



# Why Populist Nationalists Are Not Having a Good Crisis Yet

*Thomas Kleine-Brockhoff*

The mainstream interpretation of the coronavirus crisis sees it as a trend accelerator, rather than a turning point of history. According to this hypothesis, first advanced by the Council on Foreign Relations's Richard Haass,<sup>1</sup> the world that emerges from the crisis will not look fundamentally different than the world that has existed before. The pandemic and the response to it will reveal and reinforce existing forces and trends of the international environment and hence not so much change the basic direction of history as expedite its course. An eroding liberal international order, a United States retreating as a global leader, increasing great-power rivalry, a world economy surpassing peak globalization—all of these trendlines were observable before and grow more notable as the pandemic ravages on.

But several months into the crisis, elements of discontinuity have emerged that point to not an acceleration but a deceleration of history. The politics of the pandemic seem to have slowed, not hastened the global ascent of populist nationalists<sup>2</sup>. Their arguments are falling increasingly flat. Their poll numbers are tanking.<sup>3</sup> Electoral victories are suddenly harder to come by. Their momentum is stalling. Where populist nationalists govern, their performance has been uneven. Clearly, they are not having a good crisis. It may be too early to talk about a turning point of history, but there is something to be learned from shining a light on exactly how and why they are struggling and what their best chance for a turnaround would appear to be.

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1 Richard Haass, [The Pandemic Will Accelerate History Rather Than Reshape It – Not Every Crisis Is a Turning Point](#), Foreign Affairs, April 7, 2020.

2 The use of the term “populist nationalism” draws on the definitions of Jan-Werner Müller and Michael Thumann. Müller ([False Flags – The Myth of the Nationalist Resurgence](#), Foreign Affairs, March/April 2019) makes the distinction that populism and nationalism are not the same. But, while a person can be a nationalist without being a populist, today “all right-wing populists are nationalists”. Populism is a shorthand for criticism of “elites.” Populists, claim only they can represent “the real people” while their adversaries are deemed to be corrupt. In monopolizing representation, populists attack the very idea of political pluralism, thereby endangering democracy when in power. Right-wing populists draw on nationalist ideas, such as distrust of international institutions, economic protectionism, and critique of migration. These ideas often cross over into nativism and racism. Nationalists, on the other hand, cross over into the territory of populism and become “populist poseurs.” Michael Thumann ([Nationalism by choice](#), IPC-Mercator, May 2020; forthcoming as a book: *Der neue Nationalismus – Wiederkehr einer todegeglauten Ideologie*, Die Andere Bibliothek, September 2020) describes this crossover phenomenon as nationalism of opportunity or nationalism by choice. It results in an amalgamation with the populist agenda and consists of: a victimization narrative, identity politics, deliberate polarization, monopolization of representation, rhetorical dehumanization, islamophobia, a critique of liberalism, hatred for George Soros, politics of history as a tool, and a leadership cult. Thumann sees Presidents Putin of Russia and Erdogan of Turkey as the two most relevant examples of this type of populist-nationalist amalgamation.

3 For example, in the United States, Germany, Sweden, and Finland. Henry Olsen, [Angela Merkel says the pandemic stopped populism's rise. She speaks too soon](#), Washington Post, July 17, 2020.

In the abstract, the populist nationalists like the theory of the crisis as an accelerator because it seems to portend their hastened rise. With a foothold in multiple countries and in positions of power in some of them, they were poised to gain even more ground by acerbating societal polarization and stoking culture wars. Building on the erosion of the liberal international order, an emerging “nationalist international” would present itself as an alternative to “globalism,” as they like to call international cooperation.

A worldwide pandemic would allow populist nationalists in government to tighten their grip on power. In a moment of crisis that makes the centralization of power more acceptable, an anti-pluralist agenda could be quickly advanced.

For populist nationalists in opposition, the crisis was supposed to highlight the weakness and the corruption of the governing elites. The expectable failure of mainstream leadership would allow them to present themselves as viable alternatives, thus taking another step toward power.

Indeed, throughout the centuries, competitors to the prevailing order have understood that disaster affords them with opportunities. The 14<sup>th</sup> century plague, which eliminated more than 40 percent of Europe’s population, discredited the leaders of government and of society, its priests and its intellectuals, even the laws and the theories supported by them.<sup>4</sup> Centuries later, the 2008 financial crisis generated a surge in anti-establishment populism (from the right and the left) that was instrumental in replacing leaders across the globe. With this in mind, the strategists of the populist movement saw the coronavirus pandemic as a crisis they did not want to waste.

