

UNDERSTANDING THE NEO-NATIONALISM PHENOMENON IN EAST EUROPEAN COUNTRIES: IDEOLOGY, MOBILIZATION, AND TRANSFORMATION OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

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Abstract: *Neo-nationalism has emerged as the defining ideological force reshaping East European politics in the twenty-first century. Distinct from nineteenth-century nationalism or Cold War anti-communism, contemporary neo-nationalism combines assertions of national sovereignty with cultural conservatism, anti-immigration policies, and skepticism toward supranational institutions (particularly the EU). This article examines the neo-nationalist phenomenon across East European countries—Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Western Balkans—analyzing its ideological foundations, social bases, mobilization strategies, and transformative effects on democratic institutions and practices. We argue that neo-nationalism represents not merely a political movement but a comprehensive alternative vision of governance, identity, and international relations that challenges liberal-democratic consensus and threatens democratic consolidation. Understanding neo-nationalism requires examining economic grievances, cultural anxieties, historical traumas, geopolitical insecurities, and the organizational capacities of neo-nationalist political entrepreneurs. The article concludes that addressing neo-nationalism's political dominance requires not dismissal but serious engagement with underlying grievances while defending democratic institutions against anti-democratic nationalist capture.*

Keywords: neo-nationalism, East, European, countries.

1. Introduction: Defining Neo-Nationalism

1.1 Nationalism Reconsidered

Nationalism—the political ideology organizing state authority around national communities and prioritizing national interest in international relations—has profoundly shaped world history. Nationalism facilitated national unification movements, anti-colonial independence struggles, and modern nation-state formation. Yet nationalism has also generated devastating wars, ethnic cleansing, and authoritarian regimes.

Contemporary nationalism requires careful analysis distinguishing it from historical predecessors. Twenty-first century neo-nationalism differs fundamentally from nineteenth-century romantic nationalism (Herder, Fichte) that celebrated national cultures, from fin-de-siècle nationalisms generating imperial competition, and from twentieth-century fascist ultra-nationalism justifying totalitarian violence.

Neo-nationalism is a distinctive contemporary ideology characterized by: (1) sovereignty assertions against supranational institutions and international law; (2) cultural nationalism prioritizing national identity and traditional values; (3) anti-immigration and restrictive citizenship policies; (4) state-centric economic nationalism opposing free trade and globalization; (5) geopolitical multipolarity emphasizing national interest over liberal internationalism; and (6) populist claims to represent "authentic" national interest against cosmopolitan elites (Müller, 2016; Ignazi, 2017).

1.2 Neo-Nationalism in East Europe

East European neo-nationalism possesses distinctive characteristics reflecting the region's historical experiences. Unlike Western European right-wing parties (French National Rally, Italian Brothers of Italy) that often emphasize ethno-cultural nationalism and immigration restriction primarily, East European neo-nationalism emphasizes: (1) resistance to perceived Western (American and EU) hegemony and imperialism; (2) reassertion of national sovereignty after decades of subjugation (Soviet domination, Nazi occupation); (3) preservation of cultural and religious traditions against secular liberalism; (4) grievances regarding economic marginalization within EU integration; and (5) geopolitical balancing between Western institutions and Russian regional influence.

Key neo-nationalist parties include Poland's Law and Justice (PiS), Hungary's Fidesz (under Viktor Orbán), Czech Pirate Party and Freedom and Direct Democracy, Slovakia's LSNS (People's Party—Our Slovakia), Romania's AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians), Bulgaria's VMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization), and numerous Western Balkan movements. While these parties display significant diversity, they share core neo-nationalist characteristics.

1.3 Article Scope and Structure

This article examines neo-nationalism as comprehensive ideological and political phenomenon rather than isolating single policy domains or partisan movements. We analyze: (1) neo-nationalism's ideological foundations and intellectual traditions; (2) social bases supporting neo-nationalist mobilization; (3) specific grievances neo-nationalism exploits; (4) organizational and mobilization strategies; (5) neo-nationalism's relationship to authoritarianism and democratic erosion; (6) geopolitical dimensions; and (7) possible futures for neo-nationalist political forces.

The article's central argument is that neo-nationalism, while deeply concerning from liberal-democratic perspectives, represents a comprehensible response to genuine grievances and genuine alternative vision of governance and international relations. Addressing neo-nationalism requires understanding rather than dismissing, engagement with underlying grievances rather than mere condemnation, and institutional defense against anti-democratic capture while respecting legitimate nationalism and national interest considerations.

2. Intellectual Foundations and Ideological Roots

2.1 Varieties of Nationalism Theory

Neo-nationalism draws selectively from diverse nationalist intellectual traditions. Understanding neo-nationalism requires examining these foundational ideas and their contemporary application.

Romantic Nationalism: Johann Gottfried Herder's romantic nationalism emphasized the distinctive character of national cultures, claiming each people possessed unique historical missions and cultural essences requiring political expression. While Herder's philosophy itself was not inherently aggressive, romantic nationalism's emphasis on cultural particularism and national uniqueness provided intellectual foundations for later ethno-nationalist ideologies (Herder, 2003). East European neo-nationalism's emphasis on national cultures and values—Polish Catholic identity, Hungarian linguistic and cultural distinctiveness, Slovak regional traditions—echoes romantic nationalism's cultural emphases.

Integral Nationalism: Charles Maurras and Maurice Barrès developed "integral nationalism" emphasizing the nation as organic whole transcending individual interests, with national interest supreme. This tradition justified hierarchical social organization, strong executive authority, and subordination of particular interests to national purpose. Contemporary neo-nationalist emphasis on centralized authority, weak civil society constraints on executive

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power, and subordination of minority rights to national interest reflects integral nationalism's influence (Maurras, 2013).

National Self-Determination: Woodrow Wilson's post-World War I emphasis on national self-determination established the principle that peoples possess right to self-governing nation-states. While potentially democratic (enabling peoples to establish governments reflecting their values), national self-determination principle also created foundation for authoritarian movements claiming to represent national will and opposing supranational constraints on national sovereignty. East European neo-nationalism's sovereignty assertions employ national self-determination rhetoric (MacMillan, 2001).

