

A NEW DEMOCRATIC AGENDA TO COUNTER THE POPULIST TIDE AROUND THE GLOBE

In the past decade populist parties have surged as an electoral force around the globe. From Hungary to the Philippines, populists have assumed power through free and fair elections. Unlike coup d'états that produce sudden democratic breakdowns, populist governments have accumulated power and sought to alter the existing order in a gradual fashion. In so doing, they have undermined institutional checks, weakened representative institutions, and targeted their critics both in the political and civil arenas. This article analyses why and how populist governments have fueled democratic backsliding in the context of Latin American and European cases, and discusses possible strategies that can be employed by the democratic opposition forces to reverse this trend in light of the 2019 local elections in Turkey.

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We currently live in a “populist zeitgeist”.¹ In the past decade populist parties have surged in popularity around the globe. In a wide array of developing countries ranging from Hungary to the Philippines, populists have attained power through free and fair elections, and subsequently consolidated their power against their mainstream opponents. Even in developed democracies of the West, such as Austria, France, and the Netherlands, populist leaders expanded their political base to achieve unprecedented electoral success.² Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 presidential elections, despite lack of political experience, elite support, and positive media coverage, has signified this phenomenon more than any other case.³

Although populists gain strength due to a confluence of factors, their electoral rise leaves a strong mark on the political systems across the democratic world. For some, the inclusionary aspects of populism can be seen as a democratic response to the proliferation of “cartel parties”⁴ in the West, and may therefore reverse the marginalization of voters in such cases. Its inclusive aspects notwithstanding, the electoral rise of populist parties is generally associated with democratic backsliding around the globe. Accordingly, populist parties that had initially come to power through elections later undermined institutional checks as well as representative institutions, targeted their critics, and introduced majoritarian elements into the political system.

Unlike coup d’états that produce a sudden democratic breakdown, populist governments have accumulated power and eroded political institutions to pave the way for executive aggrandizement at a gradual pace.⁵ Populist leaders tend to be charismatic outsiders who have limited experience with representative institutions and do not seek compromise with political elites. As they challenge the existing political order, they can obtain only limited support from the elites, thus, they seek popular mobilization as a strategy survival mechanism instead. Despite their relatively high level of economic development and strong institutions, not even Western democracies are completely immune to this trend, as can be evidenced from the United States case.⁶ Indeed, the populist tide paved the way for the rise of illiberal regimes with varying

¹ Cas Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2004), pp. 541-63.

² Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk. “The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect,” *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 27, No.3 (2016), pp. 5-17.

³ Berk Esen and Şebnem Yardımcı-Geyikçi, “An Alternative Account of the Populist Backlash in the United States: A Perspective from Turkey,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* Vol. 52, No. 3 (2019), pp. 445-50.

⁴ For more on this concept, see M. Blyth & R. Katz, “From Catch-all Politics to Cartelisation: The Political Economy of the Cartel Party,” *West European Politics*, Vol. 28, No.1 (2005), pp. 33-60.

⁵ Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 27, No.1 (2016), pp. 5-19.

⁶ Esen and Yardımcı-Geyikçi (2019), pp. 445-50.

levels of competition.⁷ This article analyses why and how populist governments have fueled democratic backsliding in the context of several Latin American and European cases, and discusses possible strategies for the democratic opposition to reverse this trend in light of the 2019 local elections in Turkey.

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Populists in Power Around the Globe

For the scope of this article, I use Cas Mudde’s definition of populism “as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”⁸ Contrary to the “inclusion-moderation” thesis that expects elected officials to moderate their discourse over time, populists have not generally toned down their agenda after coming to power. Instead, electoral victory has emboldened populists even in advanced democracies, where institutional checks are in place to monitor elected officials. In their campaign platforms, populists have challenged centrist policies in an attempt to mobilize their supporters against their elite rivals. As they consider the status quo to benefit the extant establishment, populists express their opposition to the political regime and its representative institutions, and seek change both in the international system and the political arena.

Coming to office with strong electoral support, populists assume that they have a mandate to politicize the state apparatus and restructure the political system in accordance with their policy agenda. While left-wing populist leaders such as Chávez (Venezuela), Correa (Ecuador), Morales (Bolivia), and Tsipras (Greece) turned against the neoliberal economic order and sought to restructure their national economies, right-wing populist leaders in India, Turkey, Hungary, the Philippines, and Poland adopted a conservative cultural agenda that promotes religious and family values across the polity.

