



# POPULIST ETHNO-RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM: CHALLENGES TO GLOBAL GOVERNANCE AND DOMESTIC SOCIAL INTEGRATION

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## **Abstract**

This literature study examines the confluence of identity politics, ethno-religious nationalism, and populism as a defining geopolitical force in the contemporary world. It argues that this triad is reconfiguring both the international order and domestic social contracts. At the global level, populist identity politics transforms sovereignty from a legal principle into a performative tool for asserting exclusive cultural identity, thereby fostering a fragmented and transactional order skeptical of multilateralism and international law. Domestically, it challenges inclusive citizenship by replacing civic solidarity with exclusive communal bonds based on perceived ethnic or religious homogeneity and antagonism towards constructed "others." This process erodes social cohesion, polarizes publics, and weakens democratic institutions by personalizing power and undermining checks and balances. The study concludes that these dynamics represent a significant shift away from post-Cold War liberal paradigms, demanding renewed scholarly and practical attention to building resilient, pluralistic societies and adaptable international frameworks in an age of resurgent identitarian geopolitics.

**Keywords:** identity geopolitics, populist nationalism, sovereignty, global order, social cohesion, citizenship, polarization.

## Introduction

The world entered the new millennium carrying the legacy of post-Cold War optimism that has gradually faded. The grand narrative about the end of history and the triumph of liberal democracy as well as global economic integration has not fully succeeded in dampening more primordial tensions. In many regions, political structures built upon the foundations of the modern nation-state face pressure from claims of more particular collective identities. These claims are often rooted in feelings of ethnic, religious, or cultural attachment that are perceived as more authentic and fundamental than legal bonds of citizenship. The rise of these voices marks a significant shift in the global political landscape, where classical geopolitical logic focused on territorial sovereignty and state alliances is now complicated by the psychological and sociological dynamics of the masses. Feelings of economic uncertainty, the speed of social change, and the rapid flow of information create fertile conditions for political responses that seek certainty in forms of identity imagined as pure and fixed. Globalization, with all its promises of interconnectedness, in some respects actually strengthens local reactions that attempt to reaffirm boundaries, both symbolically and physically (Arwine & Mayer, 2013). The dynamics of modern society are influenced not only by political factors but also by changes in social behavior, organizational structures, and patterns of decision-making within society (Darmawan, 2013; Mardikaningsih, 2018). These reactions can no longer be viewed merely as local upheavals, but rather as part of an interconnected global pattern that reshapes the contours of domestic political debates and international relations.

The development of communication technology and digital media has radically transformed the public sphere where identities are constructed and contested (Aranda & Salinas, 2011). Social media platforms enable the creation of imagined communities with a speed and reach never before experienced, transcending the geographical boundaries of nation-states. Within this digital space, narratives of collective identity can be disseminated, reinforced, and mobilized for political purposes with high efficiency. Sentiments that might previously have been scattered and fragmented can now easily find gathering points, forming echo chambers that reinforce group beliefs and often sharpen differences with external groups. The ability to filter information and interact primarily with like-

minded individuals creates a polarized political reality. This phenomenon provides a powerful instrument for political actors who build their messages on the promise of representing the 'true people' against 'corrupt elites' or 'external threats'. Digital media has become a new battleground for narrative warfare, where truth is often overshadowed by the power of repetition and emotional resonance that appeals to a sense of threatened identity. This transformation is also inseparable from the development of society toward the digital era and Society, in which information technology increasingly influences the way people think, interact, and shape social and political perceptions in everyday life (Darmawan et al., 2021).

Amid these currents of change, the concept of nationalism has undergone profound transformation. Civic nationalism, which is inclusive and bases membership on loyalty to shared institutions and constitutional principles, is increasingly challenged by exclusive ethno-religious nationalism (Cox, 2021). The latter form of nationalism defines the nation based on specific cultural, ethnic, or religious parameters, thereby implicitly or explicitly positioning citizens who do not meet these parameters as outsiders, or even as threats to the purity of the nation. Such identity politics does not occur only in countries with long histories of ethnic conflict but has also emerged at the heart of established liberal democracies. Social and organizational dynamics within society are often influenced by factors such as well-being, group interests, and the relationship between society and existing public institutions (Gautama et al., 2021). In these contexts, dissatisfaction with multicultural policies, concerns over the loss of state authority, and anxieties about demographic change are exploited by populist political forces to build platforms that promise the restoration of what is perceived as an authentic national identity. This type of politics often links complex economic and social problems with simplified narratives about protecting identity from foreign influences or certain minority groups.