Conservative Nationalism: Edmund Burke and Friedrich Hayek, while not primarily nationalists, provided intellectual foundations for conservative nationalism emphasizing tradition, organic social development, and skepticism toward abstract rationalism and cosmopolitan ideologies. Burke's emphasis on particular historical inheritances and skepticism toward rationalist revolutionary projects influenced conservative nationalism. East European neo-nationalism's cultural conservatism and emphasis on traditional values reflects conservative nationalist influence (Burke, 1790; Hayek, 1960).

Realist International Relations: Hans Morgenthau and other international relations realists emphasized that states pursue national interest in anarchic international system without ultimate authority above them. Realism's emphasis on power, national interest, and skepticism toward internationalism influences neo-nationalist foreign policy orientations emphasizing national interest over liberal internationalism (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979).

2.2 Post-Communist Nationalism and Historical Memory

East European neo-nationalism particularly draws from post-communist nationalist movements emphasizing recovery of national identity after Soviet suppression. The Soviet Union suppressed distinct national identities through Russian cultural dominance, ideological conformity requirements, and integration into Soviet system. Post-1989 transition enabled nationalist reassertion emphasizing suppressed national cultures, languages, and historical experiences.

This post-communist nationalism emphasized: (1) national languages and literatures suppressed under Russification; (2) Christian religious traditions suppressed by communist atheism; (3) national historical narratives emphasizing independence movements and resistance to foreign domination; and (4) national symbols and monuments celebrating national greatness.

Initially, this post-communist nationalism facilitated democratic transitions by mobilizing against communist authoritarianism. However, as post-communist transition matured, nationalism's potential for democratic capture became apparent. National identity claims transitioned from liberatory assertions into anti-democratic nationalist mobilization.

2.3 The Visegrád Group Intellectual Network

The Visegrád Group (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia)—established 1991 as regional cooperation structure—developed distinctive intellectual frameworks emphasizing Central European identity, Christian civilization, and skepticism toward Western hegemony. While initially emphasizing democratic consolidation and integration with West, Visegrád discourse increasingly emphasized regional distinctiveness and resistance to external pressure.

Intellectual figures associated with Visegrád nationalism include: Jarosław Kaczyński (Poland's political leader emphasizing Polish Catholic identity and sovereignty), Viktor Orbán (Hungary's ideologist of "illiberal democracy" and Christian civilization), and various intellectuals and publicists developing neo-nationalist critiques of globalization and liberalism (Ash, 2016).

These intellectual networks helped translate abstract nationalism into concrete political programs, providing theoretical justification for democratic erosion and anti-EU policies under nationalist auspices.

3. The Social Bases of Neo-Nationalism

3.1 Economic Grievances and Market Transition Losers

A fundamental foundation for neo-nationalist mobilization involves economic grievances stemming from market transition and globalization. The transition from command economies to market systems created substantial economic disruption disproportionately affecting certain populations.

Deindustrialization and Regional Decline: Formerly industrial regions based on communist-era heavy industry experienced collapse as subsidized Soviet trade relations disappeared and industries lost competitiveness. Steel, coal, and manufacturing towns throughout the region experienced plant closures, mass unemployment, and demographic decline. Workers in these sectors lost secure employment and faced declining life prospects.

Poland's Silesia, Hungary's mining regions, Romania's industrial belt, and similar areas throughout East Europe experienced dramatic economic decline. This deindustrialization concentrated losses on specific populations (industrial workers, lower-educated populations) in specific regions, creating geographically concentrated grievances.

Rural Marginalization: Agricultural transformation and rural depopulation created grievances in farming communities. Agricultural subsidies favoring large-scale production disadvantaged small farmers. Rural depopulation as young people migrated to cities left aging rural populations behind. EU agricultural policies often disadvantaged East European farmers relative to Western European agribusiness.

Public Sector Contraction: Transition from communist welfare states to market economies involved substantial public sector contraction. Pensions declined, healthcare deteriorated, and public employment shrunk. Populations dependent on public services and employment experienced direct losses.

Wage Inequality and Income Stagnation: While overall GDP growth occurred, wage growth for lower-income populations stagnated or declined in real terms. Income inequality increased dramatically. Top earners benefited substantially from market transition; working-class and lower-middle-class populations experienced wage stagnation or decline.

Research demonstrates that regions and populations experiencing greatest economic losses from transition provide strongest support for neo-nationalist parties. Poland's PiS found strongest support in declining industrial and rural regions; Hungary's Fidesz similarly mobilized economically disadvantaged populations; Czech populist parties similarly drew support from economically stressed areas (Ivaldi, 2020).

However, economic grievances alone cannot explain neo-nationalism, as similar economic dislocation affected Western European populations without generating equivalent neo-nationalist mobilization. Rather, economic grievances combine with cultural and political factors to create neo-nationalism.

3.2 Cultural Anxieties and Identity Threats

Neo-nationalism mobilizes not merely around economic grievances but around cultural anxieties regarding identity transformation. Globalization, migration, and social liberalization have generated cultural changes experienced by many as threatening to national and local identities.

Immigration and Demographic Change: Immigration into East European countries (though substantially lower than Western Europe) has created demographic anxieties. While East European countries remain substantially ethnically homogeneous compared to Western

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Europe, recent immigration from Middle East, Africa, and Asia has catalyzed anti-immigration mobilization. Neo-nationalist parties have emphasized immigration threats, sometimes in explicitly xenophobic terms.

Concerns regarding immigration reflect multiple factors: cultural differences and integration challenges; perceived security threats (terrorism, crime); employment competition; and concerns regarding national cultural preservation. Whether immigration levels actually justify anxiety level, perceived immigration threat drives electoral behavior (Pappas, 2019; Mudde et al., 2017).

Religious and Value Conflicts: Globalization has introduced religious pluralism and secular liberalism into traditionally Christian societies. LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, secular education, and religious pluralism challenge traditional values and social structures. Populations committed to traditional religion and values experience social liberalization as threatening.

Poland's Catholic Church, while not explicitly backing neo-nationalist parties, has aligned with cultural conservatism and traditional values. Hungary's Christian nationalism explicitly combines religious belief with national identity. Slovakia's nationalism similarly emphasizes Catholic tradition. These religious-nationalist alignments reflect perceived threats to religious and traditional values from secular liberalism (Pye et al., 1965; Hachon, 2016).

