

Populist Shifts: How Turkey, Serbia, and Germany's AfD are Redefining Democracy and International Alliances

The world is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by the rise of populism, the erosion of traditional alliances, and the pervasive influence of social media. As populist leaders gain prominence across the globe, the very foundations of democracy are being challenged, leading to increased polarization, instability, and a growing sense of uncertainty about the future of democratic governance.

The Rise of Populism: A Global Phenomenon

Populism, once considered a fringe political movement, has now become a dominant force in many countries. Leaders like Donald Trump in the United States, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia, and the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Europe, have harnessed the power of populist rhetoric to gain and maintain power. These leaders share a common strategy: they present themselves as the voice of the "people" against a corrupt elite, using divisive language to stoke fear, anger, and resentment.

In Turkey, Erdoğan has masterfully employed populism to consolidate power, blending nationalism, religious conservatism, and anti-Western sentiment to appeal to his base. His government's increasingly authoritarian tendencies, such as the suppression of judicial independence and press freedom, are emblematic of the risks that populism poses to democratic institutions. Recently, Erdoğan's formal request for Turkey to join the BRICS group — a coalition of emerging markets including Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa — signals a significant pivot away from traditional Western alliances. This move underscores Turkey's strategic desire to diversify its international relationships and strengthen ties with non-Western powers, reflecting a broader trend among populist leaders to challenge the post-World War II global order.

Similarly, in Serbia, Vučić has balanced between aligning with the European Union and maintaining strong ties with Russia, using populist rhetoric to navigate the complex political landscape. The purchase of Rafale jets by Serbia under President Aleksandar Vučić provides a compelling illustration of the complex balancing act between populist rhetoric and pragmatic politics. On one hand, Vučić has maintained Serbia's traditional ties with Russia, leveraging historical and cultural connections to appeal to nationalist sentiments within the country. On the other hand, his decision to purchase Rafale jets from France — a member of the EU and NATO — highlights a strategic move to strengthen ties with Western powers, particularly in the context of Serbia's long-term aspirations to join the European Union.

This purchase can be seen as a calculated attempt by Vučić to navigate Serbia's geopolitical position. By acquiring advanced military equipment from a prominent Western nation, Vučić signals a willingness to engage with the West and modernize Serbia's defense capabilities in line with European standards. This move is likely intended to bolster Serbia's standing with EU member states, while still allowing Vučić to maintain his populist rhetoric domestically by framing the deal as a necessary step to protect Serbia's sovereignty and security in an increasingly volatile region.

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The Rafale deal also serves as a counterbalance to Serbia's close ties with Russia. While Vučić continues to assert that Serbia will not impose sanctions on Russia — a stance that appeals to pro-Russian and nationalist factions within Serbia — his engagement with France through this significant arms deal demonstrates a pragmatic approach to international relations. It reflects a broader strategy of keeping Serbia open to multiple alliances, thus avoiding over-reliance on any single power.

The appeal of populism is not confined to any single region or ideology. In Germany, the AfD's victory in Thuringia and Saxony signals a significant shift in European politics. The AfD, characterized by its anti-immigration stance and skepticism toward European integration, has capitalized on growing discontent with the political establishment, particularly in regions that were part of the former East Germany. This success is particularly relevant due to the unique historical, economic, and cultural dynamics of these areas. After the reunification of Germany in 1990, the former East German states experienced significant economic challenges, including higher unemployment rates, slower economic development, and a general sense of being left behind compared to the more prosperous western regions of the country.

These disparities have contributed to a sense of disillusionment and frustration among the population in these areas, making them fertile ground for populist and far-right parties like the AfD. The party's anti-immigration stance, skepticism toward European integration, and focus on national sovereignty resonate strongly in these regions, where there is a perception that the benefits of globalization and reunification have not been equally shared. This sense of being overlooked or marginalized by the central government and traditional political parties has driven many voters in the former East Germany to support the AfD as a form of protest against the political establishment.

AFD's success reflects a broader trend of populist parties gaining traction across Europe, fueled by economic inequalities, cultural anxieties, and a perceived disconnect between citizens and their governments.

The Erosion of Democratic Norms

The rise of populism poses a direct threat to democratic norms and institutions. Populist leaders often undermine the checks and balances that are essential to democracy, concentrating power in the executive branch and weakening the independence of the judiciary and the press. In doing so, they erode the rule of law and create environments where dissent is stifled, and political opponents are marginalized. These actions help them to solidify and maintain their authority. By undermining these checks and balances, they can bypass legal constraints, push through controversial policies, and maintain a tight grip on power. This strategy helps sustain their narrative of fighting for the "people" against a corrupt elite, while marginalizing dissent and eroding democratic norms, leading to a more authoritarian style of governance.

Erdogan's Turkey exemplifies this trend. By centralizing power and curtailing freedoms, Erdogan has created a political system that is increasingly authoritarian, undermining the democratic institutions that once served as a check on his authority. This model is not unique to Turkey; similar patterns can

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be observed in other populist-led governments, where democratic backsliding has become a significant concern.