Populism, as a style of politics or a thin-centered ideology, finds an effective strategic partner in ethno-religious identity politics. At its core, populism divides society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the 'pure people' versus the 'corrupt elite'. When combined with ethno-religious nationalism, the definition of 'the people' becomes further narrowed and infused with strong cultural content (Kaufmann, 2011). This phenomenon is also related to the level of public political participation and

the dynamics of civil society movements that develop within modern democratic systems (Rojak et al., 2021). The elites portrayed as enemies are not only materially corrupt but are also seen as culturally betraying the nation, because they are perceived to ignore or even erode the traditional values and identity of the nation. Thus, ethno-religious populism offers a political package that combines criticism of economic inequality with promises to preserve identity. Its rhetorical style is often emotional, direct, and anti-intellectual, rejecting policy complexity with solutions that appear clear and simple. Populist leaders present themselves as the only legitimate voice representing the true will of the silent people, whose identity has been neglected by the mainstream political establishment.

This combination of geopolitics, identity, and populism then produces tangible effects on the global order and the structure of social cohesion within states (Velasco, 2020). At the international level, populist identity politics encourages foreign policies that are more unilateral, protectionist, and skeptical of multilateral cooperation. These changes require a balance between economic, social, and environmental interests so that development can proceed sustainably (Mardikaningsih & Hariani, 2021). Institutions such as the European Union or international human rights regimes are viewed as threats to national sovereignty and identity. Long-standing alliances may be questioned, while closer relations with other authoritarian regimes that promote similar nationalist narratives may emerge. At the domestic level, social polarization increases sharply. The public sphere becomes fragmented, with constructive dialogue becoming difficult as debates quickly shift toward questions of loyalty and identity betrayal. Trust in democratic institutions, independent media, and the judiciary declines when these institutions are perceived as part of an elite hostile to the people. Social cohesion, which is built upon a minimal consensus regarding shared values and a sense of equal citizenship, faces severe challenges when certain identities are claimed to be more superior or more entitled to determine the direction of the nation.

One of the main challenges arising from the resurgence of populist identity politics is the erosion of the basic consensus necessary for the functioning of a healthy liberal democracy. Democracy is not only about electoral procedures, but also about recognizing the plurality of views and the legitimacy of political opposition. From the perspective of social welfare

theory, political stability and fair public policies are essential to ensure that the interests of the broader community remain protected in the development process (Rizky & Udjari, 2021). Politics built upon an exclusive 'us versus them' rhetoric laden with rigid identity claims threatens this fundamental principle. Political opposition is no longer viewed as a legitimate competitor within democratic contestation but is often portrayed as an enemy of the state, a traitor to the nation, or part of a foreign conspiracy. This simplification of complex social realities into a binary struggle between good and evil undermines society's ability to negotiate differences and seek compromise. As a result, politics becomes a zero-sum game, where the victory of one identity group is interpreted as the total defeat of another. This situation creates a cycle of political retaliation that can erode institutional stability in the long term.

Another crucial problem is how populist identity politics exploits and at the same time worsens existing economic and social inequalities. It has been noted that human resource management and policy innovation are important factors in enhancing the competitiveness of organizations and societies in the era of globalization characterized by uncertainty (Abdulah et al., 2021). Narratives about restoring national glory and protecting identity often obscure the structural roots of economic dissatisfaction, such as widening inequality, deindustrialization, or job insecurity. By diverting public attention to cultural and identity issues, populist actors can avoid accountability for economic policies that may in fact strengthen global market forces or certain business groups. In many cases, fear of the 'other' whether immigrants, religious minorities, or foreign entities is used as a scapegoat for problems that actually stem from domestic policies or global economic transformations. This not only hinders the resolution of substantive economic problems but also reinforces prejudice and discrimination against groups that are falsely blamed. Social cohesion consequently fragments, as solidarity based on economic class or shared civic interests is replaced by exclusive solidarity grounded in narrow identity boundaries.