Urban-Rural and Educational Divides: Voting patterns demonstrate sharp geographic and educational divides. Urban, university-educated populations support liberal parties and EU integration; rural, lower-educated populations support neo-nationalist parties. This reflects differing exposure to globalization's benefits and costs: urban professionals benefit from international mobility, trade, and cultural pluralism; rural populations experience globalization as threat to local communities and traditional ways.

This educational-geographic divide represents structural polarization difficult to bridge through negotiation, as competing constituencies literally inhabit different cultural worlds.

3.3 Status Anxiety and Lost Great Power Status

East European neo-nationalism partly reflects anxiety regarding national status and great power loss. Throughout modern history, Poland, Hungary, and other East European nations possessed significant regional power, cultural influence, and international standing. Communist period subordinated these nations to Soviet dominance, reducing them to client states.

Post-1989 transition brought EU and NATO integration but also subordination to Western-dominated international order. For populations identifying with historical great power status, contemporary subordination generates status anxiety. Neo-nationalism appeals to this status anxiety through reassertion of national greatness and resistance to external domination (Anderson, 2006).

Poland's "Four Crowns" doctrine (combining historical Polish territories to recreate alleged greater Poland) reflects this status anxiety, as do Hungarian neo-nationalism's references to pre-1920 greater Hungary, and similar status-restoration narratives throughout the region.

3.4 Generational Factors and Communist Legacy

Generational analysis reveals important patterns. Populations that experienced communism (those over fifty) sometimes display greater attachment to nationalist solutions as response to communist internationalism and Russian domination. Younger populations, educated in post-communist democratic systems, might be expected to embrace liberal democracy more fully.

However, empirical evidence suggests more complex patterns. While some younger populations embrace liberal democracy enthusiastically, others support neo-nationalist parties

equally strongly, suggesting that communist legacy and age provide limited explanation for neo-nationalism.

Rather, educational trajectories appear more significant than generational positioning *per se*. Young university-educated urban professionals support liberal parties regardless of communist experience; young rural or lower-educated populations support neo-nationalist parties. Education rather than age drives political orientation.

4. Specific Grievances and Neo-Nationalist Narratives

4.1 EU Integration and Perceived Foreign Domination

A central neo-nationalist grievance involves EU integration and perceived loss of national sovereignty. While EU integration initially promised prosperity and security, decades of integration have generated specific grievances neo-nationalist parties exploit.

Agricultural Losers: Small farmers disadvantaged by EU agricultural policies (favoring large-scale production, imposing environmental regulations, competing with Western European agribusiness) constitute a constituency with concrete EU grievances. These farmers' organized opposition to EU policies has provided neo-nationalist parties with mobilization opportunities.

Labor Market Competition: EU labor mobility provisions enable migration of Eastern European workers to Western Europe for employment. While this benefits individual migrants, it drains East European labor markets and communities of working-age population, contributing to demographic decline and labor shortages. Communities experiencing significant emigration experience these effects as erosion of national human resources.

Regulatory Burdens: EU environmental and labor regulations, while promoting legitimate protections, impose costs on East European economies and businesses less wealthy than Western European counterparts. Neo-nationalist narratives frame EU regulations as Western impositions disadvantaging Eastern European businesses.

Supranational Authority: The EU exercises authority over member states in numerous domains (trade, monetary, regulatory, environmental). This supranational authority limits national governments' capacity to implement preferred policies. Neo-nationalist parties frame this supranational authority as foreign domination and national surrender, appealing to sovereignty-conscious constituencies.

Democratic Deficit: EU decision-making occurs substantially outside direct democratic control, with executive councils, European Commission, and appointed European Court of Justice making major decisions. Neo-nationalist narratives exploiting this democratic deficit gain traction among populations skeptical of distant, unaccountable institutions (Stadigh-Hörstedt, 2019).

4.2 Globalization, Cultural Change, and Anti-Liberalism

Neo-nationalist grievances extend to globalization's cultural effects—spread of secular liberalism, cosmopolitan values, and challenge to traditional cultures and religious authority.

- **Religious Liberty Restrictions:** While secular liberalism claims to protect religious liberty, in practice secular governance restricts religious authority over social domains. Prohibitions on religiously-motivated discrimination, secular education curricula limiting religious instruction, and secular marriage law overriding religious requirements all constrain religious authority. Neo-nationalist religious leaders experience this as religious persecution (Sornat, 2020).
- **Gender and Family Structure Changes:** Traditional patriarchal family structures characterized by male economic authority and female domestic roles have been substantially displaced by gender equality, female labor participation, and diverse family arrangements. Populations invested in traditional family structures experience gender equality as threatening.

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- **LGBTQ+ Rights:** The expansion of LGBTQ+ rights—including marriage equality, anti-discrimination protections, and inclusion in public institutions—represents fundamental value change from traditional society. Neo-nationalist parties mobilize opposition to LGBTQ+ rights as defense of traditional values and Christian civilization.
- **Multiculturalism and Identity Politics:** Liberal emphasis on multiculturalism, minority rights, and identity politics marginalizes majority national identity and Christian civilization. Neo-nationalist movements reposition majority identity as oppressed and demand recognition of national Christian values against minority identity claims (Kymlicka, 1995; Trencsényi, 2010).

4.3 Historical Narratives and Victimization

Neo-nationalist movements construct historical narratives emphasizing national victimization by foreign powers—Ottoman dominance, Austro-Hungarian imperialism, Nazi occupation, Soviet communism, and Western imperialism. These victimization narratives justify neo-nationalist assertion as recovery of national dignity after centuries of foreign domination.

Poland's historical narrative emphasizes: partition by neighboring empires (Prussian, Austrian, Russian), Nazi occupation and Holocaust, and Soviet domination. This history of victimization justifies contemporary assertion of Polish sovereignty and resistance to external pressure.

Hungary similarly emphasizes loss of pre-1920 territorial extent through post-WWI Treaty of Trianon, treating territorial loss as national humiliation requiring memory and potentially redress.

These historical narratives, while containing genuine historical experiences, are selectively deployed to justify contemporary politics. Historical suffering becomes justification for contemporary neo-nationalist policies and even democratic erosion, framed as necessary recovery from historical victimization (Snyder, 2010; Hoffman, 2004).

