



The Dangerous Geopolitics of Populism, and What NATO and the EU Can Do About It

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Undemocratic governments are at risk of creating a geopolitical void in central Europe. By antagonizing fellow European states in NATO and the EU, at a time when the US is less than fully invested in these institutions, they are isolating themselves. By artificially stirring anti-EU feeling they are rendering their citizens more vulnerable to Russian propaganda. In a worst-case scenario, these states might end up detached from the West, and entering into a geopolitical limbo.

The European Economic Community (EEC) started off as a small club of just six democratic states. NATO, originally, was less squeamish about values, in spite of the reference to “democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law” in the preamble to the Washington Treaty. The authoritarian Portugal of Salazar was a founding member in 1949. Greece and Turkey have been allies since 1952, even as they went through periods of authoritarianism. Strategic necessity trumped values. That assessment began to evolve with the accession of Spain to NATO in 1982, and of Spain and Portugal to the EEC in 1986, following the democratization of both countries. The end of the Cold War definitely

changed things: democracy now *is* a strategic necessity. The consolidation of democracy in central and eastern Europe has become a key objective of NATO and EU enlargement.

So what do NATO and the EU do when some of their members revert back to authoritarianism?

That the governments of Hungary and Poland are, at the very least, weakening democracy in their countries is beyond doubt. The EU has repeatedly identified specific policies that violate democratic principles. Other member states are at risk of evolving in a similar direction. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has stated himself that he seeks to construct an “illiberal democracy”. Obviously, no such thing exists. Whatever populists claim: the choice is between democratic and non-democratic government.

POPULISM AND NATO

This authoritarian trend, which affects other countries too, creates a fundamental problem for NATO, because it is at odds with how its basic purpose has evolved since the end of the Cold War. The purpose of NATO today is to defend not just the territorial integrity of its members, but also the model of society that they have constructed on their territories. In European society, the state is to guarantee

security, prosperity, and democracy for its citizens. This triad cannot be disentangled: a citizen can only benefit from security, prosperity and democracy together or not at all. Security from violence doesn't mean much if one dies of hunger, just as wealth doesn't mean much if the government can take it away, or even imprison you, arbitrarily.

If an ally no longer upholds this European way of life, then what exactly is NATO supposed to defend? A government that undermines its country's democracy thus ipso facto puts its security at risk too. The more authoritarian a government becomes, the more it puts the bond of solidarity in the Alliance into question. To put it very starkly: which democratic government could justify to its citizens putting its forces in harm's way in order to defend an eventual dictatorship in another NATO country?

This, of course, is obvious to NATO's potential adversaries too. Russia definitely will not hesitate to use any opportunity that presents itself in order to weaken NATO, if only to stop the Alliance from interfering in its strategic design of re-establishing predominance in the former Soviet republics. Hence Russia actively supports various populist actors.

POPULISM AND THE EU

In most cases, populist tactics include Euro-scepticism. It is both acceptable and necessary in a democratic polity to criticise EU policies, and even the EU project as such. But when countries decided, by democratic means, to join the EU, they subscribed to a set of objectives and limitations. If a government no longer is willing to abide by them, it cannot expect that its country's status in the EU will remain unaffected, even if such were the free and informed democratic choice of its citizens (which today is questionable). Therefore, if the EU adopts sanctions against a government that violates the basic principles that it subscribed to when joining the Union, this

does not constitute a violation of the sovereignty of the state in question.

But certain governments not only violate the EU's values, they also actively undermine EU policies, notably the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). What is worse, they appear to be doing so under the influence of foreign powers such as Russia and China. In full contradiction with their nationalist rhetoric, some governments have willingly become instruments of outside actors. Worryingly, not only proto-authoritarian but even some fully democratic governments are undermining the EU in this way, having become hostage, it seems, to Russian energy or Chinese financial power. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for the EU to take a resolute and united stance in issues involving China and Russia. Certain governments even undermine EU positions on general human rights policy, directly affecting the core of the Union's value-based foreign policy.

The risk is that at some point other EU countries will stop investing in a foreign policy, and other policies, at 28, and forge ahead in a core group. A multispeed EU is in the offing anyway, and it is the (suboptimal) solution if there is no other way to advance European integration (and it must advance, for there still are areas in which only a stronger EU role can safeguard the national interest of the member states). But a multispeed EU should be a positive choice, a way of moving ahead with a view to all member states re-joining the core eventually. It should not be a negative choice, a way of casting aside those that have come to be seen as obstacles to progress. That would create long-lasting acrimony from which the EU might not recover.

