the problems that have been associated with neoliberal globalisation over the last few decades. Instead, in most cases, their policies favour the interests of privileged classes at the very top of the income and wealth spectrum. The fact that right-wing populists in government have been particularly successful in countries with high degrees of income and wealth inequality in both the global North and the global South deserves

attention. On that note, the far-right parties so far have not emerged as a dominant force in Western Europe where welfare states are stronger and inequality is less of a problem in comparative terms.<sup>6</sup>

We, therefore, suggest that economic growth and a certain amount of redistribution that comes with it is only a necessary condition for the success of right-wing populists. Polarising identity politics and aggressive foreign policy with nationalist overtones constitute other key ingredients that jointly explain their resilience. This kind of identity politics becomes a mechanism for diverting attention and evading underlying problems of income and wealth inequality that can only be partially addressed through purely economic measures. As a result, right-wing populists are able to master an election winning formula based on a majoritarian understanding of society, with exclusionary identity politics serving as a glue to bring together people from very different levels on the socio-economic spectrum despite widespread income and wealth inequality in those societies.

### **Conclusion: is right-wing populism reversible?**

This article has sketched a critical review of some of the common stereotypes on populism in the literature and offered an integrated political economy perspective for studying right-wing populism as a global phenomenon. We have argued that right-wing populism and the way populist leaders manage its contradictions should best be understood within the context of 1) an economy-identity nexus and 2) a domestic-foreign policy nexus. To substantiate this argument, we discussed six key controversies of right-wing populist movements in the global North and global South. We suggested that the resilience of right-wing populism is closely related to the vested interests that are the major beneficiaries in terms of economic opportunities and enhanced status. There is evidence that key segments of powerful corporate interests perceive left-wing populism rather than illiberal-authoritarian right-wing populism as the real existentialist threat. Given the incumbency advantages that right-wing populist leaders enjoy in their respective societies, the job of the political opposition becomes particularly challenging, especially in more authoritarian settings where the media is heavily skewed in favour of the right-wing populist governments and where institutional checks and balances have progressively been weakened. In such an environment, the benefits of compliance with the right-wing populists are substantial and the costs of dissent prohibitive. Furthermore, right-wing populist leaders regard foreign policy as an instrumental area where they can divert public attention from awkward domestic problems and mobilise masses along nationalist sentiment to bring to bear the ‘populist dividend’.

Considering the factors that collectively explain the resilience and the global nature of illiberal-authoritarian right-wing populism, one cannot be overoptimistic about its possible demise in the near future. That said, some possible avenues could be pointed out to reverse the current global wave. First, it is plausible to suggest that major crises and policy failures may undermine the foundations of right-

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<sup>6</sup> In the European context, migration rather than inequality has been the main driver that has fueled the rise of far-right parties Eichengreen (2018, 135-140).

wing populists in particular national contexts. Moreover, again in line with the global nature of the phenomenon, a major failure in a specific setting may trigger a set of chain reactions. As right-wing populists are inclined to form transnational alliances and actively learn from each other, the failure in major cases is likely to accelerate declining allure of the populist wave in other cases. The 2020 presidential elections in the US are obviously crucial. If Trump fails to win a second term, this is likely to influence the overall mood and empower the opposition in other national settings. In any case, the failure of mainstream politics in addressing the problems of hyperglobalisation facilitated the rise of right-wing populist sentiment. Thus, the fall of populism would be possible with public opinions concurring that the right-wing populist remedies are ill-suited to address complex issues of domestic and global governance in the 21st century.

Second, there are signs of distress in several major right-wing populist cases. For instance, in Brazil, Bolsonaro seems to be facing serious problems at home, including corruption allegations surrounding his family members, only six months after his election. In Russia, economic difficulties and weak growth seems to be generating resistance, constituting a possible challenge to Putin's previously uncontested popularity. Turkey's Erdoğan is being put to the test by a state of economic crisis feeding growing popular reactions from below, as the results of the March 2019 local elections in major metropolitan centres clearly attest. In none of these cases, however, do the on-going crises – at least for the time being – seem deep enough to unsettle the voters' electoral preferences.

Third, one should note the inherent tension in right-wing populism that may pave the way for its eventual demise. Right-wing populism thrives on polarisation and the existence of categorical 'others'. Its success depends on winning the majority of the popular vote. However, there is always the concern that a significant part of the society will remain outside the coalition. Hence, success is built on a permanent sense of insecurity and constant fragility. In the face of major economic stalemates and slowdowns in growth rates, opposition movements, if they were able to develop more inclusive agendas to win broad-based political support, could capitalise on this ontological fragility in right-wing populism, especially as large numbers of people become increasingly disenchanted with the politics of fear fomenting polarisation and a perpetual state of conflict.

In conclusion, on an optimistic note, we may discern a series of chain reactions at local level in a wide variety of national settings, which may form the basis of a possible global counter-movement against the right-wing populist wave. The rise of new style Democrat politicians in the US, growing environmental and civil society activism in Europe, the result of the local elections in Turkey and Hungary, as well as several mass protests across the world may all be seen as part of this new counter-movement of progressive politics. Whether this new politics of globalisation from below will display the degree of coherence needed to counteract the wave of populist right-wing politics remains a major challenge.

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