⁷ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁸ Mudde (2004), pp. 541-63.

Although the two populist variants differed in terms of their level of inclusiveness,⁹ both cases envisioned a dramatic transformation of the political system and, by extension, the society. In so doing, populists endorse a majoritarian version of democracy to politics that does not take into consideration the views and desires of opposition groups. Accordingly, populist governments have challenged the entire political order, which they consider to be corrupt, elitist, and broken. This leaves limited room for compromise with their rivals. They did not want to be constrained by checks and balances; therefore, they captured the state apparatus and clashed with regulatory institutions as soon as limitations were exercised on their power.¹⁰ As further elaborated below, this strategy pitted populist governments against political institutions that commanded limited popular support in the country. In the end, frequent clashes between the two groups strengthened the populist leader's popularity at the expense of representative institutions. Under populist governments, we have indeed seen parliaments turn into rubber stamp institutions and courts failing to limit executive power.

Worried about this populist surge, opposition elites initially sought to restrict the populist agenda through institutional mechanisms.¹¹ In cases where populist leaders did not command a strong majority in parliament, their opponents used legislative mechanisms to block legislative items they deemed too radical and, should those attempts failed, took such laws to the Constitutional Court for annulment. The latter was particularly a common strategy adopted by Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, hereafter CHP), which succeeded in overturning numerous legislations passed by the AKP-controlled parliament in the 2000s. Presidential veto was another tactic used by opposition groups that feared the populist agenda. Since most countries require a larger parliamentary majority to overrule the presidential veto, the opposition usually gained the upper hand vis-à-vis the government when it was allied with the president. Indeed, political and economic elites frequently lobbied both the Constitutional Court and the president to hamper the populist agenda on controversial issues.

Relying on veto players was neither a sustainable nor a democratic solution for the opposition. This tactic pitted populist governments against veto players, which rarely enjoyed strong popular support. Herein lies the dilemma of democrats faced with populist governments. Fearing a populist takeover, political elites resorted to institutions with limited support and adopted anti-majoritarian measures that had

⁹ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America," *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (2013), pp. 147-74.

¹⁰ Steven Levitsky and James Loxton, "Populism and competitive authoritarianism in the Andes," *Democratization*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2013), pp. 107-36.

¹¹ C. R. Kaltwasser & P. Taggart, "Dealing with populists in government: a framework for analysis," *Democratization*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (2016), pp. 201-20.

questionable democratic legitimacy. The strategy of defending the status quo to counter the populist agenda proved to be an unpopular strategy. This gave populist leaders a convenient pretext to attack political institutions and push for regime change. This showdown between the two sides triggered a constitutional crisis, as existing political institutions failed to contain the conflict and neither side backed down. For instance, since Morales, Chávez, and Correa initially lacked a supermajority in parliament, they determinedly called for a new Constitutional Assembly to enact a new constitution and subsequently packed the Constitutional Court with their partisan judges. Similarly, court packing was a favorite strategy of populist governments in Turkey, Hungary, and Poland in the 2010s.

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Another strategy employed by centrist parties was to organize large-scale protests against populist governments with the hope of bringing the country to a standstill. Massive demonstrations took place against populist governments in Hungary, Poland, Venezuela, Thailand, Argentina, Romania, and Turkey during their first term in office. For instance, the strike of oil workers employed by the Venezuelan State Oil company (PDVSA) brought the country to a halt in 2004, while the Turkish secular opposition protested the AKP’s attempts to elect its leaders as president across all metropolitan centers in 2007. Few of these protests succeeded in eroding popular support for the populist parties, and instead intensified polarization in the country. In response, populist leaders portrayed their critics as affluent members of the cosmopolitan elite who resided in major urban centers, held liberal values, and were out of touch with public opinion. These demonstrations fueled anger and frustration amongst voters who turned towards populist leaders for political change. Not surprisingly, populist incumbents won the first election held after these large-scale protests and expanded their parliamentary majority that in turn allowed them to reconfigure the political system. This resulted in democratic backsliding that paved the way for the rise of hybrid regimes with varying levels of competitiveness. As a last resort, the military resorted to toppling populist leaders in cases like Honduras, Venezuela, and Thailand to break the political deadlock between the two sides. Military coups also did not settle the populist threat, as democratic breakdown left these cases vulnerable to similar populist challenges in the future.

