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SREERAM CHAULIA (/COLUMNIST/SREERAM-CHAULIA-1)

Sreeram Chaulia is a professor and Dean of the Jindal School of International Affairs.

[\(/columnist/sreeram-chaulia-1\)](#)

Foreign Pulse: Will 'new' nationalism reverse globalisation?

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 President Donald Trump. (Photo: AP)

A new era of nationalism seeking to reverse globalising trends of the post-Cold War decades is upon us. Everywhere one looks, there is a tailwind behind nationalistic groups demanding a return to an earlier period when governments were answerable to the majority of their citizens rather than shackled by multilateral or supranational institutions and greedy transnational corporations. The blowback against integration of countries into a global melting pot and formation of a broad international identity is strongest in Europe and the United States. The “Leave” campaigners’ victory in the Brexit referendum and the astonishing rise of ultra-nationalist right-wing populists in Holland, France, Germany and most of central and eastern Europe has overturned the elite project of a step-by-step evolution towards a “United States of Europe”. Barring privileged pockets in metropolitan cities where multinational corporate power still dominates, the rest of Europe is at war with what the Dutch sociologist Ruud Koopmans terms as “cosmopolitan overstretch” of Europeanist elites. Feelings of nativity and belonging to one’s own nation that were sought to be superseded by welding over 500 million people into a common track are breaking loose from controls.



They are driving a “take back our country” agenda against vilified technocrats and faceless bureaucrats who are blamed for sitting far away in Brussels, the EU’s headquarters, and interfering in daily lives of ordinary people. The sovereignty which underpins nation-states assumes a direct relationship between rulers and ruled. But angry nationalists across Europe lament this umbilical link has been broken due to subservience of their governments to dark external forces, particularly EU, seen as imposing refugees and migrants without people’s consent. In 2003, when the EU was still healthy and expanding with new members, political scientist Simon Serfaty argued Europeans were transforming their systems of political governance “from city-states to nation-states to member states”. Today’s rightist populists like France’s Marine Le Pen, Holland’s Geert Wilders, Britain’s Nigel Farage and Germany’s Frauke Petry are determined to turn the tables and extract decision-making back from the EU into nations and localities.

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The lodestar for European nationalists is US President Donald Trump, whose unlikely path to power in 2016 was paved by outbursts of parochial nationalism and disdain for global institutions and the international community. His populist spiel that “a lot of countries are terribly taking advantage of us” and his nationalistic mission to defend the US from these alleged foreign cheats sounds myopic and petty in the context of an American-moulded liberalised world order. But it echoes well with Trump’s core constituency. Although the US is not part of any EU-like supranational intergovernmental body, nationalists rooting for Trump’s “America First” ideology want to discard all regional and global arrangements Washington has upheld for decades. For the Trump brigade, the perceived ills of trade, outsourcing and migration facilitated by treaties like the North American Free Trade Agreement have to be rolled back to maintain racial domination of white people of European ancestry, “protect our borders” and “save our jobs”.

To understand the rage of quintessential Trump backers from the white working class, one must read J.D. Vance’s book *Hillbilly Elogy*, which outlines how manufacturing towns in Ohio and Kentucky hollowed out due to de-industrialisation and left whole communities in despair and profound loss.



These left-behinds of corporate globalisation hold a bitter worldview that the US establishment (before Trump) was hand-in-glove with foreign counterparts and profiteering from their misery. Scapegoating of ethnic minorities is part of the mix because the “liberal conspiracy” is seen as giving away too many welfare benefits to undeserving people of colour, while abandoning the shrinking majority of whites lacking state support. As far as US nationalists are concerned, America wasn’t a superpower but a sucker that lost its purity and vitality by joining the diffuse flow of global values and pluralistic intermixing. Besides the US and Europe, the third and oldest pillar of conservative nationalism is Russia. Under Vladimir Putin, Moscow has championed right-wing populism and retention of orthodox Christian values as the answers to corporate globalisation and “the world is one village” interventionism.

President Putin embodies the clamour for preserving local cultures against an onslaught of morally corrupted and debauched global elites who want to standardise the whole planet into a single impersonal marketplace and erase historic traditions specific to each country. His vehement opposition to gay rights and freedom of the press and expression resonates with nationalists not just in Russia but around the world who yearn for a simpler past when there was no transnational pressure on every society to adopt universal tolerance and human rights. China under Xi Jinping is another huge votary for nationalism which preserves the Communist Party-crafted “socialism with Chinese characteristics”. This model rests on China’s civilisational heritage, dubbed as the “DNA of our people”. President Xi’s focus on “cultural security” as intrinsic to China’s national security is based on fear of Western liberal ideas creeping in via globalised communication networks to corrupt Chinese people’s minds and distort China’s rise as a superpower. A lot of the rampant nationalism that is raging is politically motivated and factually false. It is also economically and socially harmful to the so-called “deplorable” have-nots who placed their faith in it. Yet, raw emotions are transcending epistemic and rational limits and presenting a set of “alternative facts” with a vehemence not seen since the Cold War ended. In 1990, British scholar Eric Hobsbawm argued that nationalism had “become historically less important” and



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that "it's not impossible that nationalism will decline with the decline of the nation-state". Some liberals hang on to this thread and hope that Trump and other such nationalist populists are temporary blips who sustain themselves for years or decades to alter the course of history. Indeed, if the rightist nationalists enter formal office and fail to deliver on the expectations of their voters, disillusionment may set in and swing the pendulum back towards more internationalist ways. Whichever direction it churns, we have entered a period of severe contention, conflict and upheaval.



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