An Ethno-Nation Deeply Divided-

The Center Periphery Cleavage and the Rise of Right Wing Populism in East Central Europe

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Abstract

Perhaps the most notable political phenomenon of the past decade has been the global rise of populism. A growing number of populist leaders worldwide have been mobilizing on ultra-nationalist rhetoric, and cultivating an exclusionary and protectionist domestic and international environment. Much of the research on populism seeks to define it, or explain the timing of the current rise of populism, focusing on economic crisis, immigration, and globalization. My research aims to explain the underlying causes that make countries more susceptible to populism. I ask why some countries experience a surge of radical nationalist populism leading to transformative political outcomes such as the concentration of power in the center and a decline of liberal-democratic practices and institutions. I argue that to understand why nationalism reemerges in the form of radical right populism, we need to view the populist struggle as a struggle over the meaning and content of the nation. To that end, I define the nation not as a unified solidarity group, but as the *effort* to create a solidarity group through shared ethnicity, history, culture, language, territory, or civic identity. Thus, while the struggle to create a relatively homogenous national territory may be settled, in-group struggle for determination of the nation can continue.

Where the development and reproduction of national identity was uneven across territory and social groups, groups in society hold contradicting ideas on national identity. They are effectively two distinct national groups that share ethnicity, but not the homogeneity of identity that existing nationalism literature would lead us to expect. Deep center periphery cleavages, occupational gaps, or differing levels of religiosity can create a deeply divided society even within the same ethno-religious group. The result is fundamental disagreement on the essentials questions the nation is facing: criteria of belonging to the national community; friends and foes; basic rights; the role of religion in public life; and form of government. In such cases, radical nationalist leaders can mobilize support against mainstream politicians by presenting the mainstream elite as betraying the "true" nation. The key to this theory is rethinking the concepts of nations and nationalism. In recent decades, nationalism scholarship focused on interethnic conflict as a trigger to the reemergence of nationalist mobilization and the rise of civil war. The recent rise of populism however, requires scholars to turn their attention to intra-ethnic cleavages. While populists mobilize against minorities, and foreign actors, much of the national fervor they bring to societies is directed inwards, particularly toward center elites. Unlike in cases of ethnic divides, existing literature does not offer any remedies for deep intra-ethnic divisions, as solutions like federalism, consociationalism, or secession do not apply.

My book project explores the origins of uneven spread of national identity and its consequences for liberal democracy. To support my theory, I examine the cases of East Central Europe's Poland, Hungary, and the Czech and Slovak Republics. The research draws on fourteen months of field work, during which I conducted close to one hundred in depth interviews and extensive archival research. I show that in all the cases, the development and reproduction of the nation left the political and geographic centers disengaged from the peripheries. I demonstrate that the four countries took different paths in the 1989 transitions from communism that opened the political system for contestation. Both Poland and Hungary failed to integrate the peripheries into the political systems creating two groups with contradicting understanding of national identity within the ethno-national group. Conversely in Czechoslovakia, center and periphery cleavages overlapped with ethnic identity and as a result it was far easier for the periphery in Bratislava to organize and make demands early on the center in Prague. I find that national fervor in ethnically homogenous but center-periphery divided societies is turned inwards – from the periphery toward the center. This is manifested in the rise of anti-establishment discourse that presents the elite establishment as foreign and legitimizes an overturn of liberal institutions. A second finding is that both strong liberal traditions and national unity offset transformative populism. Slovakia has been the least liberal country in the study. The entire Slovak political system, including the left, has been employing nationalist and culturally populist discourse, in particular in regards to the Roma and Hungarian minorities. It is therefore difficult for radical right populists to undermine the political mainstream based on nationalist agenda. More broadly, though a highly liberal regime transition might seem desirable to Western observers, it has a disruptive potential for countries that lack deep liberal traditions. This contributes to literature on the unstable nature of new democracies.