Understanding the dynamics of identity geopolitics and populist nationalism has become both an intellectual and practical necessity in a period when the post-Cold War world order appears increasingly unstable. In addition, strengthening regulatory frameworks and legal instruments is also necessary to maintain social order and protect public interests from the

various impacts of increasingly complex social and environmental changes (Herisasono et al., 2021). The patterns observed across continents, from North America and Europe to Asia and Latin America, indicate that this is not an isolated development but rather a symptom of broader historical conditions. Climate change, pandemics, technological disruption, and global economic instability have created deep feelings of vulnerability among many segments of society. This sense of vulnerability, when combined with the rapid pace of social change, becomes fertile ground for political movements that promise protection, certainty, and the restoration of collective dignity (Boin et al., 2017). Without a comprehensive understanding of the internal logic, driving factors, and implications of such politics, responses from academics, policymakers, and civil society may remain reactive and fail to address the root causes. A systematic study is therefore required to map the common threads connecting seemingly different cases while also identifying the specific characteristics of their local configurations.

The transformative power of populist identity politics has reshaped the political landscape of many countries, challenging long-standing assumptions about linear progress toward more inclusive and cosmopolitan societies (Aggestam & True, 2020). By understanding these various social, political, and organizational dimensions, academic research can make an important contribution to formulating more adaptive and sustainable strategies for modern societies (Darmawan, 2013; Abdulah et al., 2021). Its emergence compels us to revisit theories of social integration, citizenship, and international relations. This study is important for examining the resilience of democratic institutions when confronted with pressures from exclusive identity-based politics. Furthermore, it highlights the vulnerability of the liberal international order established after the Second World War, which now faces challenges from major powers that emphasize absolute sovereignty and cultural superiority. By critically examining this topic, we can develop sharper analytical frameworks to anticipate future political trends, design policies that strengthen social cohesion without sacrificing justice and pluralism, and build societal resilience against divisive narratives that threaten the foundations of coexistence in diversity.

This literature study aims to critically analyze the complex relationship between geopolitics, the rise of identity politics, ethno-religious nationalism, and populism, as well as their impacts on the global order and social

cohesion. Specifically, this study seeks to describe and interpret how these phenomena reconfigure the understanding and practice of state sovereignty while simultaneously transforming patterns of international relations and cooperation. At the domestic level, this research aims to explain the mechanisms through which the discourse and practices of populist identity politics reshape, strengthen, or undermine the bonds of social cohesion and challenge the paradigm of inclusive citizenship. The expected theoretical contribution is the enrichment of academic discourse in comparative politics, international relations, and political sociology by providing an analytical synthesis that connects global and domestic dynamics. Practically, the findings of this study are expected to provide clearer insights for stakeholders regarding the roots and implications of populist identity politics, serving as a consideration in formulating public policies and social strategies oriented toward strengthening democracy, justice, and social integration amid diversity.

## Method

This research is a qualitative literature study designed to conduct an in-depth conceptual and theoretical investigation of the complexity of the topic discussed. The qualitative approach was chosen because of its suitability for the objective of understanding, interpreting, and constructing arguments regarding a multidimensional and meaning-rich socio-political phenomenon. This study does not aim to test hypotheses or produce statistical generalizations but rather to achieve substantive understanding through critical analysis of relevant academic texts. The researcher acts as the key instrument who is actively involved in the processes of searching, selecting, critically reading, synthesizing, and constructing an analytical narrative based on the corpus of collected texts. This process emphasizes depth of analysis, sharpness of interpretation, and the ability to connect various concepts and findings from diverse literature sources into a coherent and logical exposition.