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In the early days of the pandemic the populist nationalists seemed to think the tide of the crisis was lifting their boat. They deployed their arsenal of trademark arguments to relatively good results. In the United States, *National Review* author Michael Brendan Dougherty spoke for many when he opined that “the coronavirus incident will only increase Western voters’ demand for and openness to [populist nationalism].” Especially young people who feel drawn to the right “will come out of this experience more skeptical of China, more critical of the pre-crisis economic policy of the Republican Party, more suspicious of uncontrolled flows of labor, capital, and goods across borders.”<sup>5</sup>

This argument was supported far and wide, honed and refined in the global echo chambers of the movement. Alice Weidel, floor leader of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party in the federal parliament of Germany, blamed the spread of the virus on what she called “the dogma of open borders.”<sup>6</sup> President Donald Trump treated the virus as an attack on the United States from foreign soil, calling it the “Wuhan virus,” and blaming China for willfully exporting it. Turkey’s rulers, too, felt victimized by external actors. It saw itself subjected to a “global attack,” as Numan Kurtulmus, the deputy chairman of the ruling Truth and Justice Party

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4 Carl Benedict Frey, [Democracies have proven they have the edge in coping with this crisis](#), Financial Times, May 26, 2020.

5 Michael Brendan Dougherty, [Has the Coronavirus Crisis Proved the National-Populist Case?](#), National Review, March 28, 2020.

6 Pawel Zerka, [Ill will: populism and the coronavirus](#), European Council on Foreign Relations, March 5, 2020.

stated.<sup>7</sup> Brazil's government saw that very same attack onto its territory but called out another culprit. Foreign Minister Ernesto Araujo saw "a return of the communist nightmare" in the guise of a "globalist project," aiming to strengthen malign international organizations like the World Health Organization at the expense of nation states. He called Covid-19 the "comonavirus" and a sibling of "climate alarmism," "gender ideology," "immigrationism," "racism," and "scientism."<sup>8</sup>

Where such enormous dangers loom and the nation state is victimized by dubious globalist forces, citizens need protection. The leaders of Brazil and Turkey as well as several other members of the populist world readily offered such assurances. The populist nationalists liked the idea that authoritarianism was superior to democracy in dealing with a pandemic, a theory first peddled in the Chinese Communist Party press.<sup>9</sup> It appeared to support the concept that strong leadership in combination with emergency powers was called for, while checks and balances seemed superfluous. The likes of Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia, Narendra Modi of India or Victor Orbán of Hungary readily jumped onto the bandwagon. The latter even erected what some called a "coronavirus autocracy,"<sup>10</sup> instituting draconian measures that had only a dubious relationship to health and disease prevention.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, Donald Trump and Mateusz Morawiecki of Poland seized the moment by unilaterally closing their country's borders, jumping out ahead of their liberal democratic neighbors in order to make good on the idea that national isolation from a dangerous world provided the desired answers. As the University of Gothenburg's novel *Pandemic Backsliding Index* shows, five out of six populist governments have instituted measures since the crisis began that endanger democratic institutions.<sup>12</sup>

### Supporting Autocracy, Defending Liberty

It is quite telling that populist nationalists accept or even prefer the productive, yet incomplete<sup>13</sup> analytical frame of autocracy versus democracy. As long as they are trying to operate within the democratic system and win elections they should not want to be confused with authoritarians. The coronavirus pandemic seems to have fractured that barrier. When they are in government, populist nationalists appear to regard themselves as not-yet-authoritarians and find that countries can be more successful in combatting the virus when evermore state power can be centralized. But the strategy of admiring the concentration of power and nudging closer to authoritarianism has come at a price. The facts on the ground are not helping the case.

The world's largest dictatorship, China, was initially successful in suppressing the pandemic while Russia and Iran were not. Several bona fide authoritarians found themselves defenseless against the onslaught of the virus even though their word was enough to marshal all of the state's resources and power. There is simply no way they can successfully use force to get people to wash their hands. At the same time, countries with complex

7 Reiner Hermann, "Ein „globaler Angriff“ auf die Türkei," Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, May 8, 2020.

8 Michael Unsieber, "Brasilien sieht kommunistische Verschwörung hinter dem Coronavirus," Latinapress, April 23, 2020.

9 Thorsten Benner, "Wenn Xi und Orban Coronaparties feiern," Der Tagesspiegel, May 10, 2020. Early successes in suppressing the virus were credited to the "significant advantages" of the Chinese system.

