

Notes on right-wing populism and authoritarianism (Part 2)

20: On Eastern Europe

Although the ex-Stalinist countries of Central and Eastern Europe embarked on capitalist restoration at roughly the same time, their development diverged. In Russia, a group of powerful oligarchs quickly emerged through their connections with the Yeltsin government, largely based on control of natural resources. While Western capital did invest, it never came to dominate Russia as it did in Central Europe. Despite its weakness and instability, Russia remained a key regional economy, and many former Soviet states – whose economies had been deeply integrated into the Soviet system – retained close economic ties to it. Their ruling classes largely saw their future as linked to Russia.

On the other hand, although the Soviet Union had been an important trading partner for the economies of the Central European countries – Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and the Baltic states – they had not been such an integral part of the Soviet planned economy and were located on the border of the European Union. That is why, from the very beginning, the newly established ruling elites of these countries saw the opportunity for their future development and prosperity as being tied to Western capitalism and its political, economic, and military institutions. As early as 1991, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia formed the Visegrád Group with a view to pushing for integration into the European Union and NATO.

This orientation went hand in hand with the wholesale adoption of neoliberal policies, strongly promoted and enforced by Western institutions such as the EU, the World Bank, and the IMF. These countries were geographically close to Western Europe, making them particularly attractive for Western capital, which took an active part in the restoration of capitalism by sharing know-how, helping to build capitalist financial and legal institutions, and investing heavily in light industry in the region. In return, these economies offered a skilled, low-paid workforce that could assemble and produce manufactured goods for the European market close to the border of the European

Union. These countries also provided a huge market of enthusiastic but not overly demanding would-be consumers for the goods of European capitalists.

NATO membership expanded Western imperialism's sphere of influence further east and provided a guarantee of security for Western capital's investments in the region. In turn, EU membership allowed Western capital to locate production facilities in Central Europe and to export goods back to Germany and the EU without barriers or tariffs. EU funds were not charity payments to Western Europe's poor eastern neighbours, but investments in infrastructure that would increase the efficiency of these links in global value chains and boost Western capitalists' profits. In addition, the establishment of bourgeois democracy and the "rule of law" – a requirement of EU membership – would guarantee clear and stable rules for Western capital to do business in the region. As a result, these economies were relatively quickly integrated into the global value chains of European capitalism.

Although some individuals became extremely rich in a very short time in the countries gravitating towards Western capitalism, they never gained the same power and influence as the oligarchs of the former Soviet states such as Russia and Ukraine. Instead of becoming dominated by oligarchs, the economies of Central Europe became dominated above all by Western capital. For example, by 2003 foreign banks owned approximately 77% of the Polish banking sector and 84% of the Hungarian banking sector. In other Central European countries, the figure was similar. In contrast, only 16% of the Ukrainian banking sector was owned by foreign capital.

The neoliberal paradigm – based on privatisation, labour market deregulation, and the rolling back of welfare systems and public services – went largely unchallenged in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, following the Global Financial Crisis, popular opposition to neoliberalism began to grow in parts of the region, particularly in Poland and Hungary, where it increasingly took the form of mass protests and trade union mobilisations.

Poland

In Poland, large demonstrations by workers and trade unions broke out in the years preceding the rise of PiS, directed against the liberal PO government and its policies, including attacks on workers' rights in the labour code, the spread of precarious work, and the raising of the retirement age. PiS was able to capitalise on this growing discontent, promising to reverse some of the most unpopular neoliberal policies, including restoring the lower retirement age and introducing a child benefit programme aimed at reducing poverty.

In Poland there was the potential for a much more generalised working-class mobilisation and growing support for a general strike. However, the trade union leadership refused to build the movement, and there was also no independent working-class party capable of taking the lead. The main “left” party, SLD, had compromised itself after continuing neoliberal policies when in government and as a result was hated by large sections of the working class. As a result, working class anger was captured and rechannelled by right-wing populist and nationalist forces rather than by a socialist alternative.

Hungary

Although there was no comparable mass working-class mobilisation or trade union upsurge in Hungary, Orbán also captured the broader anti-liberal and anti-austerity mood that developed in Hungary in the wake of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis.

Nationalism played a central role in channeling the social discontent produced by neoliberalism. It redirected working-class anger away from a struggle against capital and toward external and semi-external targets: foreign – particularly German – capital, European Union institutions, and domestic liberal elites portrayed as agents of German interests. This allowed right-wing populist forces to absorb this discontent and turn it into political support rather than it developing into an independent working-class challenge.

