

> What Comes After the End of History?

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The post-Cold War order is under strain. Challenged from without by the rise of authoritarian regimes, and from within by a resurgent populist far right, Western democratic institutions are undergoing a crisis of legitimacy. In Western Europe, far-right parties are siphoning voters from the center-right and center-left. Once marginal politicians, such as Marine Le Pen of France's National Front, have gained ground on a nationalist anti-EU platform. In Central Eastern Europe, self-styled "illiberal states," such as Hungary, are rolling back political freedoms and centralizing executive powers. And in the United States, Donald Trump was swept into office on a populist anti-globalist platform.

At the same time as populism, nationalism, and authoritarianism gains traction across the globe, trust in democratic institutions, mainstream media, and centrist political parties is declining in the oldest democracies of Western Europe and the United States. Russia, seeing an opportunity to undermine transatlantic consensus, is actively working to further destabilize Western democracies by propping up far-right populist parties, engaging in disinformation campaigns, and exporting kleptocracy. These pressures mounting pressures on the international system reveal that democracies are not invincible or eternal.

To some, it may seem that the rise of populism within democratic societies, on the one hand, and the resurgence of authoritarian states, on the other, came about suddenly and will come to end just as suddenly. As the adage goes, "authoritarian regimes are stable until they're not." The notion that we are in the middle of a cyclical moment, which will come to an end once the international system reasserts itself, is a comforting thought. But what if the current trends propelling democratic regimes toward nationalist populism and driving the appeal of authoritarian leaders are not cyclical? What if we are entering a new era in which such movements will grow to define a new structure of the international order? What if, despite best efforts to

shore up Western values, democratic institutions, and liberal ideas, authoritarianism wins the day?

It is possible that with the defeat of Le Pen in France and Angela Merkel's continued reign in Germany, European populism has hit its peak and is now on the decline. It is also possible that with increased Western sanctions and pressure, Vladimir Putin will change course in Ukraine and will roll back Russian influence operations in Europe. And it is possible that the European Union will emerge post-Brexit economically stronger and more united around common values, while President Trump walks back his populist rhetoric. These events, were they to materialize, would buttress the international system and restore some stability in the international order. But while a move toward restabilization is certainly possible, political and economic trends point in the opposite direction. As the primacy of the international liberal order recedes, the question that we must ask ourselves is not "how should the West reinstate the post-Cold War order," but rather, "what comes next?"

TEMPORARY CYCLES OR PERMANENT REALIGNMENT?

In his recent book, *A World in Disarray*, Richard Haass argues that the post-World War II order, ushered in by the U.S. and Europe, has run its course. If the West is to continue to play a role in shaping the new world order that comes next, it must develop institutions and foreign policy approaches that are better equipped to manage an international system defined by uncertainty and chaos. While Haass convincingly lays out the foundational concept of World Order 2.0, in which the United States and its allies can continue to have an important role, he does not address the possibility the West (primarily the United States and Europe) are themselves undergoing a profound transformation that will restructure the politics, values, and guiding principles in these societies for the long term.

With the rise of far-right populism in Western Europe, emergence of illiberal states in Central Eastern Europe, continued economic stagnation, and political oscillation in the post-Soviet states, the European continent may be headed toward a realignment that will allow nationalist movement form where there are none and proliferate where they already have a foothold. This shift, were it to take place, has been long in the making.

The European Union has been in crisis management mode for the last decade: the economic crisis, Brexit, refugee inflows, and multiple terrorist attacks have given fodder to far-right (and far-left) populist political parties. But while these crises have helped the far right's anti-EU, anti-immigrant, nationalist agenda, these parties did not emerge out of the blue.

TAKING A LESSON FROM FRANCE

Europe's populist turn has been in the making since the 1980s. The National Front (FN) is a prototypical example of the slow rise of the far right over the last four decades. Jean-Marie Le Pen founded the FN in 1972 with the intention of unifying France's right-wing movement under one umbrella. The party struggled to make headway at the polls until the mid-1980s, when the FN had its first electoral breakthrough and gained 35 seats in the National Assembly. While the party was anti-immigrant from the beginning, this point was underemphasized in favor of a nationalist agenda centered on an ethnic vision of statehood. Its economic policy at the time (unlike today) was somewhat incoherent but generally pro business, deregulation, and market liberalization. More so than the party's platform, what helped propel Le Pen in those early days was the center left's embrace of (neo)liberal economic policy and austerity. By 1983, in a dramatic about turn, Francois Mitterand's socialist government abandoned its ambitious nationalization plan and moved to pursue austerity measures (*rigueur*). And, as would be the case for other European countries, this shift toward liberal economic policies pushed the traditional constituency of the Left—the working class—into the open arms of the nationalist right. By the 1990s a full “proletarianization” of Europe's far right, which by then adopted an anti-liberal economic protectionist rhetoric, was under way.