10 R. Daniel Kelemen, "Hungary just became a coronavirus autocracy," Washington Post, April 2, 2020.

11 All of this was enforced with little pushback from Hungary's partners in the European Union.

12 University of Gothenburg, *Pandemic backsliding project – democracy during Covid-19*. March – June 2020.

13 The frame is incomplete because there are other factors to be considered: state capacity, level of globalization, public health, income level, demography, etc. It should also be considered whether a country has recent experience in fighting a pandemic. Asian countries did better than countries on the European and American continents (irrespective of their form of government) because they were able to build on the experience of fighting an epidemic, SARS, in living memory. Public-health structures were in place as well as a mindset that prizes early action over procrastination.

liberal democratic governing systems, multiple power centers, lively oppositions, and active judicial checks performed remarkably well, in fact better than a host of illiberal states when they applied similar policies and restrictions.<sup>14</sup> They also fared better than several autocracies introduced more stringent lockdowns and relied on more intrusive contact tracing. While pluralist democratic Italy and Spain, for example, struggled only early on, their fellow liberal democracies Taiwan, South-Korea, Denmark, and Germany managed very well from the beginning.

Carl Benedict Frey of Oxford University has studied this phenomenon across 111 countries. He and his co-authors have found that democracies' lockdown measures were more effective in reducing movement and travel. "Citizens in democracies," says Frey, "are more likely to abide by the rules set by their governments" while "political repression reduces co-operation."<sup>15</sup>

***While consistent and transparent leadership is in high demand in times of crisis, intrusive governance and curtailed freedoms seem not to be.***

Therefore, the command-and-control world that illiberals prefer nearly as much as authoritarians suffered a serious blow during the coronavirus crisis. While consistent and transparent leadership is in high demand in times of crisis, intrusive governance and curtailed freedoms seem not to be. Social trust and a civic spirit, a sense of individual responsibility combined with a competent state apparatus and credible leadership, have been the characteristics of governance that have led to impressive performances in suppressing the virus. Liberal democracies provide more of these ingredients than illiberal states and certainly than autocracies. It is therefore unsurprising that the pandemic record of populist nationalists in power is mixed at best. Victor Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have often handled administrative challenges competently while Jair Bolsonaro and Donald Trump have not.

But it was not just maladministration that has hurt the populist nationalists' cause, it is their startling inconsistency. When in power they used the pandemic to make quick progress toward illiberalism and state control; when in opposition they embraced libertarianism, presenting themselves as the white knights of civil liberties. They emerged as crusaders of freedom in the face of an allegedly overbearing state. They attacked mainstream governments for adopting the very same emergency measures that their fellow populists in power in other countries embraced – and often surpassed. In Germany, the AfD, in normal times comfortably at home in the law-and-order camp, suddenly discovered a civil libertarian streak and decried Chancellor Angela Merkel's measures to suppress the virus as unnecessary, disproportionate, and in violation of the basic rights of citizens. Italy's Matteo Salvini, leader of the Northern League party, joined the chorus of defending liberty against lockdown by calling the center-left government "authoritarian" because it squelched citizens' freedom of movement and supposedly impoverished the population. At the same time, Salvini managed the intellec-

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14 Michael Bayerlein and Győző Gyöngyösi, "[The Impact of COVID-19 on Populism: Will it Be Weakened?](#)," Kieler Beiträge zur Wirtschaftspolitik, June 2020, p. 93.

15 Carl Benedict Frey, "[Democracies have proven they have the edge in coping with this crisis.](#)" See also University of Gothenburg, [Pandemic backsliding project – democracy during Covid-19](#); Thomas Carothers and David Wong, [Authoritarian Weaknesses and the Pandemic](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 11, 2020; John Daniszewski, "[In struggle against pandemic, populist leaders fare poorly](#)," Associated Press, July 23, 2020; David Leonhardt and Lauren Leatherby, "[Where the Virus Is Growing Most: Countries With 'Illiberal Populist' Leaders – Brazil, Russia, Britain and the U.S. have something in common](#)," New York Times, June 10, 2020.

tual acrobatics of voicing his admiration for Orbán's decision to close parliament and concentrate power in his own hands.<sup>16</sup>

Wanting to have it both ways is not a specialty that Salvini pioneered—President Trump has developed an unrivalled mastery of this tactic. At the same time that he and his administration said they supported stay at home orders, temporary business closures, and social distancing measures, he mobilized citizens against this very policy by encouraging them to protest in the name of “liberty”<sup>17</sup>—a right wing populists’ version of virtue signaling.