They consolidated power by combining selective redistribution with a far-reaching restructuring of the state apparatus, bringing the judiciary and much of the media under strict political control. In Hungary, this took the form of a constitutional reconfiguration

driven by Orbán's parliamentary supermajority, while in Poland it involved the effective breaking of existing constitutional constraints.

At the same time, they sought to shift the balance of economic forces established during the period of capitalist restoration, presenting this as a project of restoring national economic sovereignty and strengthening domestic capitalism. In practice, however, this involved embedding party loyalists and allies within large partially state-controlled firms and banks, while through corruption, preferential treatment, and manipulated public procurement, state resources and the profits of these enterprises were channelled into private businesses linked to ruling party networks. The boundary between state institutions, party structures, and private capital became increasingly blurred.

They proceeded to restructure their domestic banking systems. In Poland, this took the form of "repolonisation" of the banks – a process of voluntary nationalisation aimed at reducing the share of foreign-owned capital. A similar strategy was pursued in Hungary, where in 2014 Orbán declared the goal of achieving 60% Hungarian ownership of the banking sector.

Are these bonapartist states?

The emergence of these regimes raises the question of whether they can be understood as forms of bonapartism. In the classical Marxist sense, bonapartism refers to a situation in which the state acquires a relatively autonomous position in relation to the main class forces, balancing between them while ultimately defending the conditions of capitalist rule. While Trotsky's analysis was developed in relation to inter-war Europe, and often linked to situations of acute pre-revolutionary crisis, the dynamics in Central and Eastern Europe suggest a more flexible application of the concept. In these cases, bonapartist tendencies can arise not only in moments of revolutionary confrontation, but also in conditions where capitalism is re-established on a dependent basis, where the bourgeoisie is fragmented, and where no stable hegemonic fraction of capital is able to fully dominate the state.

In Poland and Hungary, the dominance of foreign capital and the weakness of a consolidated national bourgeoisie created a situation in which political power could be exercised through the state as a relatively autonomous actor, rather than as a direct expression of a unified ruling class. Right-wing populist governments were able to position themselves between different social pressures: on the one hand, the constraints of global and European capital; on the other, popular discontent with neoliberal restructuring. In this sense, their authority was not simply a reflection of a dominant class fraction, but depended on balancing and mediating between conflicting forces while reorganising the state in their own interest.

21: What is meant by populism - left-wing and right wing

Cas Mudde, a Dutch academic, tries to define populism as an “ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”

This definition is made much clearer when placed in context of Trotsky’s explanation “The difference between the [left] populism of the Narodniks and revolutionary politics is that the former lacks any understanding of class struggle and the role of the working class”.

Today’s wave of right-wing populism follows neoliberalism, the collapse/ bourgeoisification of former workers’ parties, alienation of populations from the bourgeois institutions and parties together with the failure of the left populist wave in the last two decades [starting with Chavez, Morales, Syriza, Kircher, Obrador, Sanders, Corbyn, Melachon, Yamamoto etc and including the anti-globalisation movement].

In general presenting themselves as fighting for the 99%, left populist forces focused on economic democracy, social justice, anti-capitalism but did not present either a coherent alternative to capitalism, or a strategy for sustainable organisational resistance. This is a major weakness between left and right reformism - the former, to maintain credibility has to be able to end capitalism, while the latter, essentially defenders of raw-blooded capitalism, does not face the same challenges.

Now right populist forces are clearly in the ascendancy. The turning away from neoliberalism by the global bourgeois, and consequently moves to reverse globalisation and “the rule of law” in favour of the protection of national industry inevitably leads to the strengthening of right-wing nationalism and militarisation. Right populists fit well into this context when, put crudely, they contrast the corrupt liberal establishment which was built up during the neoliberal epoch to ‘ordinary people’ and traditional family/religious values. With contempt for those they appeal for support to, they are anti-programme relying instead on simplistic slogans based on “common sense” - in reality on “common prejudices”.

Unlike left populism which appeals to the whole population, blurring class differences, the right populists appeal to a specific group within the overall population while denying the class divisions within that group, instead blaming the corrupt elite which they portray as betraying the interests of just their group.

Mudde argues that right populism shares three distinct elements - they are anti-establishment, authoritarianism and nativist. In the above context it is necessary to qualify these elements. Right-populists are anti-establishment only to the extent they oppose that part of the establishment that developed during and dominated the neo-liberal epoch, while behind its general anti-establishment rhetoric it actually supports the new developing capitalist paradigms. They are authoritarian as far as restrictions on their opponents are concerned - of course, in power they can go further in the direction of bonapartism. Nativism is most commonly, but not always expressed as violent anti-immigrant campaigns, although in some cases it can be expressed in inter-ethnic conflict - against Muslims and others in India, against Rohingyas in Myanmar etc.

