For the speakers, in the excellent questions that we got to see beforehand, there was a polite but firm suggestion that we retire the term populism. I actually agree with that sentiment to a significant degree. I think it has become a problem that we slap that label on all kinds of phenomena today for which we actually happen to have much more precise concepts, be it protectionism, nativism, racism, all kinds of phenomena which are regularly associated with populism, but which actually in a meaningful way are quite distinct.

Having said that, I would persist with using the word for one particular phenomenon, which I think doesn't get captured by some of these other concepts, and that is a phenomenon that comes down to a leader or a party claiming that they and only they represent what populists typically call the real people, or also the silent majority. It is a claiming of a distinctly moral monopoly of representing the people. The consequence is that populists then also will deny the legitimacy of all other contenders for power. Less obviously, they are going to suggest that all citizens who do not share their ultimately symbolic construction of the allegedly real people – and who therefore also politically don't support these populists – you can put it to doubt whether those citizens truly belong to the people.

To illustrate this perhaps less self-evident claim with one quote from our president, in May 2016, Trump gave a campaign speech where he said, I'm quoting from memory, "The most important thing is the unification of the people and all the other people don't mean anything." I hope you can see where this is going. Contrary to what we read and hear day at night, populism is not just about being critical with elites. All of us can be critical with elites. It doesn't mean we're automatically right, but this is certainly not automatically dangerous for democracy. Quite possibly the opposite. What is specific and dangerous about populism is, for shorthand, anti-pluralism: the tendency always to exclude others obviously at the level of party politics, less obviously at the level of the people themselves.

Now, if you find this halfway plausible, then I think it has certain implications for how we think about the question whether the populists can actually govern. I think there remains a widespread view among liberals in the widest possible sense of this term ... probably everybody who's in this room, I suspect ... that almost by definition, populists cannot truly govern. Why? Well, it is often said that they're all anti-elitists. Once they come to power, well, by definition, they have become the elite and they can't possibly continue with anti-elite discourse. Or another widespread view, all populists are characterized by the fact that they have horrendously simplistic ideas about policy and they make all these false promises to the people, and once they come to power, of course it'll become blindingly obvious from the first day onwards that none of these promises can be kept. No walls are going to get built, no trade agreements are going to get renegotiated. Then according to this logic, either populists in government become reasonable and actually start to solve problems, or they persist with their populism and thereby disappoint all their followers who will then turn away from them.

You can see hopefully that in both scenarios, the problem ends up solving itself. They cease being populists by definition, or they will obviously fail once they're in government. This is a widespread, complacent and deeply misguided view. I think we have enough
examples in our era to conclude that populists
can very well govern. Not only that, they can
govern specifically as populists, which is to say
as actors who, on one level, do not accept the
legitimacy of an opposition.

Moreover, and perhaps less obviously, by now,
I think we can identify distinct elements of
what I would suggest we might call a populist
art of governance. It doesn’t look exactly the
same everywhere. I’m not suggesting that
Modi equals Trump equals Orbán equals
Erdoğan and so on. Obviously, we’re talking
about very different, very heterogeneous
contexts. What I’m suggesting is something
like a family resemblance. If you lined up all
these people and you looked at their regimes,
you would say, "Yeah, of course I can see the
differences, but I can also see that they are
part of one family." There are patterns which
they share and perhaps less obviously, they
can learn from each other, and perhaps even
less obviously, they have also learned not just
from each other, but, God forbid, from history.

All of us are in favor of learning from history,
but of course, we always assume that only
good people learn from history, and not so
nice people maybe also learn from history.
Maybe one of the specific things that some of
these actors have learned is how precisely not
to produce images from the 20th century that
would all too obviously remind global
audiences of dictatorships, of massive human
rights violations and so on. The populist art of
governance is precisely about doing something
that maximizes control over a society and at
the same time does not look like a traditional
dictatorship, let alone anything totalitarian.

So what are we talking about concretely? Well,
let me just highlight four elements. The first
one I think is going to be totally obvious to
everybody. When these actors are criticized by
non-elected independent institutions, be it
courts or free media, they always respond by
saying, "Who elected you? We and only we
represent the people." This is absolutely not
new or innovative. Napoleon the third already
confronted the press in France in his day by
saying, "These are illegitimate rivals to the
elected authorities."