NATO and the EU can no longer be disentangled. If one weakens the bond between nations in the EU, ipso facto one weakens ties in NATO. Or do proto-authoritarian governments really think that

they can constantly frustrate other EU member states, and yet those same states will come running to their assistance through NATO when they are in need? Today, there can no longer be a strong and united NATO without a strong and united EU. Thus, undermining the EU undermines collective defence just as much as undermining democracy does.

A GEOPOLITICAL VOID

The governments concerned may think that they can always count on the US to protect them. But how certain can they be? In July 2017 president Trump happily let himself be fêted in Warsaw and in his speech even seemed to support the Polish government against “bureaucracy” – a thinly veiled reference to the EU. But just a week later he made his appearance as the glowing guest star at the Bastille Day celebrations in Paris, where president Macron will have given him a totally opposite view of the EU.

Even without the suspicion surrounding Trump’s links to Russia, it hardly seems wise to put one’s faith in a president who chose a campaign slogan that originated with extreme right isolationists in the 1930s: “America First”. Under the Trump administration, the US has increased its military presence on the eastern borders of NATO. But given Trump’s less than enthusiastic views on institutions such as NATO and the EU, and his apparent links with Russia, can he really be counted upon to counterbalance Russian attempts to unravel these organisations and to gain major influence in specific central European countries (by other than military means)? Especially if some of the European governments concerned seem to have de facto enabled Russia themselves?

What anti-EU, undemocratic governments are at risk of doing, therefore, is to slowly create a geopolitical void in central Europe. By antagonizing fellow European states in NATO

and the EU, at a time when the US is less than fully invested in Europe’s institutions, they are actually isolating themselves. At the same time, by artificially stirring anti-EU feeling they are rendering their citizens more vulnerable to Russian propaganda. In a worst-case scenario, these states might end up detached from the West, and entering into the same geopolitical limbo as Ukraine, an uncomfortable buffer zone between the West and Russia. This is probably not what citizens in Poland and Hungary have in mind.

The consequences may not be limited to the current proto-authoritarian states. If authoritarianism is not stopped, it may well affect ever more European states. Already, the existence of proto-authoritarian regimes within the EU has greatly undermined the legitimacy and effectiveness of EU foreign policy. It may well end up paralysing EU decision-making altogether and, consequently, cause the flight ahead, if not the break-away, of the remaining democratic member states. At that point the cohesion of NATO too will crumble. What is more, authoritarian tendencies in Europe and in the US may become mutually reinforcing. Many American observers fear similar developments in the US as are now happening in Poland and Hungary. In a reversal of history, a strong democratic EU can act as a beacon for democratic forces in the US. But a divided and less and less democratic EU and US may end up pulling each other down.

This is a dark scenario, but not an impossible one, which is why NATO and the EU have to guard against it.

NATO-EU COOPERATION

Preventing a geopolitical void in the heart of Europe and halting the spread of authoritarianism is a really strategic challenge for NATO-EU cooperation. It calls for a degree of common strategizing that goes much beyond what NATO-EU cooperation envisages today.

The EU has awoken to the challenge, be it belatedly. The European Commission is keeping up the pressure on governments that violate the Treaties, including, most recently, by proposing to leverage financial support in the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework for the EU's budgetary period 2021-2028. Sanctions may be counter-productive to some extent at first, as people may unite behind their national government, but the alternative is to let the rot spread. NATO too should communicate much more firmly with its member states: NATO commitments amount to a lot more than spending 2% of GDP on defence. Democracy is as important, if not more, to merit the solidarity expressed by Article 5.

Sanctions alone are not enough, however. The West must have a positive story to tell and, even more importantly, concrete new achievements to underpin it. First and foremost, the EU must have convincing policies that are seen to directly benefit the security, democratic rights, and prosperity of every individual citizen. People must understand that in reality neither Russia nor any other outside actor has anything to offer to a citizen of the EU. Or would anybody opt for a Russian pension plan? This means investment in the economy, but it probably also means that a new deal in European social policy is the indispensable bulwark against foreign intrusion. The national welfare states

that ensure the equality of European citizens, and thus the cohesion of European societies and the stability of European politics, must be ensured at the EU level, and visibly so. This is of major importance for all EU member states, for as elections in France, Germany and Italy have shown, nobody is immune against the lure of populism.

Finally, EU institutions must be strengthened as well. Specifically, unanimous decision-making on foreign policy (CFSP, not defence or CSDP) should be abandoned in favour of decisions by qualified majority voting. Individual member states will then no longer be able to weaken European diplomacy for their narrow short-term benefit, but to the long-term detriment of all. That's the essence of the Union: giving up on individual short-term interests guarantees everyone's interests in the long-term.

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