To withstand these challenges, populists frequently mobilized their own supporters and accused their opponents in harsh terms. The ensuing polarization consolidated popular support for populists and also served as justification for their attacks on dissident groups in media, education, and civil society. Moreover, through mass mobilization, populists can frame the political debate, intimidate their opponents, and polarize the society in accordance with their agenda. For instance, Islamists in Turkey have repeatedly taken to the streets in 1990s to protest the headscarf ban and good relations with Israel, while Fidesz party mobilized its supporters before the 2010 parliamentary elections to criticize widespread corruption in the country.

Interestingly, populists rely on this strategy even when they are in power by co-opting pro-government NGOs and tapping into their local party organizations or the state bureaucracy. Indeed, populist elites have also mobilized their supporters by framing a wedge issue (immigration, corruption, religion) as a conflict between the elites who are out of touch with reality and the masses. Some populist parties, such as the ones in Bolivia (MAS), Hungary (Jobbik), Italy (Five Star Movement), and Argentina (Peronists), even have their origins in a social movement. With public resources at their disposal, populists have easily dominated the public arena and mobilized their supporters through a blend of nationalism and religion. In both Poland and Turkey, for instance, ruling parties have traditionally relied on religious institutions, such as the church and *Diyanet* (Presidency of Religious Affairs), to mobilize their supporters, especially when confronted with growing opposition against their rule. Leaders in Hungary, Bolivia, Turkey, and Venezuela held rallies to turn attention away from anti-government protests. The Maduro government in Venezuela went so far as to direct paramilitary groups to attack anti-government protestors in recent years. This mobilizational strategy is also increasingly employed by populist governments on social media, wherein populist governments seek to dominate the net with paid online trolls in Turkey, Ukraine, Ecuador, Russia, and Hungary, among others.

Can External Actors Reverse Democratic Backsliding in Populist Regimes?

Against this backdrop, the international community had few options to help opposition groups and reverse democratic backsliding. First, external actors, such as the US and the EU, had limited leverage vis-à-vis the populist governments. Having emerged as a cohort after the late 2000s, these leaders forged close bilateral relations with each other, and intensified the economic and political ties between their governments to cooperate against any backlash from the advanced democracies. Meanwhile, regional organizations like Organization of American States and the African Union could not effectively sanction member states that had experienced democratic backsliding, since other member states could veto any punitive measures

being proposed. Until the rise of right-wing governments in the region in recent years, for instance, leftist administrations in Latin America refused to openly criticize the Venezuelan government for its democratic violations. Similarly, the African Union did not take a strong stance against the Mugabe government in Zimbabwe for many years despite electoral fraud and its crackdown on regime dissidents.

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Moreover, populist leaders were able to obtain support from illiberal regimes in Russia and China, which sought to challenge the US unipolarity stage, and thus approached these cases with the purpose of penetrating new markets and limiting Western influence. Unlike the first two decades of the post-Cold War era when liberal ideas were dominant in the international arena,¹² the 2008 global financial crisis saw a gradual rise in protectionist views and bilateralism even in advanced democracies in the West. Trump’s election as president in the US and the Brexit decision in the UK’s EU referendum, not to mention the rise of far-right movements across Western Europe, have all contributed to the weakening of the liberal Western order. Additionally, Russia’s re-emergence as a major military power and China’s phenomenal growth into an economic powerhouse limited the transformative capacity of the West. These developments gave significant autonomy in the international arena to populist strongmen who commanded strong popular support and controlled alternative sources of revenue in their respective countries.