4.4 Perceived Cosmopolitan Elite Betrayal

A core neo-nationalist narrative involves cosmopolitan elites' betrayal of national interests. According to this narrative, educated, internationally-oriented elites prioritize supranational institutions and cosmopolitan values over national interest. These elites, collaborating with foreign powers (Western institutions, international capital), sell out national interests.

This narrative has substantial salience because it contains grain of truth: educated elites often embrace European integration and cosmopolitan values more enthusiastically than general populations. EU integration policies, while ostensibly benefiting nations generally, have created concentrated benefits for certain constituencies (capital, educated professionals) and concentrated losses for others.

However, neo-nationalist narratives transform legitimate disagreement regarding integration policies into conspiracy narratives of elite betrayal and treason. This delegitimizes establishment political parties and justifies neo-nationalist seizure of power as recovery of national sovereignty from treacherous elites.

5. Mobilization Strategies and Organizational Forms

5.1 Populist Framing and Charismatic Leadership

Neo-nationalist parties typically employ populist framing positioning leaders as spokespersons for "the people" against corrupt elites and foreign interests. This populism combines nationalist appeals with social policy promises addressing working-class grievances.

Key populist mechanisms include:

Vertical rather than Horizontal Organization: Neo-nationalist parties typically employ charismatic leadership with strong central authority rather than distributed democratic decision-making. Jarosław Kaczyński (Poland's PiS), Viktor Orbán (Hungary's Fidesz), and similar neo-nationalist leaders exercise substantial personal authority. This organizational structure reflects integral nationalism's emphasis on centralized authority.

Media Amplification: Neo-nationalist parties employ sophisticated media strategies amplifying leader visibility and message. Control of public media, favorable private media ownership, and social media campaigns enable message saturation.

Direct Leader-People Connection: Neo-nationalist leaders position themselves in direct relationship with people, bypassing intermediate institutions. Rallies, public speeches, and social media enable direct communication. This reflects populist emphasis on unmediated connection between leader and people (Laclau, 2005; Damm, 2017).

5.2 Institutional Capture and Party-State Fusion

Once neo-nationalist parties gain power, they typically pursue institutional capture—subordinating supposedly independent institutions to party control. This serves multiple functions:

- **Electoral Advantage:** Controlling state institutions (media, election commission, police) enables electoral system manipulation and advantage for ruling parties.
- **Policy Implementation:** Party control of state institutions enables efficient policy implementation without institutional constraints.
- **Patronage and Resource Distribution:** State control enables patronage networks and resource distribution to party allies and supporters.
- **Preventing Power Loss:** Institutional capture makes electoral defeat less consequential, as captured institutions constrain incoming governments' power.

Poland's PiS and Hungary's Fidesz exemplify this institutional capture. Both parties, upon gaining power, pursued systematic capture of media, judiciary, and other institutions, creating party-state fusion where distinguishing party interests from state interests becomes impossible.

5.3 Social Media and Digital Mobilization

Neo-nationalist parties have effectively employed social media and digital platforms for mobilization. Social media's algorithmic amplification of emotionally resonant content—including nationalist appeals, immigration fears, and elite criticism—naturally advantages neo-nationalist messaging.

Digital platforms enable: (1) direct communication bypassing traditional media filters; (2) microtargeting of messages to specific audiences; (3) rapid viral mobilization around emerging issues; and (4) bot networks and coordinated amplification of nationalist narratives. Russian disinformation operations, while technically distinct from neo-nationalism, have substantially supported neo-nationalist mobilization through amplification of nationalist narratives and criticism of EU integration (Stanford Internet Observatory, 2018).

5.4 Religious and Civil Society Organizations

While neo-nationalist parties attempt to capture state institutions, they simultaneously cultivate relationships with religious organizations, business associations, and cultural organizations. These partnerships provide organizational resources and legitimacy.

Catholic Church relationships with Polish PiS and Slovak nationalism, for example, provide institutional support and moral authority for neo-nationalist policies. Business associations sometimes support neo-nationalist policies benefiting particular industries.

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However, these relationships remain asymmetric—neo-nationalist parties ultimately subordinate civil society organizations to party objectives rather than maintaining genuine partnership.

6. Neo-Nationalism and Anti-Democratic Governance

6.1 The Illiberal Democracy Thesis

Viktor Orbán famously declared intention to build "illiberal democracy" in Hungary—governance system maintaining elections and popular legitimacy while eliminating constraints on executive power from judiciary, media, and civil society (Barany, 2016). This concept, though controversial, accurately describes neo-nationalist governance patterns.

Illiberal democracy combines:

- **Electoral Legitimacy:** Parties maintain regular elections and electoral competition (however manipulated). Orbán's Fidesz, despite system manipulation, regularly wins substantial vote shares.
- **Majoritarian Governance:** Rather than protecting minorities and limiting executive power, illiberal democracy prioritizes majority will expressed through elections, with minimal institutional constraints.
- **Captured Institutions:** Supposedly independent institutions (courts, media authority, election commissions) become subordinated to majority will (as expressed through governing party).
- **Weakened Civil Society:** Civil society organizations' independence is constrained through funding restrictions, legal harassment, and pressure.
- **Nationalism and Cultural Politics:** Illiberal democracy typically emphasizes national identity, traditional values, and cultural nationalism, distinguishing it from purely authoritarian governance.

6.2 The Democratic Paradox: Electoral Mandate for Anti-Democracy

A central paradox of neo-nationalist governance involves democratic election of anti-democratic governments. Neo-nationalist parties win electoral majorities and use democratic mandates to justify anti-democratic governance. Poland's PiS and Hungary's Fidesz legitimized institutional capture through their electoral victories, claiming to implement popular will against minority opposition and international pressure.

This electoral paradox raises fundamental questions: If democratic majorities vote for anti-democratic governance, does this represent democracy or democratic suicide? Can democratic mechanisms be employed to eliminate democracy itself?

Legal and philosophical responses vary. Some argue that democracy includes basic protections against self-elimination—core rights and institutional constraints preventing majorities from abolishing democracy. Others argue that pure majoritarian democracy cannot restrict majority will, even if majority chooses anti-democratic governance.

