

## Introduction 'Populism in Europe'

This introduction offers reflections on causes of populism; about its core messages; about the forms of populist agitation; about the effects of populism, and about its future. Certain dimensions of the current debate on populism are particularly interesting because they are not (yet) as inflationary as other features of populism. These dimensions will be presented below, before we move on with four studies on the more concrete dimensions of populist policies and trends in (mostly) Eastern Europe.

1 There is considerable *heterogeneity* when it comes to defining populism. As always when there is a concept debated intensely and emotionally (see totalitarianism, autocracy, globalization, civil society, democracy, social capital ...), there are those who suggest concrete definitions - but, unfortunately, there is an abundance of definitions. Others say that there is 'nothing new' and that the respective issue has always been around. Still others argue that there is 'nothing new' because the issue at hand is a sub-concept to something else (as, in our case, to democracy, or right-wing extremism).

I do not share these attempts to downplay the relevance both of the phenomenon of populism and the term. The issue as we are facing it now is relatively new, it is relevant, even powerful, and worthy of academic consideration. But we should accept the observation that we are rather facing populisms, using the plural form (Grzymala-Busse 2017, 54).

While there are plenty of debates and controversies around populism as a concept, a few features that seem to be matters of consent, or at least the core differences are clearly visible.<sup>1</sup>

2 The first issue to be mentioned relates to the *demand side of the populist phenomenon*. There is a lot of thinking and writing about the supply side, i.e., what it is that populists offer, what groups and parties are involved and how they act, and the role of charismatic individuals. But all this is mostly about changing frames for enhancing visibility and support, and as such is not that interesting. The other side, i.e. why are growing numbers of the electorate longing for what the populists offer, is less researched - and, as is argued here, much more relevant.

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<sup>1</sup> For good overviews, see Gidron and Bonikowski 2013, and Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017.

The answer is well known, but not so well documented. The current wave of populism most likely correlates with the increasing uncertainties felt by many people across different types of societies, fueled by various effects of globalization. Uncertainties about the prospects of educational, professional, social, cultural, economic challenges and identities in global times are on the rise. As Roger Cohen puts it, 'Disorientation spreads' (Cohen 2018a).

The monthly survey of the Allensbach Institute in Germany recently produced figures that two thirds of the respondents were under the impression that 'nothing is moving forward, and that no problem is really being solved' (Köcher 2018). Many citizens harbor 'doubts whether political decision-making processes can be accelerated significantly': 38% think that this is not possible, and an additional 17% are sure that it is not - due to 'complexity, divergent interests, and frequent crises' (Köcher 2018).

As for the U.S., especially two books make this point by giving voice to those Americans who voted for Trump and may have had a reason for it, and who probably will vote for him again in two years. Both *The Great Revolt* and *Hillbilly Elegy* provide deeper portraits of people especially from the Midwest, the rustbelt and Appalachia. In these books, they report on, or at least offer a glimpse of their experiences of deterioration – of lost communities, jobs, hopes and values – without glorifying them. These sober and often depressing presentations of mentally displaced (but not insane) people are impressive; they lead to a disturbing question: how is it that these displaced people were unrecognized for so long by elites in general, particularly the liberal ones in the U.S. and also in Europe? There were (and are) societies in growing disarray, and liberals couldn't provide convincing and meaningful answers. They didn't even listen.

Other data corroborate these observations. American society is approaching a situation where whites will no longer constitute a majority of the population. This trend will have 'broad implications for identity and for the country's political and economic life, transforming a mostly white baby boomer society into a multiethnic and racial patchwork' (Tavernise 2018). A parallel indicator, a tragic one, concerns the suicide rate: '(t)he suicide rate for middle-aged women, ages 45 to 64, jumped by 63 percent over the period of the study (the last 30 years, KS), while it rose by 43 percent for men in that age range, the sharpest increase for males of any age. The overall suicide rate rose by 24 percent from 1999 to 2014' (Tavernise 2016). Suicide rates 'rose in all but one state between 1999 and 2016', and suicide has been identified as a 'public health issue'. While suicides were on the rise everywhere, the 'increase was higher for white males than any other race or gender group' (Ellis Nutt 2018). Also, (t)he data analysis provided fresh evidence of suffering among white Americans. Recent research has highlighted the plight of less educated whites, showing surges in deaths from drug overdoses, suicides, liver disease and alcohol poisoning, particularly among those with a high school education or less (Tavernise 2016).

At the same time, 'whites – and, in particular, less educated whites – will still make up the bulk of eligible voters in the country for a while'. They will make up 44% of eligible voters in 2020 (Tavernise 2018).

The demand for national populism is going to stay around, beyond Trump and Brexit, because it is directly correlated with globally emerging uncertainties, and simultaneously with lost images and values, and shattered identities.

3 Small wonder that at least in Western societies, we see a '*rising distrust in democratic institutions*' (Brechenmacher 2018). The degree of this dissatisfaction certainly varies, but in the U.S., Hungary, France, Italy, Spain and Greece, it is higher than 50%. In the UK and Poland, it is in the mid-40th percentile. Trust in political parties in Southern Europe is at an all-time low. The trust in media in EU societies is also very low (except in Finland and Portugal). Many citizens complain about 'partisan polarization and gridlock' (Brechenmacher 2018, 5-16).