With significant oil rent flowing into his state budget, for example, Venezuela’s populist strongman Hugo Chávez could counter the US pressure, gain autonomy in the international arena, and even manage to support left populist movements in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, not to mention the authoritarian regime in Cuba as well. Chávez gained the upper hand after massive pro-government demonstrations defeated the 2002 coup d’état, which was spearheaded by radical elements of the opposition and supported by the Bush administration. Following the rise of left populist leaders in Brazil (2003), Argentina (2003), Bolivia (2006), Honduras (2006), Peru (2006), Nicaragua (2007), Ecuador (2007), and Paraguay (2008), regional dynamics

¹² Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, “Linkage versus Leverage. Rethinking the International Dimension of Regime Change,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (2006), pp. 379-400.

turned in favor of left populist regimes.¹³ Not surprisingly, these left populist governments in Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia also possessed resource rents that brought them large windfalls when prices were high and protected them from the pressure of international markets.¹⁴

Under such conditions, democracy promotion by external actors experienced limited success, particularly in Latin America. Only in Peru, Argentina, and Ecuador populist leaders left office through elections thanks to constitutional term limits, whereas government turnover in other cases occurred through impeachment under dodgy circumstances (Paraguay and Brazil), popular unrest and military pressure (Bolivia), or a coup d'état (Honduras). Ironically, some of these left populist leaders later lost election to right-wing populists (Brazil and Argentina), albeit with the same problems remaining intact. Meanwhile, populist leaders in Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Venezuela continue to hold office even at the expense of gradual democratic backsliding. Opposition parties have accused their governments of vote rigging in both Venezuela and Bolivia, where once popular regimes experienced sharp falls in their level of popular support due to corruption and economic mismanagement. Not surprisingly, Russia and China have both expanded their political influence and military as well as economic ties to these cases in this period. In Venezuela, this support was crucial for Chávez's successor Maduro to survive in office amidst major protests and an electoral defeat after the regime plunged into a long economic recession.

Despite its stronger institutional capacity to monitor compliance with democratic norms, the EU faced similar challenges in reversing democratic backsliding in the region. As widely noted by analysts, the EU's leverage over a regime differs dramatically before and after the country's accession.¹⁵ Once seen as success stories of Europeanization, Hungary and Poland witnessed a dramatic transformation under the rule of right-wing populist parties. Opposition groups in both countries appealed to the EU institutions to widen their domestic struggles into "a transnational political conflict",¹⁶ though with only limited success. For instance, following its failure to block the legislation in the national parliament, the Hungarian Socialist Party took the media law, spearheaded by the Fidesz to centralize control over the media, to the European Parliament. In January 2012, the European Commission launched infringement proceedings against Hungary's violation of EU law with its newly

¹³ Steven Levitsky and Kenneth M. Roberts (eds.), *The Resurgence of the Latin American Left* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Sebastián L. Mazzuca, "Lessons from Latin America: The Rise of Rentier Populism," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2013), pp. 108-22.

¹⁵ Ziya Öniş and Mustafa Kutlay, "Global Shifts and the Limits of the EU's Transformative Power in the European Periphery: Comparative Perspectives from Hungary and Turkey," *Government and Opposition* (June 2017), pp. 1-28.

¹⁶ Agnes Batory, "Uploading as political strategy: the European Parliament and the Hungarian media law debate," *East European Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2014), p. 231.

enacted media law, decrease of the retirement age of judges, and encroachment on the independence of the central bank.¹⁷ On the first two issues, the Commission referred Hungary to the European Court of Justice, but the high tribunal did not tackle the more serious charge of erosion of rule of law and pluralism in the country.¹⁸ In response, Prime Minister Orbán made tactical concessions to appease the EU elites without changing his government's primary agenda.

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In line with the European Commission's recommendation, the European Parliament invoked Article 7 against Poland in 2017 and Hungary in 2018, which could potentially result in the loss of a member state's voting rights. But the process has not yet compelled either government to change course. Accordingly, the EU's transformative capacity has been severely weakened in recent years due to the euro crisis and the migration question. Both issues fueled resentment and anger among middle and lower-class citizens in the EU, who consequently turned to populist leaders for quick solutions, weakening mainstream parties that failed to offer an alternative agenda. By skillfully exploiting the migration crisis after the summer of 2015, Hungarian PM Orbán not only solidified his base but also sought close ties with other right-wing parties in the EU. The European People's Party caucus, which includes Fidesz, refused to censure the party over its authoritarian measures on numerous occasions, and thus gave cover for its leader Victor Orbán in the EP. For instance, when the European Parliament issued the Tavares Report that criticized the erosion of democratic rights in Hungary, the EPP vice-chair Manfred Weber portrayed the report's findings as a leftist attack against Orbán.¹⁹

Similarly, the EU politicians began to criticize Erdoğan's illiberal practices openly after the government's crackdown on the Gezi protestors. However, the EU has

¹⁷ Erin K. Jenne and Cas Mudde, "Hungary's Illiberal Turn: Can Outsiders Help?" *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (2012), pp. 147-55.