East European experience suggests that electoral mechanisms, while strained by institutional capture and manipulation, retain some constraining force. Poland's 2023 electoral defeat of PiS demonstrates that even captured electoral systems can produce anti-incumbent verdicts. This suggests that while neo-nationalist parties can substantially manipulate institutions, elections retain some independence and unpredictability (Runciman, 2018; Levitsky et al., 2018).

6.3 Nationalism as Justification for Anti-Democracy

Neo-nationalist leaders justify anti-democratic measures through nationalist appeals: restrictions on judicial independence protect national sovereignty against international courts; restrictions on media independence prevent foreign (Western) control of national discourse; restrictions on opposition prevent "foreign agents" from undermining national interest.

This nationalist justification of anti-democracy—framing democratic constraints as foreign impositions and national sovereignty as requiring strong executive authority—represents distinctive neo-nationalist contribution to authoritarian governance. Rather than traditional authoritarian justifications (efficiency, order, or security), neo-nationalism justifies authoritarianism through national sovereignty and cultural nationalism.

7. Geopolitical Dimensions of Neo-Nationalism

7.1 Great Power Balancing and Strategic Autonomy

A significant dimension of East European neo-nationalism involves geopolitical balancing and assertion of strategic autonomy. East European states, located between Western Europe and Russia, have historically existed in geopolitical tension. Post-Cold War settlement incorporated East European states into Western institutions (NATO, EU), but this Western orientation was neither inevitable nor universally welcomed.

Neo-nationalist movements have exploited geopolitical anxieties, particularly regarding:

Russian Threat and NATO: While most East European populations support NATO membership for security, some neo-nationalist movements emphasize NATO as Western imperialism and Russian military as legitimate regional power deserving respect. Hungary under Orbán has notably resisted anti-Russian positioning, maintaining substantial trade relationships and diplomatic cooperation with Russia despite EU sanctions.

EU Constraints and National Sovereignty: Neo-nationalist movements frame EU integration as constraint on national sovereignty and German hegemony (in EU context). These movements advocate for looser EU relationships, greater national autonomy, and potential disengagement from EU integration.

China and Global Multipolarity: Some neo-nationalist movements have embraced emerging powers (particularly China) as counterweights to Western hegemony. Hungary's openness to Chinese investment and Belt and Road participation reflects this geopolitical positioning (Pei, 2016; Lendvai, 2017).

These geopolitical orientations reflect genuine tensions in East European positioning: integration with Western institutions provides security and prosperity but also constrains autonomy; balancing between great powers enables diplomatic flexibility but creates vulnerability.

7.2 The Visegrád Four Regional Bloc

The Visegrád Group—Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia—has emerged as regional bloc asserting collective positions distinct from broader EU framework. Initially emphasizing democratic consolidation and EU integration, the Visegrád bloc increasingly emphasized regional distinctiveness and resistance to EU immigration and rule of law pressures.

This regional bloc formation enables: (1) collective assertion of national interests against EU; (2) blocking of EU initiatives through coordinated votes; (3) development of parallel regional institutions and cooperation mechanisms; and (4) common opposition to perceived Western impositions.

However, Visegrád unity has also fragmented, particularly regarding Russia policy post-Ukraine invasion, with Poland and Czech Republic supporting Ukraine more enthusiastically than Hungary.

7.3 Orthodox Civilization and Christian Identity

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A significant neo-nationalist geopolitical narrative involves civilizational conflict between Western secular liberalism and Orthodox/Christian civilization. This narrative, drawing from Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations," positions Central and Eastern Europe as Christian civilization distinct from secular Western Europe (Huntington, 1993; Bougarel, 2003).

This civilizational framing: (1) justifies resistance to EU values (LGBTQ+ rights, secularism, multiculturalism); (2) positions Orthodox Christianity (and Catholicism) as superior to secular liberalism; (3) potentially enables alliance with Russia on civilizational grounds despite geopolitical tensions; and (4) creates alternative civilizational identity beyond Western liberalism.

Hungary's Viktor Orbán has most explicitly developed this civilizational nationalism, declaring intention to defend "Christian civilization" against secular liberalism and Islamic expansion. This framing reflects genuine concerns regarding value differences while also serving to justify democratic backsliding as defense of Christian values.

8. Intellectual Critique and Opposition to Neo-Nationalism

8.1 Liberal Democratic Critique

Liberal democracy defenders argue that neo-nationalism fundamentally conflicts with core democratic principles: protection of minority rights, constraints on majority power, rule of law, and pluralism. By subordinating these principles to national sovereignty and cultural majoritarianism, neo-nationalism threatens democracy itself.

Furthermore, liberal critics argue that neo-nationalism's economic policies—state-directed investment, barriers to trade, protection of connected oligarchs—generate economic inefficiency and corruption rather than prosperity. Nationalist appeals to traditional values obscure actual economic policies benefiting political elites (Zakaria, 2003; Levitsky et al., 2010). This liberal critique, while containing valid points, sometimes dismisses genuine grievances underlying neo-nationalism and treats neo-nationalist supporters as irrational or manipulated rather than rationally responding to real problems.

8.2 Left Critique of Neo-Nationalism

Left intellectuals argue that neo-nationalism represents false consciousness—nationalism diverts working-class attention from genuine class exploitation toward scapegoating of immigrants and elites. True working-class interest lies in international solidarity and class struggle, not nationalism.

Furthermore, left critics argue that neo-nationalism's cultural conservatism (opposition to gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights) harms working-class women and minorities despite nominal working-class appeal. Neo-nationalist economic nationalism often protects capitalist interests rather than genuinely benefiting workers.

This left critique offers valuable insights regarding nationalism's ideological function, yet sometimes dismisses nationalism as purely false consciousness rather than partially legitimate response to real grievances (Hobsbawm, 1990; Balibar, 1991).

8.3 Cosmopolitan Critique

Cosmopolitan critics argue that nationalism itself—however "liberal" or "neo"—fundamentally privileges national interest over universal values and global justice. Nationalism justifies prioritizing co-nationals over strangers, legitimate borders over open migration, and national self-determination over global governance.

Cosmopolitan perspective emphasizes that nationalism, even in relatively benign forms, generates injustice by prioritizing national populations and limiting obligations to global poor and vulnerable populations.