### The Intellectual Unraveling

In the midst of this intellectual confusion it made perfect sense that the populist nationalists could not decide whether the virus was for real—and *if* it was for real where it came from and what to do about it. Trump again is the perfect example. Was the virus a “hoax” fabricated by the Democrats to hurt him politically? Or was it something truly dangerous, the “Wuhan virus,” designed by the Chinese to hurt the United States? Or was it something mysterious, but innocuous that in the end would disappear “like a miracle”? No one in the movement knew for sure, not even the world's über-populist himself.

Far from living their commitment to protect “the real people” from the alleged oppression by “elites,” populist nationalist parties became receptacles for conspiracy theorists, some of them even embracing the QAnon cult. And it was for the much-scorned mainstream politicians and their equally derided scientific advisors to devise strategies and organize societal buy-in for the fight to protect lives from the pandemic.

Nothing less than the intellectual framework of the movement became undone during the crisis. Many of the drivers that had fueled the rise of the movement now undermined the traditional pillars of its support. The crisis deprived populist nationalism of oxygen because in order to breathe citizens needed solidarity, not polarization. Instead of exposing the purported weakness and the corruption of the governing elites as well as the biases of scientists, the pandemic brutally exposed the populist nationalists’ conspiracy-mindedness, their alternative truths in the face of inconvenient facts, their futile-to-deadly alternative medicines, their disregard for the little person, their ignorance about the power of social trust. Their haphazard performance in power has sent the movement into tailspin.<sup>18</sup>

Not even hijacking the response to the pandemic as a tool for the culture wars worked sufficiently well. Calling face masks symbols of cowardice and cultural elitism—as Jair Bolsonaro, Matteo Salvini, and Donald Trump did—only succeeded in rallying their unswervingly loyal fan bases. For everyone else this tactic revealed the movement’s ideological infatuation and perilous propensity to take incalculable risks with the lives of others.

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16 Nadia Urbinati, “[The Pandemic Hasn’t Killed Populism.](#)” Foreign Affairs, August 6, 2020.

17 Kevin Liptak, “[Trump tweets support for Michigan protesters.](#)” CNN, May 1, 2020.

18 Polling over the spring and summer has seen populist parties and their leaders flatlining at best. Mostly, they are dropping considerably. The AfD weakened from 13 percent in pre-Corona polls to 10 percent in summer 2020. The Northern League dropped from 30 percent to 26 percent in national polls and 66 percent of Americans disapprove of Donald Trump’s handling of the coronavirus crisis Germany – National parliament voting intention. [Politico Europe Poll of Polls](#), August 17, 2020; [Italy – National parliament voting intention](#), Politico Europe Poll of Polls, August 6, 2020; Chris Jackson, “[Americans believe federal law enforcement presence at protests is making the situation worse.](#)” Ipsos, July 31, 2020.

The failures of populist nationalists have elicited elated reactions from the liberal camp. The coronavirus crisis seemed like the break that the liberals had been waiting for. Angela Merkel spoke for many when she said at the European Parliament in July that “fact-denying populism is being shown its limits.”<sup>19</sup> It is, after all, not easy to deny facts when they are on the ground in local hospitals and morgues. To British author Peter Pomerantsev, the pandemic represented “a moment of hope” because suddenly there were indications that “the Salvinis, Bolsonaros and Trumps do not own this world.” People, wrote Pomerantsev, are simply less likely “to vote for policies that could kill them.”<sup>20</sup>

### Down, but Not Out

Has this course of events therefore falsified Richard Haass’s theory of the pandemic as an accelerator instead of a turning point of history—at least in this instance? Will maladministration portend the undoing of those populist nationalists who hold positions of power? Will the movement’s intellectual collapse preview their gradual departure from the scene?

That the emperor is shown to have no clothes is, of course, the liberal’s most cherished concept based on the enlightened belief that facts and objectivized observations govern behavior. But it may well be nothing more than a wistful fantasy, as Princeton’s Jan-Werner Müller warns. In his view, unmasking incompetence will not be enough to render the populist nationalists irrelevant because “no populist has ever run out of scapegoats.”<sup>21</sup> The movement will not be “magically swept away” before the root causes of its ascendance are addressed, writes Carnegie Europe’s Rosa Balfour.<sup>22</sup> Bulgarian intellectual Ivan Krastev is even sure “the rage will return” once the deadly peril recedes.<sup>23</sup>