The methodology applied follows the principles of a systematic literature review adapted for the purpose of narrative synthesis. This procedure involves several systematic stages, ranging from planning, identification, selection, evaluation, to the synthesis of textual data. The literature identification stage was conducted through searches in leading

academic databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar using combinations of carefully designed keywords. As explained by Fink (2005) in his book on literature research, an effective review requires a clear protocol for determining inclusion and exclusion criteria. In this study, these criteria include focusing on publications between 2000 and 2021 that directly discuss aspects of geopolitics, identity, populist nationalism, and social cohesion, with priority given to peer-reviewed journals, monographs, and research reports from reputable institutions. After collection, each source was critically reviewed, and relevant data were extracted and categorized based on emerging themes, which subsequently served as the foundation for the in-depth discussion and the construction of the main arguments of this study.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **The Reconfiguration of Sovereignty and the Global Order in the Geopolitics of Populist Identity**

The rise of identity politics accompanied by the spirit of populist nationalism has launched a significant challenge to the concept of state sovereignty in its Westphalian form (Kallis, 2018). Classical sovereignty, understood as the highest, absolute, and indivisible authority within the territory of a state, is experiencing pressure from two directions that paradoxically contradict each other. This phenomenon can also be understood as part of the dynamics of modern politics that involve changes in how societies perceive power, leadership, and the relationship between the state and its citizens within an evolving system of governance (Rojak, 2021). On the one hand, populist actors often echo the rhetoric of “taking back control” and assert national sovereignty as a fortress against supranational forces such as the European Union or international legal regimes. On the other hand, their political practices frequently internalize and reinforce the logic of global markets, while simultaneously disregarding the sovereignty of other states through interventionist rhetoric or aggressive foreign policies. Public political attitudes are also often influenced by both rational and emotional considerations that arise from social experiences and individual perspectives toward existing political systems (Ujjianto & Darmawan, 2003). Sovereignty, within the discourse of ethno-religious populism, thus undergoes a reduction in meaning. It is no longer primarily about abstract legal and political authority, but rather about the cultural and

symbolic performativity of a claim to represent and protect the “soul of the nation” or the “national character” perceived as pure from foreign contamination. This shift transforms sovereignty from a legal principle into a tool of identity politics.

This conceptual transformation has direct implications for patterns of international relations. The liberal international order established after the Second World War, with its emphasis on multilateralism, international institutions, and universal norms such as human rights, is viewed with suspicion by populist regimes. Institutions such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, or the international criminal court are seen not as arenas of cooperation but as mechanisms that restrict the freedom of state action and threaten the unique identity of the nation. This skepticism toward multilateralism gives rise to a more transactional and zero-sum approach to foreign relations. Alliances are no longer based on shared values or commitments to a common order but on narrow calculations of national interest that are often defined within the framework of competition between identities. Foreign policy becomes an extension of divisive domestic politics, where the portrayal of leaders as protectors of the nation from external threats is used to strengthen domestic legitimacy, even at the risk of provoking tensions with neighboring countries or traditional allies (Murphy, 2017).

The implications of the geopolitics of populist identity for regional stability are highly tangible. In regions such as Europe, politics that emphasize the superiority of particular national cultures and reject transnational solidarity have weakened the foundations of the European Union integration project, which was originally designed to overcome the logic of exclusive nationalism. The migration crisis and rules regarding the distribution of responsibility have become testing grounds for these identity-based sovereignty claims, where member states reject the authority of Brussels by referring to their right to protect cultural homogeneity and national security. In Asia, populist nationalism manifests in politicized territorial and historical disputes, where claims over certain islands or maritime territories are not merely about resources but also serve as symbols of national revival and dignity that must be defended against neighboring states (Vickers, 2017). These dynamics complicate conflict resolution through conventional diplomatic channels, because compromise can easily be framed as betrayal of the nation by domestic political opposition.

Regional orders that were previously relatively stable become more vulnerable to upheaval triggered by domestic populist sentiments.

Furthermore, populist regimes in power often establish complex and pragmatic relationships with other global powers that share similar views on sovereignty and the international order (Destradi & Plagemann, 2019). An informal kind of “populist international” emerges, in which leaders in countries such as Russia, Hungary, Turkey, or previously the United States provide each other with legitimacy and rhetorical support, even though their material interests may differ. This network operates beyond traditional ideological alliances, creating new axes in global politics characterized by a rejection of international liberalism. Cooperation occurs in areas such as security, energy, or strategic investment, often while disregarding criticism from the international community regarding issues of democracy and human rights. This accelerates the fragmentation of the global order into competing blocs that are no longer fully bound by common rules. Sovereignty becomes a shield to protect regimes from external criticism as well as a justification for authoritarian governance models carried out in the name of the will of a homogeneous people.