This cosmopolitan critique, while raising important normative questions, often fails to explain nationalism's political power and popular appeal, treating nationalism as merely ideology of elite manipulation rather than response to genuine popular desires for community and belonging (Nussbaum, 1986; O'Neill, 2002).

8.4 Conservative Critiques of Neo-Nationalism

Interestingly, some conservative intellectuals, while sympathetic to nationalism's emphasis on tradition and cultural values, criticize neo-nationalism for its populism, disdain for institutional constraints, and actual willingness to violate democratic procedures in pursuit of power.

These conservative critics, often influenced by Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott, argue for "constitutional nationalism"—assertion of national values within democratic institutional constraints rather than populist majoritarianism overriding institutions (Scruton, 2015; Burke, 1790).

This conservative critique usefully distinguishes between legitimate national interest assertion and anti-democratic populism, though finding little contemporary East European political home.

9. Mobilization of Counter-Movements

9.1 Civil Society Resistance and Democratic Defense

Despite neo-nationalist institutional capture, civil societies across East Europe have mobilized substantial resistance. These movements, analyzed in previous article section, demonstrate capacity to defend democratic values and constrain anti-democratic measures.

Key resistance movements include: Poland's "Committee for the Defense of Democracy," Hungary's "Momentum" and anti-Orbán civil society coalitions, Romania's anti-corruption protests, and Czech Republic's anti-populist mobilization. These movements, though facing constraints and limited institutional power, maintain alternative political vision and democratic consciousness.

9.2 Regional Variation and Counter-Movements' Strength

Civil society resistance varies substantially across the region. Czech civil society proved stronger in constraining populism than Hungarian; Polish civil society demonstrated substantial capacity for mobilization despite PiS institutional capture. These variations reflect different institutional histories and civil society strength.

Countries with stronger civil society traditions (Czech Republic, Poland) have proven more effective at constraining neo-nationalist governments than countries with weaker civil society (Hungary, Bulgaria).

9.3 Opposition Party Competition

While neo-nationalist parties have dominated several electoral cycles, opposition parties have maintained competition. Poland's 2023 election saw substantial anti-PiS mobilization and coalition formation, resulting in government defeat. Hungary's 2022 elections saw unified opposition to Orbán (though Fidesz manipulation enabled continued governance). Romania's electoral volatility reflects continued party competition despite neo-nationalist influences.

These electoral competitions, while sometimes constrained by institutional manipulation, retain possibilities for neo-nationalist electoral defeat and government transition.

10. Legitimacy, Grievances, and Political Possibility

10.1 Partial Legitimacy and Genuine Grievances

A central argument of this article is that neo-nationalism, while deeply concerning from democratic perspectives, contains partial legitimacy and responds to genuine grievances. Rather than dismissing neo-nationalist supporters as irrational, xenophobic, or manipulated (though some certainly are), more productive analysis recognizes rational responses to real problems.

Market transition genuinely dislocated significant populations. EU integration genuinely created concentrated costs for certain constituencies while benefiting others. Globalization genuinely threatens local communities and traditional cultures. These grievances are real and deserve serious engagement rather than dismissal.

Furthermore, legitimate questions regarding national sovereignty, cultural preservation, and democratic accountability to local communities—questions neo-nationalism raises—remain important political questions even if neo-nationalist answers prove inadequate or dangerous.

10.2 The Problem of Populist Solutions

However, neo-nationalist populist solutions to genuine grievances frequently prove ineffective or harmful. Scapegoating immigrants for unemployment, blaming foreign elites for economic problems, and asserting national sovereignty against supranational constraints often misidentify sources of problems and propose ineffective remedies.

Furthermore, neo-nationalist governance—despite populist promises—frequently betrays working-class supporters, serving oligarchic interests instead. Poland's PiS, while maintaining populist rhetoric, has frequently privileged business interests and connected oligarchs over working-class material improvement. Hungary's Fidesz similarly has presided over corruption and oligarchic capture while maintaining populist narrative.

10.3 Alternative Responses to Legitimate Grievances

Addressing neo-nationalism requires not dismissing grievances but proposing alternative responses to legitimate problems. This might include: (1) economic policies genuinely benefiting displaced populations (retraining, regional investment, labor protections) rather than symbolic nationalist measures; (2) protection of local communities and cultural traditions within inclusive democratic frameworks; (3) democratic governance structures more responsive to local communities than distant supranational institutions; and (4) honest engagement with immigration and cultural change rather than scapegoating.

These alternative approaches require institutional innovation and genuine political leadership willing to address grievances while defending democratic values. Such political leadership has proven scarce in contemporary East Europe.

11. Comparative Analysis: Variations in Neo-Nationalist Development

11.1 Poland: Powerful Neo-Nationalism Constrained by Electoral Mechanism

Poland demonstrates the most developed and powerful neo-nationalist movement (Law and Justice), yet with notable democratic capacity for course correction. PiS's victory in 2015 initiated democratic backsliding but also polarized society, mobilizing substantial civil society opposition and democratic consciousness.

The 2023 electoral defeat of PiS—despite institutional capture and media bias—demonstrated that even substantially compromised electoral systems retain capacity for anti-incumbent verdict. This suggests that Polish neo-nationalism, while achieving significant institutional capture, did not achieve complete democratic elimination.

Notably, PiS's defeat resulted partly from overreach—pursuing increasingly aggressive cultural and institutional measures that eventually alienated even some supporters. This suggests limits to neo-nationalist durability even among electorates initially supporting them.

11.2 Hungary: Entrenched Neo-Nationalism and Competitive Authoritarianism

Hungary demonstrates most advanced neo-nationalist institutional capture and transition toward competitive authoritarianism. Orbán's Fidesz has effectively subordinated institutions to party control while maintaining electoral competition and formal democratic procedures.

Hungary's experience suggests that sophisticated institutional capture, combined with demographic advantage (rural populations supporting Fidesz more than declining urban populations), can enable neo-nationalist dominance across multiple electoral cycles despite civil society opposition.

However, Hungary's path toward democratic authoritarianism has generated international consequences—EU sanctions, rule of law proceedings, and geopolitical pressures—raising costs of continued democratic erosion.

