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The Dawn of Populist Soft Power? ^[1]


The growing appeal of populism and so-called strong men and women is evident. This trend appears to be further influenced by President Trump. Attracting in international relations, rather than using coercion or bribery, is known as soft power. The populist twist can be seen as a departure from a liberal understanding of soft power towards a post-liberal one. However, this approach may have limited chances to succeed in the long run as it aims to satisfy domestic audiences while overlooking foreign ones – the usual recipient of soft power. It is also marked by instability and unreliability. How is that so?

First, it is crucial to identify populism's key elements when examining its link with soft power. Oxford Languages define populism as “a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns are disregarded by established elite groups.” This broad audience means that promises can be overly simplistic while also striking an emotional note. Soft power is generally recognized as neutral, but populism is normative, with a strong moral component: “the people” are right. Charismatic leaders play a crucial role, claiming to protect “the people” from dangers while imposing their will. Illiberal forms of populism uses democratic practices to gain power but erode checks and balances that could slow down their actions. Populists may stir fear by focusing on negative stories and excluding “the other,” limiting their potential appeal in this case. Moreover, soft power strategies require slow but consistent efforts, while populist leaders often show impatience and shortsightedness.

Oversimplifying issues and creating a political identity for the oppressed, united against a common opponent, results in a compelling message. However, it often lacks clarity and commitment, leading to disillusionment when bold promises are not fulfilled.


What about some examples of populist leaders? Donald Trump could be seen as the quintessential representation of populism. In spite of his privileged upbringing, he often positions himself as the champion of the common people against the elites, using a variety of rhetorical tricks to amass political clout. Other current and former examples can be found in every continent and across the political spectrum, such as Narendra Modi in India, Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines.

Regardless of political leaning, the core elements of pitting the people against the elitist establishment, the moral and righteous framework, the democratic “disguise” of more direct participation, and the presence of a charismatic leader, all remain. Populist leaders often support each other – at least publicly – acknowledging and cherishing their authoritative similarities, but this is where the movement’s pull starts to falter.

Populist appeal is a subset of soft power, leveraging a cult of personality alongside a country's culture, values, and foreign policy. It can effectively charm and rally domestic audiences  with protectionist initiatives. However, as populist strategies typically prioritize national interests, their international appeal is limited by default. Populist leaders may also adopt similar tactics, but these often stall when faced with stronger nationalist agendas from other countries.

"Force and sanctions lead to division, while soft power aims to connect."

Soft power competition aims to elevate one's position rather than harm others. An actor can embrace soft power to improve its image and reputation abroad, but it will need a different toolset – such as disinformation and propaganda – to harm the reputation of others, blurring the lines between soft and hard methods. Strong leaders often prefer hard power, viewing it as aligned with their character while avoiding perceived weakness; hence, they may not actively cultivate soft power.

The appeal of populism per se is undeniable, but international channels of attraction are stifled in a global setting dominated by populist leaders pursuing a "my country first" doctrine. Soft power relies on global connectivity channels to allow ideas, talent, and goods to be shared and appreciated across borders. Most populist agendas clash with this scenario, favoring instead an insular approach, akin to domestic public diplomacy . Force and sanctions lead to division, while soft power aims to connect.

In short, populist soft power better works domestically, at least while the spell on citizens lasts; but internationally, it would work only when the goals of strong-willed actors do not intersect. Drawing on Snyder's work, the soft power of illiberal populist nationalism is often short-lived, but it has a "timeless" superficial appeal. This suggests it may keep resurfacing in different forms.

What may this mean for the future of global politics? To begin with, some populist leaders neglect the value of international relations. For instance, America itself may be the main cause of the crisis in the liberal order it once led. This opens opportunities for actors such as China and Russia to redefine international dynamics of attraction, possibly favoring pragmatism over ideology. A world defined by post-liberal manifestations of soft power – populist or not – could mimic a geopolitical multipolarity in which a variety of poles compete for attraction. Yet they will not shy away from using hard power.

Joseph Nye suggested that smart power – a balance between hard and soft power – is ideal for achieving desired outcomes. However, if illiberal populism prevails, the tension between domestic and international interests will lead to uncertainty and instability. Will then "the people" still see their populist choices as wise? Time will tell.