Of course there is no “pure” right populism, or “pure” bonapartism - the transit from one to another should be seen as a dynamic - and within each phenomena - fascist individuals and fascistic activities can usually be found. Right-populist forces have often evolved out of former fascist organisations (ie in France, in Italy etc) but unable to win sufficient electoral support they have whitewashed their fascist past - but this makes them inherently prone to move towards bonapartism if they gain power.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that the growth of right populism is pushing the traditional parties of the establishment further to the right, which is not just under the pressure of the far-right, but because the bourgeoisie itself is becoming more nationalistic.

22: Who supports the right populists?

United States

The Roper Centre conducted a statistical analysis of which groups voted for Trump and Harris in 2024. At 64%, turnout was relatively high for such an election. Men voted more for Trump 55% than women 45%. White people voted 57-43 for Trump, Afro-American 13-86, Hispanic 46-51, Asian 40-55.

Under 44 years of age the balance was 45-52, over that age 52-46. All groups earning under \$100000 a year voted 51-47, whilst over \$100,000 47-51. Union households - 45-53, and non-union 51-47.

Immigration, the economy and foreign policy were the most important issues for Trump supporters, whilst the state of democracy and abortion rights drove Harris supporters.

Turnout of GenZ voters in 2024 was lower than in 2020 - but of those who did, there was an increase in Trump votes. But the sharp drop in Trump's approval ratings has been most marked amongst this group due to dissatisfaction with the economy and the way immigration is being handled. A 2026 youth poll against a general fall in Trump's approval ratings shows that 68% of 18-22 year olds, 72% of 23-28 yos and 75% of 30-34 yos disapprove. This trend is more marked for young women than young men.

Living standards, immigration attacks and the activities of ICE have undermined Trump's support amongst the Latino population. A recent poll suggests a quarter of those who voted for Trump would not do so again.

Trump also polled well among "white non-university graduates" - a year ago he had a positive approval rating of +32, now it is negative 2. The main reason for this collapse is the economy. It appears that the decline in support amongst this group (which voted 66% for Trump in 24) is sharp across all ages. The only demographic that seems to be increasing its support for Trump is the white male older (over 65) traditional republican voter.

Australia

Pauline Hanson's "One Nation" party has multi-billionaire backers such as Gina Rinehart and other ultra rich sponsors. Its supporters mainly come from disillusioned supporters

of the liberal/national coalition - up to 68% would consider voting ON. But amongst Labour voters too 45% would consider doing so. In both cases these are mainly people over 50 who no longer think the two-party system is working for them.

Like in the US, low-income (less than \$AU45,000) non-university layers show a high level of support for ON, but they are matched by the same proportion of those earning more than \$200,000. Why do low income people support ON - because they suffer most from the cost of living crisis, and they have no confidence in the two party system, they feel they have no agency to change the situation.

The dominant issues concerning voters for all parties are overwhelmingly living standards, as well as health and housing. ON stands out only on the question of immigration, which 24% of its supporters consider the most important. Voters of all parties are cynical about politicians but those who vote for ON are extremely cynical. 75% of ON voters think politicians only look after themselves.

Argentina

Mauro comments in his notes that: "In January 2025, Milei reached a 43.7% approval rating compared to a 40% disapproval rating. In January 2026, this was reversed, with a 48.7% disapproval rating compared to a 38% approval rating. In more recent days, a Bloomberg poll places Milei's approval rating at 36%, the lowest of his administration. This gives a fairly clear picture of the situation. A relevant aspect for characterizing Milei's social base is that it comprises a segment, especially young people, who, amidst the crisis, are seeking alternatives in cryptocurrencies and financial investments as a means of livelihood. This is not a phenomenon exclusive to Argentina, as the same is happening in Mexico, the United States, and Europe. The so-called "manosphere," a virtual space where far-right, sexist ideas and "how to invest" are promoted by influencers like Andrew Tate or Temach in Mexico, is also relevant."

This analysis is borne out by the statistics provided by Martina Jaureguy following Milei's election victory. In the first round, Milei essentially gained the votes of his core base - 30% - mainly males with significant support from young males. The transfer of votes from Bullrich in the second round changed the balance with more older, including female voters giving support. In the second round 68% of young males between 18 and 30 voted for Milei, compared to only 49% of women. As the age of voters increased the percentage of women voters over 50 who supported Milei grew to 51% and men dropped to 55%.

Milei won overwhelming support from those working in the military and police forces. He also gained a large advantage amongst self-employed people, who in general favour less regulation. Jaureguay points out that a significant layer of employees also voted for Milei even though his policies could lead to closures - this is explained she says as a reaction to the previous years of Kirchnerism when inflation reached 150%. They voted not so much to support Milei but to oppose Massa.