¹⁸ R. Daniel Kelemen, "Europe's Other Democratic Deficit: National Authoritarianism in Europe's Democratic Union," *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (2017), pp. 211-38.

¹⁹ Kelemen (2017).

in this period enjoyed even less leverage over the Turkish government since the EU membership is no longer seen as a realistic scenario for Turkey. Additionally, Erdoğan has used the sizeable Syrian migrant population in the country as a strategic tool to ensure the EU's silence towards the erosion of democratic standards. At a time when many European governments closed their borders to prevent massive Syrian flux, Erdoğan increased his leverage vis-à-vis the EU by threatening to send hundreds of thousands of refugees into the region. For many observers, the EU's failure to reverse democratic backsliding in its region is particularly worrisome, as authoritarian-minded populist leaders continue to gain popular support across Eastern Europe and Balkans, both within (Bulgaria, Romania) and outside the EU (Macedonia, Serbia). The EU Council's decision not to start accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, despite recommendation from the European Commission and the European Parliament, will further widen the rift between the EU and western Balkan countries to the benefit of illiberal populist forces in the region.

In these cases, populist leaders neutralize outside pressures on their regimes by mobilizing their supporters with an anti-Western discourse, consolidating elites behind a nationalist agenda, and seeking new allies in the international arena. To counter criticisms from European governments, populist leaders exploited the sense of humiliation and anger felt by masses against the EU's unfulfilled promises and double standards in the euro crisis, the Syrian refugee flux, and the accession process. Populist leaders mobilized their voters against the EU and other liberal inter-governmental organizations by inciting nationalist rhetoric that contained heavy doses of anti-Westernism. While the target of this nationalist anger turned against the European Union in the region, the US proved as a more convenient target elsewhere. These leaders have also used the West as a scapegoat for internal problems, and accused their opponents of collaborating with foreign interests to intensify domestic conflict. For Erdoğan and Maduro, for instance, anti-government protests in their countries were sponsored by US agents. Meanwhile, Orbán has accused the EU for weakening the Hungarian national culture and keeping borders open for the Syrian migrants. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has often criticized the EU for its double standards on the minority question in Catalonia and Kosovo. At the same time, populist leaders effectively used rifts within the EU to prevent the member states from adopting harsh measures against their governments. As nationalist rhetoric escalated, the opposition parties were compelled to fall in line with the government's discourse in order to not lose popular support.

Furthermore, populist leaders in Hungary, Turkey, North Macedonia, Venezuela, and Serbia have all turned to the Putin administration with which they recently

signed a number of military, trade, energy, and cultural deals. Russia is the primary gas supplier of both Hungary and Turkey, and also signed nuclear power plant deals with both countries. While Hungary's deal with the Russian state company Rosatom triggered criticism within the EU for its opaque nature, Erdoğan's decision to purchase S-400 missile defense system caused an even bigger crisis within NATO, and harmed US-Turkish bilateral relations. In the case of Venezuela, Russia's military and economic support to the government crippled by US sanctions has even proved more valuable for consolidating support.

Can Turkey's 2019 Local Elections Serve as a Blueprint for Defeating Populists?

The electoral dominance of populist parties is not irreversible. The AKP's defeat in the 2019 local elections in Turkey is a testament to the ability of opposition parties to defeat populists through the ballot box. Despite the uneven playing field that worsened over the last few years, the opposition candidates won the mayoral race in five out of the six most populous provinces and expanded their vote share across the country. Indeed, the opposition's campaign reveals a recipe for electoral success that can be emulated by opposition parties in other populist regimes such as Hungary, India, Poland, and the Philippines, among others. A closer look at the opposition's strategy in Turkey highlights four major factors that contributed to this electoral outcome.