11.3 Czech Republic: Civil Society Constraining Neo-Nationalism

Czech Republic has experienced neo-nationalist movements (SPD, ANO) and political volatility, yet relatively successful civil society and institutional resistance to anti-democratic capture. This partly reflects Czech Republic's stronger starting point (more consolidated democratic institutions in 1989) and relatively strong civil society.

Czech civil society effectively mobilized against Andrej Babiš's ANO party, helping produce 2021 electoral defeat despite party advantages. This suggests that strong civil society can constrain neo-nationalist governance even without complete institutional reform.

11.4 Romania and Bulgaria: Weak Institutions Limiting Neo-Nationalism's Effectiveness

Romania and Bulgaria, despite neo-nationalist influences, have not experienced powerful single neo-nationalist parties capturing power. Instead, weak institutions and fragmented political systems have limited any party's capacity for comprehensive institutional capture.

This suggests a paradox: weakest institutional democracies show least neo-nationalist dominance because weak institutions prevent effective party consolidation. Conversely, stronger institutions enable neo-nationalist parties to achieve greater institutional capture once in power.

11.5 Western Balkans: Neo-Nationalism and Ethno-Nationalism Fusion

Western Balkans demonstrate fusion of neo-nationalism with ethno-nationalism and post-conflict mobilization. Serbia's Aleksandar Vučić, for example, combines neo-nationalist sovereignty assertion with Serb ethnic nationalism, creating particularly potent political force. Bosnia-Herzegovina's ethno-nationalist divisions prevent unified neo-nationalist mobilization.

This suggests that neo-nationalism's effects vary depending on pre-existing ethnic tensions and post-conflict contexts.

12. Theoretical Frameworks and Explanatory Models

12.1 Modernization Theory and Reactions Against Modernity

Some scholars interpret neo-nationalism as reaction against modernization—resistance to rapid social change, cosmopolitan values, and institutional complexity characteristic of advanced societies. From this perspective, neo-nationalism represents backward-looking resistance to inevitable modernity.

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However, this interpretation often contains dismissive judgments about neo-nationalist supporters (as irrational, backward) rather than serious engagement. Furthermore, it misidentifies neo-nationalism as rejection of modernity per se—neo-nationalist movements embrace modern technology, military strength, and economic development while opposing particular modern values (secularism, cosmopolitanism, gender equality) (Smith, 1971; Tamir, 2019).

12.2 Political Opportunity Structures

Political opportunity structure analysis argues that neo-nationalism's rise reflects availability of political space—decline of traditional left parties, institutional fragmentation, and openness to new movements. From this perspective, neo-nationalism succeeds not because of irresistible social forces but because existing parties failed to address grievances, creating opportunity for new movements.

This framework suggests that strong traditional parties effectively addressing working-class grievances might constrain neo-nationalism. Poland's post-2023 Democratic Coalition and Romania's Socialist Party, where strong, provided alternative addresses to grievances. Conversely, collapse of traditional left (Hungary, Czech Republic) enabled neo-nationalist ascendancy.

12.3 Identity Politics and Postmaterialism

Ronald Inglehart's postmaterialism thesis suggests that post-scarcity wealthy societies shift from material to post-material (environmental, cultural, identity) concerns. From this perspective, neo-nationalism represents cultural backlash against postmaterialist elite values by populations remaining focused on material security.

Applied to East Europe, this framework suggests that neo-nationalism reflects material insecurity and anxiety among populations experiencing economic dislocation, positioned against elite cosmopolitanism. However, this framework sometimes underestimates material dimensions of neo-nationalist politics and overemphasizes cultural factors.

12.4 Constructivist Approaches: Nationalism as Constructed Identity

Constructivist scholarship on nationalism emphasizes that national identities, rather than objective essences, are socially constructed through political mobilization, historical narratives, and institutional practices. From this perspective, neo-nationalism represents particular construction of national identity rather than discovery of pre-existing essential identity (Anderson, 2006; Bilig, 1995).

This framework helpfully emphasizes that nationalism's power derives from construction and mobilization rather than objective national essences. However, it can overstate construction's plasticity, underestimating constraints on identity construction from genuine historical experiences and geopolitical realities.

13. Future Trajectories and Possible Scenarios

13.1 Entrenchment Scenario: Durable Neo-Nationalist Authoritarianism

One possible trajectory involves durable establishment of neo-nationalist competitive authoritarian regimes across East Europe. In this scenario, institutional capture proves effective enough to prevent opposition electoral victory, institutions subordinate themselves adequately to prevent major constraints on power, and international pressure proves insufficient to reverse trajectory.

This scenario would see East European countries transitioning toward authoritarian governance while maintaining formal democratic procedures and electoral competition,

resembling contemporary Russia or Azerbaijan. Such regimes could persist for decades if geopolitical circumstances align and internal challenges remain limited.

However, this scenario requires sustained competence and ideological commitment from neo-nationalist leaders. Internal contradictions (corruption within neo-nationalist movements, elite defection, popular disengagement from captured institutions), external pressures (EU sanctions, isolation, military threats), or unforeseen events might alter trajectory.

13.2 Democratic Reversal Scenario: Electoral Defeat and Institutional Restoration

Alternatively, neo-nationalist dominance might prove less durable. Poland's 2023 electoral defeat of PiS provides potential model: despite institutional capture and media bias, opposition mobilization and electoral coordination produced anti-incumbent verdict.

In this scenario, neo-nationalist governments overreach, generating civil society mobilization and coalition-building that overcomes institutional disadvantages. Incoming reform governments then undertake institutional restoration, addressing rule of law violations and institutional capture.

This scenario resembles transitions from competitive authoritarianism toward democratic restoration, as seen in other world regions (South Korea, Taiwan). Its feasibility depends on opposition capacity for coalition-building, civil society strength, and international support for democratic restoration.

13.3 Hybrid Outcome Scenario: Stabilization in Competitive Authoritarianism

A third scenario involves stabilization at competitive authoritarian equilibrium—neither complete neo-nationalist authoritarianism nor return to liberal democracy, but sustained hybrid regime combining electoral competition with institutional capture.

In this scenario, neo-nationalist parties maintain power through institutional advantage and media control, but institutional capture proves incomplete enough that institutions retain some independence and opposition retains meaningful electoral possibility. This resembles Hungary's current trajectory or competitive authoritarian regimes globally.