The role of information technology and social media in this reconfiguration of sovereignty cannot be ignored. Cyberspace has become a new battleground for the geopolitics of identity, where narrative warfare and disinformation are deployed to influence domestic public opinion in other countries, erode trust in their institutions, and intensify social polarization (Freedman et al., 2021). These activities, often supported or financed by states, represent a new form of intervention that blurs the boundaries of traditional sovereignty. Cyberattacks, information manipulation campaigns, and the use of digital platforms to disseminate nationalist propaganda challenge the classical understanding of intervention as primarily military or economic action. Populist states master these instruments to expand influence while simultaneously protecting their domestic narratives, creating a toxic information environment that in turn reinforces perceptions of a world characterized by hostility and competition between identities. Sovereignty in the digital era must therefore also be understood as the capacity to control narratives and maintain discursive hegemony in the domestic public sphere against foreign influence.

The impact on international legal regimes is also severe. Principles such as non-intervention, which are supposed to protect the sovereignty of smaller states, are often invoked by major populist powers to silence criticism regarding their internal human rights violations (Krieger, 2019). Conversely, the norm of territorial sovereignty may be ignored when it concerns the strategic or symbolic interests of the populist state itself, such as in cases of annexation or occupation of other territories. Respect for international treaties becomes selective, depending on whether such agreements align with the domestic populist agenda. International judicial institutions are perceived as biased and illegitimate when their decisions contradict the interests or national identity narratives being constructed. This instrumental attitude toward international law undermines the certainty and predictability that form the foundation of a rules-based global order, replacing it with an order increasingly based on power and identity claims.

This shift carries serious consequences for global issues that require close cooperation, such as climate change, nuclear non-proliferation, or pandemic management. Populist identity politics, which emphasizes narrow national interests and often displays skepticism toward scientific knowledge perceived as the consensus of a “global elite,” hampers effective collective responses. The Paris Climate Agreement, for example, faces challenges from countries whose leadership questions scientific consensus or prioritizes carbon-intensive domestic industries under the justification of protecting national employment. During global health crises, nationalist responses characterized by vaccine hoarding and unilateral border closures without coordination demonstrate a priority placed on protecting narrowly imagined communities, sacrificing universal humanitarian solidarity (Feffer, 2021). This indicates that the geopolitics of identity not only reshapes power politics but also fundamentally alters humanity’s capacity to address existential challenges that transcend the boundaries of nation-states.

The rise of identity politics and populist nationalism has reconfigured the concept of sovereignty from a legal-rational principle of political organization into a performative and emotionally driven instrument of identity politics (McNamara, 2015). This reconfiguration, in turn, drives the transformation of the global order toward a more fragmented, transactional, and competitive form. Sovereignty is used flexibly as a shield against unwanted external influence while simultaneously functioning as a sword to

cut through international obligations and perpetuate narratives of identity conflict. The resulting pattern of international relations is characterized by the weakening of multilateral institutions, the rise of pragmatic alliances among populist regimes, and the use of hybrid warfare in cyberspace to contest influence. A rules-based order is gradually replaced by one that relies more heavily on power and identity claims, thereby reducing the world's collective capacity to address urgent global challenges.

### **Populist Identity Politics and Challenges to Social Cohesion and Citizenship**

The mechanisms of populist identity political discourse erode the foundations of social cohesion by systematically constructing and sharpening symbolic boundaries between the groups of “the true people” and “the others.” This process does not occur in a vacuum but rather exploits structural uncertainties and anxieties already present within society. Populist discourse operates through a logic of radical simplification, transforming social complexity composed of individuals with multiple identities and overlapping loyalties into rigid and easily understood dichotomies (Noury & Roland, 2020). “The people” are redefined not as all citizens who are equal before the law, but as a homogeneous community based on particular ethnic, religious, or cultural criteria. This definitional process is both exclusive and performative; it actively constructs “insiders” by celebrating certain symbols and historical narratives, while simultaneously producing “outsiders” by stigmatizing those who do not fit these criteria as threats, parasites, or traitors. It is this mechanism that transforms ordinary differences into deep social divisions, because one's position within the political body is no longer determined by contribution or adherence to the law, but by identity attributes considered primordial and immutable.