India

The dynamics of support for Modi differ somewhat from those felt elsewhere. In 2016 the level of support for the BJP was high (50-70%) across all demographics, slightly less only for women.

In the previous two decades, the annual GDP growth rate averaged over 5% - some call this India's "gilded age". Unlike the traditional base of Congress which was amongst the lower caste and poorer layers, the BJP was traditionally the party of the richer and urban middle classes. In 2016 though Modi was able to appeal not to those who had been left behind as in other countries but to those, particularly the young who had benefitted from and aspired to more from the previous decades of growth. His image was helped as he himself was from the "OBC" (Other backward Classes).

In 2014 Modi was promising proper jobs instead of reliance on welfare payments, a system which he argued was corrupt decadence. Once however he failed to create sufficient jobs, he started again to rely on welfare payments, which has served to disguise the incredible inequality in India and shore up the support for his party.

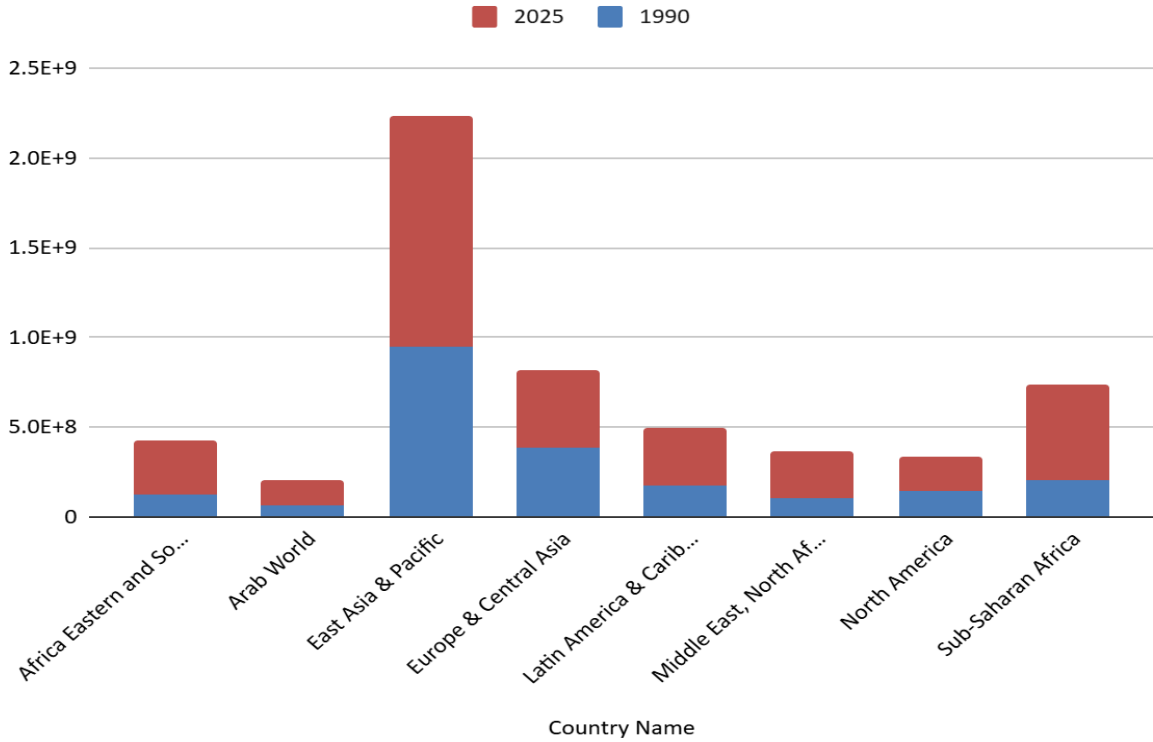
Modi's ideology was always based on Hindu nationalism, but as long as the growth was able to feed the aspirations of the "neo-middle class" it was less dominant. But a number of factors, exasperated by Covid, meant that he could not keep delivering his promises. Youth unemployment as well as precarity (80% of jobs) in particular grew. Modi increasingly leant/leans on Hindutva to explain away his difficulties.

Hindutva claims that the previous Congress secular approach privileged minorities at the expense of the Hindi majority. It attacks the "corrupt, cosmopolitan elite" while strengthening a highly unequal, pro-business capitalist economy. Needless to say the Hindu nationalism is accompanied by increasingly authoritarian methods.

Appendix 3

Numbers of the working class in the different regions of the world from 1990 to 2025

1990 and 2025



Countries having a working class numbering more than 2 million in 2025