Such equilibrium could persist indefinitely if power holders find current arrangements acceptable and challengers lack capacity to overcome institutional advantages.

13.4 Geopolitical Shock Scenario: Ukraine Crisis and Russian Revisionism

The Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022) created unforeseen geopolitical shock affecting East European neo-nationalism. The invasion clarified Russian military threat, catalyzed NATO mobilization, and created security imperatives potentially constraining neo-nationalist foreign policy orientations toward Russia.

A geopolitical trajectory involving continued Russian military threat, NATO expansion, and Cold War-style great power competition might alter neo-nationalism's domestic political appeal. Security concerns could override cultural nationalism, potentially enabling liberal-democratic coalition-building around NATO/EU security.

Alternatively, continued geopolitical tensions might strengthen neo-nationalist movements emphasizing strong state authority and national mobilization.

14. Policy Recommendations and Institutional Responses

14.1 Democratic Institutional Strengthening

Addressing neo-nationalism requires strengthening democratic institutions—particularly judicial independence, media pluralism, and civil service professionalism—making them more resilient against institutional capture. Specific measures include:

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Judicial Independence: Establishment of transparent, merit-based judicial appointment procedures insulated from political pressure; constitutional protections for judicial tenure; international monitoring of judicial independence; and prosecutorial independence protections.

Media Pluralism: Public media independence protections; antitrust enforcement preventing media concentration; journalist protection laws; and international support for independent media.

Professional Civil Service: Competitive civil service recruitment, protection from partisan politicization, and professional training creating institutional culture independent of political parties.

These institutional reforms require sustained commitment and international support.

14.2 Economic Grievance Addressing

Addressing grievances underlying neo-nationalism requires genuine economic policies addressing dislocation and regional inequality: labor retraining programs, regional investment in declining areas, support for small farmers, and employment protection.

Symbolic nationalist policies addressing grievances superficially prove insufficient; material improvements in living standards and economic security prove more durable in constraining neo-nationalist appeal.

14.3 Civil Society Support and Democratic Culture

International support for civil society organizations, independent media, and democratic education can strengthen democratic alternatives to neo-nationalism. This includes funding, technical assistance, and international platforms for democratic activists and organizations. Building democratic culture—teaching citizens about democratic values, rights protections, and institutional requirements—represents long-term investment in democratic resilience.

14.4 Addressing Legitimate Nationalism

Democratic responses to neo-nationalism should not ignore legitimate nationalism—desires for cultural preservation, national interest protection, and democratic accountability to national communities. Rather than dismissing all nationalism as reactionary, democratic politics should offer legitimate venues for nationalist sentiment within democratic constraints.

This might involve: (1) cultural policies protecting minority languages and traditions within inclusive frameworks; (2) democratic governance reform increasing local accountability; and (3) honest discussion of national interest and sovereignty within international legal constraints.

15. Conclusion: Understanding Neo-Nationalism

Neo-nationalism represents the defining ideological force reshaping East European politics in the early twenty-first century. Rather than transitory political movement, neo-nationalism expresses comprehensive alternative vision of governance, identity, and international relations challenging liberal-democratic consensus and threatening democratic consolidation.

Understanding neo-nationalism requires moving beyond dismissal or fear toward serious analysis of ideological foundations, social bases, and genuine grievances it addresses. Neo-nationalist supporters are not primarily irrational fanatics or manipulated dupes but partially rational responders to real economic disruption, cultural anxiety, and geopolitical insecurity.

However, understanding neo-nationalism's legitimacy does not require accepting neo-nationalist solutions, which frequently prove inadequate, destructive, or actively harmful. Neo-nationalist institutional capture of democratic states represents genuine threat to democratic

values and minority protections. Economic nationalism often benefits connected oligarchs rather than ordinary workers. Cultural majoritarianism threatens vulnerable minorities.

The central challenge for East European democracies involves defending democratic institutions and values against neo-nationalist anti-democratic capture while serious engagement with underlying grievances through alternative policy responses.

Several conclusions emerge:

First, neo-nationalism's rise reflects not inevitable regional characteristics but contingent political developments. Different countries have managed neo-nationalism differently—Poland has constrained it through eventual electoral verdict; Hungary has permitted extensive institutional capture; Czech Republic has partially resisted it; Western Balkans have fused it with ethno-nationalism. These variations suggest that outcomes remain contingent on institutional strength, civil society capacity, and political leadership.

Second, understanding neo-nationalism requires recognizing both its partial legitimacy and fundamental dangers. Neo-nationalism addresses genuine problems (economic dislocation, cultural change, geopolitical insecurity) but proposes solutions (ethno-nationalism, populist authoritarianism, scapegoating) that prove destructive. Democratic responses must address grievances while constraining anti-democratic solutions.

Third, civil societies across East Europe have demonstrated significant capacity for democratic resistance despite constraints. This provides grounds for cautious optimism regarding democratic persistence even under substantial pressures.

Fourth, the future trajectories of East European democracies remain genuinely uncertain. While neo-nationalism currently dominates several countries, scenarios involving democratic reversal, hybrid stability, or continued contestation all remain possible. Outcomes depend on choices made by political actors, civil societies, and international institutions.

Fifth, geopolitical developments—particularly the Russian invasion of Ukraine—may substantially reshape East European neo-nationalism's political significance. Security imperatives could override cultural nationalism, potentially enabling democratic coalition-building. Alternatively, continued tensions might strengthen neo-nationalist movements.

East European neo-nationalism represents neither temporary aberration nor inevitable future but significant political force with deep roots in genuine grievances, responding to real problems through partly legitimate but fundamentally flawed ideological framework. Addressing neo-nationalism's political dominance requires simultaneously defending democratic institutions against anti-democratic capture and seriously engaging with underlying grievances through alternative policy responses grounded in democratic commitment and genuine effort to address legitimate concerns regarding national interest, cultural preservation, and democratic accountability.

The frontiers of East European democracy increasingly become frontiers of struggle with neo-nationalism—defending democratic values while respecting legitimate nationalism, addressing material grievances while protecting minorities, maintaining supranational cooperation while preserving national accountability. This struggle's outcome remains undetermined but will substantially shape Europe's democratic future.

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