The coronavirus crisis could afford the populist nationalists with a second lease on life if they seize the opportunities that the next phase of the crisis is sure to present them with. Should a vaccine be available to large portions of the global public relatively soon, the health crisis will subside while the economic crisis will linger on. Its implications could “open up new possibilities” for the populist nationalists, Columbia University’s Nadia Urbinati warns, especially where they are in opposition.<sup>24</sup> Like every economic contraction, the virus-induced recession will not serve as a great equalizer. Rather, it will exacerbate economic and social divides, thereby opening up space for demagogues who thrive on divisiveness and polarization. In trademark style, they will argue that governing elites largely unaffected by the downturn will not care much about a continued economic crisis. Which is why “the people” can only be adequately represented by the populist nationalists.

According to economic theory, the fastest possible return to open trade, travel, and investment is the best route to renewed prosperity. But it is quite possible that “today’s emergency measures will harden into tomorrow’s institutionalized rules.”<sup>25</sup> Countries may well decide they dare no longer rely on imports and define long

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19 [Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel on the German Presidency of the Council 2020](#), Brussels, July 8, 2020.

20 Peter Pomerantsev, “[Wir sind in einem großen Krieg](#),” Internationale Politik, July/August 2020, p. 49.

21 Jan-Werner Müller, “[The pandemic will strengthen smart populists](#),” Financial Times, July 19, 2020. [See also](#) Michael Bayerlein and Győző Gyöngyösi, “[The Impact of COVID-19 on Populism: Will it Be Weakened?](#)”

22 Rosa Balfour, [Why Populism Can Survive the Pandemic](#), Carnegie Europe, July 15, 2020.

23 Ivan Krastev, Ist heute schon morgen? – Wie die Pandemie Europa verändert, Berlin 2020, p. 52.

24 Nadia Urbinati, “[The Pandemic Hasn’t Killed Populism](#).”

25 David Frum, “[The Coronavirus Is Demonstrating the Value of Globalization](#),” The Atlantic, March 30, 2020.

lists of goods to be produced at home. Some of these measures may be unavoidable, even necessary, especially when it comes to medical and pharmaceutical supplies and products that are essential for national security. Global supply chains based on just-in-time production have shown to be less than shock-proof.

The world cannot afford a brittle version of globalization. Adequate redundancy through stockpiling and relying on multiple international vendors will increase resiliency. This type of “precautionism,” as former World Trade Organization head Pascal Lamy calls it, ought not to be confused with protectionism. The former wants to harden and improve globalization by accepting limits to efficiency; the latter wants to reduce and ultimately destroy globalization in the name of sovereignty.

The populist nationalists will use the next phase of the coronavirus crisis to strengthen their case for decoupling and economic isolationism. They have demanded for quite some time to end the “happy talk about win-win trade outcomes.”<sup>26</sup> Now, they will argue that the only path toward a stable economic order and the only way to prevent future pandemics will be to de-globalize the world: build walls, restrict travel, minimize immigration, reduce trade, repatriate production. The ultimate goal is autarky—just as the nationalist’s goal was in the 1930s, with the well-documented results.

Given this history, it should be relatively straightforward for mainstream internationalists to win this argument. But the anti-populist camp is increasingly fractured. Some have discovered “progressive protectionism” as a left-wing and green version of “taking back control.” They argue that evermore open borders will increase inequality and threaten the environment.<sup>27</sup> The coronavirus pandemic has been a shot in the arm for them, especially in Europe where a growing number of “strategic sovereigntists” have embraced “progressive protectionism.” While struggling to define what sovereignty actually means for a supranational body like the European Union, they see protectionism as an insurance policy against an increasingly zero-sum world dominated by the nationalist superpowers China and the United States. As the European Council on Foreign Relations’ Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard astutely and approvingly observe, “this world view scrambles the traditional dividing line between globalists and nationalists.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, they fail to note the danger embedded in such a scramble: that voters, in the end, might go along with the original, not the copy. So far, populist nationalists, especially those out of power, have not been able to find advantage in the pandemic. However, absent a clear and compelling internationalist argument about globalization post-pandemic, it could be open season for populist nationalists.

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26 Andrew Michta, [“The building blocks of a China strategy,”](#) *The American Interest*, May 7, 2020.

27 Colin Hines, [“Time to replace globalization with ‘progressive protectionism,’”](#) in Jonathan Michie (ed.), *The Handbook of Globalisation*, Cheltenham 2019.

28 Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, [Europe’s pandemic politics: how the virus has changed the public’s worldview](#), European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2020.

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