First, the two main opposition parties — the center-left CHP and the centrist İYİ Party — ran a coordinated campaign by supporting joint candidates who had the highest chance of defeating the ruling party in important mayoral races. Moreover, in seven metropolitan municipalities such as Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, and Adana, the pro-Kurdish HDP did not field candidates, and instead called on its supporters to vote against pro-government candidates. As a result, anti-government voters managed to pool their votes behind one contender to defeat the ruling party in many provinces.

Second, the opposition parties avoided controversial topics to focus instead on governance issues, and ran a positive campaign that ameliorated Erdoğan's attempts to polarize the electorate. Instead, the opposition parties shifted the public debate by highlighting local issues and offering concrete policy proposals in accordance with voter concerns. As part of this strategy, the main opposition CHP nominated experienced district mayors as its candidates in major metropolitan municipalities. Given their strong track record, these candidates were able to mobilize the opposition vote effectively and even appeal to mainstream pro-government voters.

Third, the CHP created a strong ground operation that disseminated its message

to the electorate and mobilized voters both before and on election day. While high voter turnout is not unusual in Turkey, a record 84 percent of Turkish voters cast their ballots in the 2019 local elections. Against this backdrop, the party also created a large network of volunteers to monitor the vote-counting process and defend the ballot boxes until official results were certified later that night. Especially in the close Istanbul race, this volunteer group collected reliable results across the province and enabled the CHP candidate İmamoğlu to contest manipulated figures announced by his AKP rival Binali Yıldırım on election night. Moreover, these volunteers continued to defend the ballot boxes long after the election was over since the High Election Board issued a recount across many precincts that continued for weeks. In the absence of this organizational network, the opposition could not have resisted the government's efforts to manipulate the results in Istanbul.

Lastly, the opposition candidates used social media in an effective manner to compensate for the mainstream media's limited coverage of their campaign. In particular, the CHP candidates in metropolitan provinces appealed directly to voters through their online profiles, broadcasted their campaign events regularly, and choreographed centrist images that had resonance for some moderate government voters. For instance, the CHP mayoral candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu's Instagram profile had drawn nearly five million followers by the end of the campaign. This strategy not only gave opposition candidates wider name recognition as demonstrated by this case, but also advantage in crafting their own agenda without the ruling party's obstruction. Due to the unfair media coverage enjoyed by the pro-government candidates, social media emerged as a cost-free site for the opposition to appeal directly to voters.

Conclusion

The populist tide has surged around the globe over the past decade. In both developed democracies in the West and across the global south, marginalized groups in society threw their support behind populist leaders who pledged to be responsive to the needs and grievances of the electorate.²⁰ In turn, populist leaders have consolidated power by exacerbating ethnic, religious, and socio-economic cleavages that turned politics into a zero-sum game. It was against this backdrop that populist leaders sought to transform the political system in their respective countries. With such popular support, populist leaders captured state institutions, eroded horizontal accountability, and attacked their critics in media and civil society with impunity.

The most effective way of dealing with the populist threat to democratic regimes is to take its agenda seriously. Although they may have questionable democratic

²⁰ Esen and Yardımcı-Geyikçi (2019), pp. 445-50.

credentials, populists give voice to marginalized groups and raise issues that have not been addressed by the political establishment.²¹ Critics of populist leaders do not have the luxury to ignore the needs and grievances of populist voters. Ultimately, democratic institutions can only survive if there is strong and sustained support for them against populist leaders with authoritarian tendencies.²² Democratic forces should hold populists accountable for their unkept promises and appeal directly to their constituencies through innovative ideas. As part of this strategy, they should form broad electoral coalitions to unite anti-populist actors behind a common agenda.

As an electoral force, opposition parties have an easier chance of defeating populist candidates in major metropolitan areas, such as Istanbul and Budapest, where on average voters tend to be more educated and prosperous than rest of the electorate. Such demographics limit the electoral appeal of populists in these cities while also facilitating the opposition that can tap into this voter base to run an effective campaign. Gaining control of the local government in these cities would also provide the opposition with a local base to balance the populist control of state institutions, and generate resources for challenging the populist government at the national level. Local governments could thus serve as an incubation center to candidates for national office, and an alternative arena to showcase alternative policy agendas to the electorate.

²¹ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

²² Robert R. Kaufman and Stephan Haggard, "Democratic Decline in the United States: What Can We Learn From Middle-Income Backsliding?" *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2019), pp. 417-32.