By the time Jean-Marie Le Pen's daughter, Marine Le Pen, took over the party's leadership in 2011, France was still reeling from the economic crisis of 2008. That crisis left one in four French youth under 25 unemployed for years afterwards. Another socialist president, Francois Hollande, came to power in 2012, but was

unable to revitalize France's economy and left the presidency with single digit approval ratings mocked as France's most unpopular president. One reason for Hollande's decline was that he was the product of the Socialists' neoliberal embrace, which turned the party into a technocracy intent on holding to the socialist ideals but without a progressive vision to recapture an increasingly alienated constituency.

All of Europe breathed a sigh of relief with the surprising win of the centrist and charismatic Emmanuel Macron over Marine Le Pen, but Macron's victory overshadowed a deeper problem: the complete collapse of the center-left and the center-right, which propelled Le Pen into the second round of the presidential elections where she doubled the support reached by her father in 2002 and made significant gains among youth and first time voters. Macron is a capable and savvy politician, but less than six months into his term, his popularity is sliding. The collapse of the traditional parties provided En Marche, Macron's centrist movement, a political opportunity, but the sheen is wearing off as he tried to push through liberal labor market reforms. Rather than being Europe's savior, Macron may be the last one holding the gates.

Elements of France's experience with the collapse of the center left is manifesting itself across Europe in recent elections. The socialist and labor parties are losing ground in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany. In other countries, like the UK, Spain, and Greece, center-left parties are swinging to the far left—alienating moderate voters in an attempt to hold on to their traditional constituency and attract young voters. The center right, for its part, is forced to compete for voters with the challenge coming from the far right. Some, including the French Republicans, have responded by adopting far right platforms on trade and immigration, thereby legitimizing and mainstreaming what were once fringe policy ideas. The result is a thinning out of the traditional center and an expansion of the extremes across European democracies. These political shifts, in addition to economic stagnation, suggest that Europe is headed toward a nationalist turn defined by the reassertion of state sovereignty in opposition to the EU, political instability, and a more inward looking foreign policy over the long term. And while the EU may not collapse soon, its relevance may continue to recede as its values-based model comes under increasing pressure and doubt. And while Europe's far right populists are not, for the most part, anti-democrats, if such parties and political leaders have an opportunity to govern, examples in Hungary and

Poland suggest that they would seek to use democratic institutions to limit those very institutions checks on executive power.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF REALIGNMENT

If, as this paper has suggested, Europe's populist turn has not hit its peak but is, in fact, indicative of a broader political realignment in Europe, then the consequences for the international system could be significant. The EU, if it survives, will be a weak institutional framework as more decision making is returned to the states. More exits from the Eurozone would devastate the European economy with detrimental consequences for common European investment in multilateral institutions like NATO. So-called "illiberal states" would no longer be the exception but the norm on the continent as proto-authoritarians roll back political freedoms. Foregoing traditional alliances, individual states would broker deals with resource rich authoritarian regimes, most notably Russia. Countries between the EU and Russia would be left untethered, eventually forced to submit to Moscow's relentless desire for a sphere of influence in the region. Russia would go on the same course, even after Putin hands the reigns to a chosen successor. Putinism without Putin would become Russia's new motto. For its part, the United States, also undergoing its own populist shift, would lose the support of its strongest allies, weakening its ability to manage emerging threats, whether that be in North Korea, the Middle East or elsewhere.

THE RESPONSE

While none of these events may come to pass, Western policymakers should be prepared for this scenario. The first step in mitigating the challenge posed by a populist turn in Europe and the United States is identifying the underlying societal schisms that have led us here. Far-right populist movements have been a slow-moving threat, but, perhaps out of hubris, centrist political elites dismissed such movements as a flash in the pan that would quickly fade away. This dismissal of the looming challenge has left center left and center right parties struggling to appeal to voters and young people who are losing trust in democratic institutions and looking to more radical solutions. Center left parties must first find their progressive vision that can recapture the hearts and minds of voters. Center right parties will, over time, realize that pandering to the far right will not work. They too, will have to reassess and readjust their strategies.

Second, Western democracies should take a sober look at how foreign malign powers seek to drive wedges in our societies. Russia has not manufactured an identity crisis in Europe or an election in the United States. But its influence operations fan the flames of division and undermine consensus. Blocking Russia's (or any other state's) ability to continue to do so would reveal our own vulnerabilities to such operations and, over time, build resilience.