But a couple of other elements of this populist
art of governance are somewhat more
innovative. All of these regimes tend to engage
in efforts essentially to take over or occupy the
state itself, and that usually includes public
service media. They will try to replace what
should be independent professionals or civil
servants with partisan actors. Now, many of
you might say, "Well, look, I can think of plenty
of parties who kind of tried to do that, which
are not necessarily populist." True, but
populists sort of do this hijacking of the state
and state media in a sense very openly and
with a claim that has grounded precisely what I
tried earlier on to identify as the sort of core
assumption they tried to make plausible.
Remember that they say, "We and only we
represent the people." Who is the state for?
Well, it's there for the people, of course. So
when they take possession of the state, in
their logic, the people themselves are taking
possession of the state and that's how things
should be.

Beyond that, many of these regimes also
engage in so-called mass-clientelism,
shorthand for benefits and bureaucratic favors
for those who support the regime, ideally
nothing for everybody else. Again, you’re going
to say, "Well, plenty of regimes are trying to do
that." True. But again, populists will do this
with a quasi-moral justification. Remember
that from the get-go, not all citizens are the
people. Only some people are the real people. The fact that only these people get something and everybody else gets nothing is not something to be ashamed of—that's how things should be.

Furthermore, maybe less obviously, what also happens as a result of this stance very often is a thorough politicization of the economy outside those areas which are exposed to the international economy. So the economy is used and these clientelistic relationships are used to exert a lot of pressure, establish control in ways which are not directly ideological and are not directly traceable in ways in which, let's say, outright repression would be much more obvious and much more traceable.

We talked a little bit about fascism earlier today. Many of you will remember Ernst Fraenkel's famous book about the Nazi dual state, where he said, "Look, in Nazi Germany, there was a fair amount of normality. People got married, people started businesses and so on. It wasn't like a crazy mobilization of everybody all the time, but at the same time there was always this other state which could intervene politically and exert prerogative power whenever it wanted to."

One suggestion is that we're faced with a similar situation, but the double state has turned around. The politics is often, or at least looks often, quite normal. Yes, there's gerrymandering, there's all kinds of stuff that is about manipulating elections, but it's not exactly something that we could easily compare to 20th century dictatorships. The economy is in a sense highly politicized. And it's always very plausible to deny that somebody was fired for political reasons. This was because of financial constraints, because the EU needed budgets to be lower and so on and so forth.

That's what I mean by saying this is much harder to trace. It might be a real innovation in how you get an enormous amount of social control, while at the same time nobody can easily point to anything that immediately makes sense to an international audience as a human rights violation or an obvious form of oppression. [There is] one exception, and again, this will not surprise you in the least. When there is protest from civil society, even if that protest poses no real danger to these regimes, it becomes morally and symbolically supremely important to delegitimize that protest as comprehensively as possible.

You all know how this works. Immediately, somebody from the government will suggest that this isn't a genuine protest, that this all has been paid for or has been manipulated by... well, the usual suspects will be trotted out, the CIA, Soros, but basically no limits to creativity. Just remember the Gezi Park protest, for instance, in 2013. Somebody from the government eventually came out and said, "Well, it's obvious what's really going on here." Everything, of course, had been paid for and organized by... it's obvious... Lufthansa, the German airline. Why? Because as we all know from Morgan Freeman, from all these great ads, Turkish Airlines is now the best airline in the world. Erdoğan has just built the greatest airport outside Istanbul. That's why the Germans got so worried. That's why they called everybody into the embassy, gave them instructions and then sent them out to protest.

Again, this kind of move is rooted in the core claim I was trying to point to at the beginning. If you say, "We and only we represent the people," by definition, it cannot be true that...
parts of the people themselves are against you. So you basically have to convince your audience that these aren't real people, in a sense, they are fake people. I'm not telling you anything remotely new, it makes a world of difference whether a government reacts to protest by saying, "Look, you really are not elected as civil society. We are elected, we can talk about policies, but you just wait for the election." That I think is the normal democratic response, as opposed to somebody saying, or of course in this case rather tweeting, paid-up activists. That immediately denies legitimacy. Why talk to anybody who is just paid to do this? Obviously their arguments are not put forward in good faith and so on.

Long story short, I think this has emerged as a relatively coherent package that we can see in a number of countries. I am not suggesting that therefore these actors are invincible or nothing could ever change, that's not it. I think we are still, if anything, at risk of underestimating the coherence of what they do, and I also notice one particular thing. In all these elements I have mentioned, there's only one that really crucially relies on media, and that is the attack on civil society. Everything else can work pretty well without having a large degree of control or let alone total capture of the media. Again, that doesn't apply a clear cut lesson of what we should be doing, but I think it should also make us more careful in thinking that there are only the sort of recognizable elements in this kind of authoritarianism that we can see in terms of repression of media, reduction in media pluralism and so on, so forth. The more they can politicize the economy, the more they can hijack the state, the less they actually need to exert control over the media as such, and I'll finish on that happy note.