The everyday political practices that emerge from such discourse directly challenge the model of inclusive citizenship. Inclusive citizenship rests on the principle that political and civil rights and obligations derive from an individual's legal status as a citizen, regardless of ethnic, religious, or cultural background (Beaman, 2016). Populist identity politics replaces this logic with one based on membership defined by blood and culture. In practice, this manifests in policies and rhetoric that differentiate the

treatment of citizens according to their conformity with the claimed majority identity. Highly restrictive and discriminatory immigration policies, attempts to revise citizenship laws that make naturalization more difficult for certain groups, or bureaucratic campaigns against civil society organizations perceived as representing “foreign” values are concrete manifestations of this challenge. The public sphere, which should function as a neutral arena where all citizens interact, is transformed into a stage for affirming majority identity, where religious or cultural symbols of minority groups are marginalized or banned under the justification of maintaining public order or national character. This process effectively creates strata of citizenship, where some citizens feel and are treated as full owners of the nation, while others occupy the position of tolerated guests.

Social cohesion, which depends on mutual trust, shared recognition, and commitment to a collective future, faces severe strain under such conditions. Populist identity politics replaces the basis of cohesion from abstract and inclusive civic solidarity to exclusive and emotional communal solidarity (Cohen, 2019). Social bonds are no longer built upon shared goals as one nation, but upon shared hostility toward imagined enemies, whether elites, minorities, or foreign powers. This type of solidarity is fragile and parasitic; it requires the continuous presence of perceived threats to maintain internal cohesion within the majority group. Consequently, overall social cohesion becomes a zero-sum game: strengthening bonds within the majority group is often achieved at the expense of the sense of safety, acceptance, and trust among minority groups. Surveys and studies across various countries indicate that under governments characterized by strong ethno-religious populist rhetoric, levels of social polarization, intergroup prejudice, and perceptions of threat rise significantly, while trust among citizens from different backgrounds declines sharply.

Challenges to inclusive citizenship are also evident in the reinterpretation of history and collective memory (Dudman, 2019). Populist identity politics often involves projects of re-engineering national memory to create a historical narrative that is pure, heroic, and flawless, which exclusively claims the role of the majority group. This narrative ignores or minimizes the contributions, suffering, and existence of minority groups in the nation’s journey. Educational curricula may be revised, monuments and street names changed, and certain historical commemorations promoted or

suppressed, all to reinforce the story of a homogeneous nation. These actions are not merely academic; they have profound political consequences. By redefining who is part of the nation's history, identity politics indirectly redefines who is entitled to its future. Minority groups that are erased from the collective historical narrative feel increasingly alienated from the national project, while the majority group is strengthened in the belief that they are the only legitimate heirs of the state. Social cohesion built upon recognition of the contributions of all elements of the nation is thus replaced by cohesion built upon neglect and erasure.

The media, both mainstream and social, act as amplifiers and accelerators in this mechanism. Within a fragmented and polarized media ecosystem, populist discourse finds fertile channels (Chadwick, 2017). Partisan media or platforms controlled by certain interest groups disseminate content that consistently portrays the "other" group as problematic, dangerous, or disloyal. Social media algorithms tend to reinforce this bias by creating echo chambers in which users are exposed only to information that confirms their prejudices. This information loop creates parallel realities in which facts that contradict populist identity narratives are considered lies from enemies. As a result, the shared foundation for public conversation—a set of agreed facts—disappears. Without this common ground, debates about public policy turn into quarrels about identity and loyalty, which further complicates the achievement of compromise or social consensus necessary for effective governance and sustainable cohesion.

The implications for democratic life are very serious. Populist identity politics tends to personalize power and obscure accountability (Noury & Roland, 2020). Populist leaders often present themselves as the only legitimate representatives of the "true people," allowing them to institutionalize power in the name of the will of that supposedly homogeneous people. Institutions of checks and balances, such as an independent judiciary, critical media, or audit institutions, may be attacked and weakened with accusations that they represent the interests of "elites" or "foreigners" opposed to the will of the people. In such an environment, the rights of individuals and minority groups protected by the constitution become vulnerable, as these rights can be portrayed as obstacles to the expression of the majority's will. The model of inclusive citizenship, which protects the rights of every individual regardless of background, is gradually

replaced by an aggressive majoritarian model of democracy, in which the cultural or ethnic majority feels entitled to dictate the conditions of full membership in the political community.