In Europe, the rise of populism is challenging the cohesion of the European Union and threatening the stability of the continent. The AfD's success in Thuringia and Saxony is a stark reminder of the fragility of democracy, particularly in regions with a history of authoritarianism. As populist parties gain influence, they disrupt the traditional political order, making it increasingly difficult for governments to address the complex challenges of the modern world.

The Role of Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword

Social media has played a crucial role in the rise of populism, providing a platform for populist leaders to spread their message and connect with supporters. These platforms allow leaders to bypass traditional media and communicate directly with their audience, often using emotionally charged language to galvanize their base. The algorithms that drive social media platforms are designed to maximize engagement, which often means amplifying content that elicits strong emotional reactions, such as anger, fear, and outrage.

Research has shown that populist leaders are particularly adept at using social media to manipulate public emotions. By crafting messages that tap into existing grievances and anxieties, they can create a sense of urgency and mobilize supporters to action. This strategy not only helps them gain power but also sustains their influence once in office, as they continue to stoke division and resentment to maintain their base.

However, the use of social media by populist leaders also poses significant risks to democracy. The spread of disinformation, the proliferation of echo chambers, and the erosion of trust in traditional media all contribute to the weakening of democratic norms. As citizens become more polarized, the ability to engage in constructive dialogue and find common ground diminishes, leading to a more fractured and unstable political landscape.

The Root Causes of Populist Appeal

The rise of populism can be traced back to several underlying factors. Economic inequality, job insecurity, and the erosion of the middle class have fueled widespread discontent. Globalization and technological advancements, while beneficial to many, have left significant portions of the population feeling marginalized and disconnected from the benefits of a globalized economy. Populist leaders capitalize on this discontent by promising to restore lost prosperity through protectionist or nationalist policies.

Cultural anxieties, particularly around issues like immigration and national identity, have also contributed to the populist surge. As societies become more diverse, fears of cultural dilution and the loss of traditional values have driven voters towards leaders who promise to protect the nation from external influences. This rhetoric often resonates deeply in regions with strong historical identities and a sense of cultural heritage under threat. For instance, in the former East Germany, the AfD has capitalized on lingering economic disparities and cultural anxieties stemming from the

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reunification of Germany. Many residents feel that their distinct East German identity is being overshadowed by the more prosperous and politically dominant West, leading to a sense of alienation. Similarly, in Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić uses nationalist rhetoric to appeal to those who feel that Serbia's historical and cultural ties to Russia are under threat from Western influences. In Turkey, President Erdoğan taps into deep-seated fears of Western interference and the loss of Islamic cultural identity to rally support for his authoritarian policies, particularly as he seeks to align Turkey with non-Western powers like the BRICS group.

Finally, the erosion of trust in traditional political institutions has created fertile ground for populist movements. Scandals, corruption, and perceived inefficiencies have led to widespread skepticism about the ability of established parties to address the needs of ordinary citizens. Populist leaders, presenting themselves as outsiders untainted by the system, offer a compelling alternative to the status quo, even if their solutions are simplistic or unrealistic.

The Changing World and the Future of Democracy

The world is at a crossroads. The rise of populism, the erosion of democratic norms, and the pervasive influence of social media are reshaping the global political landscape. As populist leaders continue to gain power, the future of democracy hangs in the balance. The challenge for democratic societies is to resist the allure of populism and reaffirm the values of inclusion, cooperation, and respect for the rule of law. Populist leaders often admire and support Kremlin politics for several reasons that align with their own political strategies and ideologies.

Firstly, the Kremlin's emphasis on strong, centralized leadership resonates with populists who favor the concentration of power in the hands of a single leader. Vladimir Putin's model of governance, which prioritizes state control over key institutions like the media, judiciary, and security forces, provides a blueprint for populists seeking to bypass democratic checks and balances.

Secondly, the Kremlin's nationalist rhetoric and defense of traditional values appeal to populist leaders who often position themselves as defenders of national sovereignty and cultural identity against globalist and liberal forces. Putin's promotion of conservative social policies, opposition to Western liberalism, and emphasis on Orthodox Christianity align with the cultural and ideological stances of many populist movements in Europe and beyond.

Moreover, the Kremlin's foreign policy, particularly its opposition to Western dominance and NATO expansion, is attractive to populists who are skeptical of international institutions and multilateral agreements. By aligning with Moscow, these leaders can signal their resistance to what they perceive as Western hegemony and interference in their domestic affairs. This alignment also allows them to present themselves as part of a broader, global movement that challenges the existing international order.

Additionally, Kremlin support can provide populist leaders with practical benefits, such as financial assistance, media support, or political backing. This was evident in cases like the alleged Russian support for far-right parties in Europe, including financial aid and propaganda efforts aimed at boosting their electoral prospects.

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Democracies must address the root causes of populist discontent, such as economic inequality and cultural anxiety, while upholding the principles that have long been the foundation of free and open societies. In an increasingly interconnected world, the future of democracy depends on the ability of its defenders to adapt to new challenges and forge a path forward that is both inclusive and resilient.

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