

Introduction

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How do we make sense of the rise of populism across developed and developing democracies? Why are voters plumping for parties that decry elites as corrupt, democracy as ineffective, and their nations as failures? This critical forum sponsored by the *Slavic Review* answers these questions by ranging broadly across both post-communist countries and the developed democracies they are often told to emulate.

Populist movements share both 1) *a claim to represent the “people,”* rather than particular interests or cleavages and 2) *a view of elites as corrupt and indifferent.* The defining characteristic of populism is a claim to represent an “organic” people or nation, rather than specific interests or groups. Rather than seeing class or economic interest as the relevant cleavage, then, these parties assume that the “people” have a common shared interest, a general will that ought to be the aim of politics. Therefore, they emphasize demands for popular sovereignty and direct democracy, rather than the mediation of individual and societal interests through democratic institutions such as parliaments or parties. These commitments, once enacted, often endanger both the formal institutions and the informal norms of liberal democracy.

Beyond this shared common core, populism takes a variety of guises. There are left- and right-wing populisms, and each populist episode may have a very different logic and dynamic. As Venelin Ganev argues in his analysis of the Bulgarian ATAKA, a single party may first gain support for its xenophobic stances—only to develop a sophisticated critique of neoliberal economic policies and an argument for economic etatism. The populist rhetoric of Hungarian and Polish populists, with their emphasis on a cultural contrast between the moral and noble eponymous nations and the hollow and secular west, is a very different one. It is this chameleon-like nature of populism—its ability to articulate a variety of demands from nativism to redistribution—that makes populist arguments so appealing to many politicians, and so powerful and convincing for many supporters.

Agnieszka Pasieka takes the anthropological perspective and shows how a favorite trope of populism—far right nationalism—inhabits international spaces. Ironically, right-wing nationalists, obsessed with domestic purity and action, create transnational networks and understandings where ideas, norms, and tactics are exchanged. Putin’s “populist international” may be an example, if a particularly well-funded and prominent one. Pasieka also highlights the importance of identifying precisely what it is that our polities are contending with: bandying about “populism,” “fascism,” or “alt-right”

without clearly specifying what is meant only leads to conceptual confusion and political obfuscation.

Why has populism arisen? The role of labor markets, immigration, technology, and trade have all been held up as responsible. But as Abby Innes points out, one underlying cause is that well-intentioned economic reforms have led to a steady erosion of the state that precludes it from acting to benefit society—and instead makes it porous to private financial interests and the inevitable corruption that results. The quasi-market delivery of what used to be public goods, the competing logics of welfare states and market reforms, and the private financing of political campaigns are all both causes and symptoms of the new state failure. In both post-communist Europe and the advanced democracies of the United States and the United Kingdom, states can no longer meet expectations of protection and benefits—and populists promise they can deliver these goods again by narrowly defining the people who would receive them.