The resilience of civil society faces a severe test under these pressures. Organizations advocating for minority rights, pluralism, and human rights often become targets of smear campaigns, legal restrictions, and even violence (Brysk, 2013). The space for advocacy and intergroup dialogue narrows. In contrast, civil society organizations aligned with ethno-religious populist agendas receive support and access to those in power. This polarization weakens the capacity of civil society as a whole to act as a balancing force and a bridge between groups. When moderate actors seeking common ground are sidelined or silenced, the political stage becomes dominated by extreme voices, which further deepen divisions and damage long-term social cohesion. Society becomes fragmented into identity enclaves that distrust one another and interact very little, hindering the formation of cross-group social capital that is essential for stability and shared prosperity.

Populist identity politics challenges social cohesion and inclusive citizenship through a series of interconnected discursive and practical mechanisms (Pinto et al., 2020). It replaces the logic of rights-based citizenship with a logic of membership based on exclusive identity. Inclusive civic solidarity is replaced by communal solidarity built upon hostility toward others. This process is reinforced by the reconstruction of a homogeneous collective history and a polarized media ecosystem. The implications include the creation of stratified citizenship, the weakening of democratic institutions and accountability, and the erosion of space for a pluralistic civil society. The ultimate result is not stronger cohesion, but rather a society fragmented into opposing identity groups, with low levels of intergroup trust and a high vulnerability to social conflict. The cohesion that remains is merely a pseudo-cohesion within the majority group, paid for by the exclusion and insecurity experienced by minority groups, as well as the weakening of the democratic foundations of the nation-state itself.

## Conclusion

This literature review has revealed the complex and mutually reinforcing relationships between geopolitics, the rise of identity politics, ethno-religious nationalism, and populism. The analysis shows that these phenomena are

not isolated developments, but rather a global pattern that is reconfiguring the political order at both the international and domestic levels. At the global level, populist identity politics has transformed the concept and practice of state sovereignty. Sovereignty is no longer understood solely as the highest legal principle, but has been reduced to a performative instrument used to assert exclusive national cultural identity and to reject commitments to international norms and multilateral institutions. This transformation produces a more fragmented, transactional, and competitive global order, in which cooperation based on shared rules weakens and is replaced by pragmatic alliances among populist regimes and the use of narrative warfare in cyberspace. As a result, the collective capacity to address urgent global challenges is increasingly constrained.

The implications of this study are broad for the future of global governance and domestic democratic life. For international relations, the identified trends suggest the need to reconsider existing models of multilateral cooperation. International institutions may need to develop more flexible and persuasive mechanisms that can acknowledge the diversity of national identities without sacrificing fundamental principles such as human rights and global justice. At the level of the nation-state, the most urgent implication is the need to strengthen the resilience of democratic institutions against the pressures of exclusive identity politics. This includes strengthening critical civic education, protecting inclusive public spaces, and developing policies that proactively build cross-group social capital. Restoring social cohesion requires deliberate efforts to construct national narratives that embrace diversity, as well as designing political systems that prevent excessive concentration of power in the hands of leaders who claim to be the sole voice of the “true people.”

Based on the analysis conducted, several avenues for further research can be proposed. First, more in-depth comparative studies are needed to examine variations in the forms and intensity of populist identity politics across different cultural regions and political systems, in order to identify specific factors that moderate its impacts. Second, empirical research on the effectiveness of various policy models in building social resilience against divisive narratives such as intergroup contact programs, media system reforms, or the design of consociational political institutions is essential to provide practical guidance. Third, future research should explore the role of

non-state actors, such as global technology corporations, transnational religious institutions, and cross-border social movements, in both reinforcing and responding to the dynamics of identity geopolitics. A deeper understanding of the interactions among these forces will refine analytical frameworks for navigating an increasingly complex and polarized global political landscape.

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