Findings from the 2018 'Democracy Perception Index' show that an 'astonishing 64% of citizens living in democracies responded their government 'rarely' or 'never' acts in the interest of the public' (Alliance of Democracies 2018, 2). Other findings are that '(c)itizens in democracies are the most disillusioned', '(c)itizens in democracies don't feel their voice matters', etc. (Alliance of Democracies 2018, 2).

It would be a surprise if populists didn't exploit such a ripe situation of disillusionment. The traditional parties in many countries have turned from being part of the solution to emerging problems to being part of the problem – at least in the eyes of a growing number of citizens. Especially socialist and social democratic parties are threatened by extinction in many European societies.

4 Another relevant and partly overlooked issue is the *global dimension of populism*. There is surely a lot of interest in the relationship between democracy – by definition state-centered and mostly a domestic phenomenon – and populism. Questions arise about whether populism is compatible with democracy, and whether a de-legitimization of the established democratic parties in Western countries may have assisted the rise of populism. These questions are often linked with debates on an alleged representation crisis (Mastropaolo 2017, 61 ff.).

In comparison, there is relatively little debate on populism as a reaction to trends in the international, or, rather, global context. This dimension deserves much more attention and will be addressed below.

It is clear, however, that globally induced economic, political and social as well as cultural opportunities and constraints are often too multifaceted to be comprehended in detail by many citizens. Many issues and events are too complex to be grasped easily: examples include the end of the East-West conflict (1989-91), the attack on the New York Twin Towers (2001), the financial crisis (2007-09), and the Chernobyl and Fukushima accidents (1986/2011). *This complexity produces uncertainties.*

Many issues on the agenda of governments, cities, corporations and NGOs cannot be understood quickly: climate change; high-frequency trading; different types of migration; the role of algorithms in social networks; the effects of sanctions; WTO rules for trading; the parameters of the conflict in the South-China Sea; the intricacies of the eternal troubles between Israel and Palestine in the Near East; the background of failing states in the MENA area; the motivation of elites in Scotland, Catalonia, the Kurdish parts of Iraq, Syria and Turkey, and many others, to 'go it alone'; the attractiveness of weapons of mass destruction; the role of media in politics today; the interrelations among demographics, social security and education; and so on. The simultaneous pressure of these and other challenges is difficult to sort out for specialists, let alone for ordinary, or not so well educated citizens.

The lack of understanding of these issues, together with the ruptures and disjunctures resulting from accelerated globalization, produce uncertainties and irritations that constitute the demand side of populism.

The more these challenges accumulate, and the higher the level of perceived uncertainties, the easier it is for populists to 'sell' their panacea solutions and their false promises.

5 While populism is a global phenomenon, the *'illiberal backlash' is an all-European phenomenon*. As in almost all other parts of the world, democracy has been in retreat since 2007. Still, Europe was and is not a 'developing' or 'emerging' area; rather it is considered to have been the birthplace democracy some 2500 years ago. Admittedly, in the 20th century it was also the location of some of the biggest atrocities in the history of humankind. A recent Carnegie study found that 'Democracy in Europe is in decline... When weighted by population, the trend is much more apparent. ... the level of democracy in Europe has fallen back forty years, to where it was in 1978' (Lindberg 2018, 4). After 2012, all five parameters – the indices of liberal democracy, judicial constraints, electoral democracy, legislative constraints, and rule of law – are going down. (Lindberg 2018, 4).

*But in this context, the backsliding is still more visible in Eastern Europe* – whatever this means today.<sup>2</sup> One piece of a possible explanation is that the citizens of EEC countries

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<sup>2</sup> Let's pragmatically assume that this refers to the former Soviet Union minus Russia and Central Asia, and East Central Europe as defined during the Cold War.

had the impression that their governments were more 'rule-takers, than rule-makers' in the EU (Tilford 2018).

Another factor is that the former 'partners', 'satellites' or otherwise designated former Soviet republics hardly had time to realize that they had finally gained formal sovereignty in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when they were swallowed by the effects of an all-encompassing, powerful wave of accelerated globalization. This was one reason (and a good one) for taking refuge in the EU. But it also meant that the 'maturing' phase of the East Central European countries, once they gained formal sovereignty (only) after the demise of the USSR in 1991, didn't last very long. Soon after, the attractiveness of the EU (financial, political or institutional) led in a couple of cases to early adoption of parts of the 'Acquis Communautaire', and not much later, to membership. Ever since, sovereignty has been constrained once more – this time by voluntarily transferring it upward to the EU. However, for many citizens, the differences in their relation to an overriding authority (first that of the Soviet Union and later that of the EU) may be perceived as a matter of degree, and not of substance.

The nostalgic longing for sovereignty, composed by compiling historical fragments, ethnic 'we-ness', real and constructed otherness, opens the doors wide for populist story telling: 'You deserve better'. And 'you can get something better'.

6 A related contextual factor is that the *strength of traditional signifiers of other collective identities is eroding*. The relative downgrading of nation state status and of social class relevance opens spaces for alternative identity markers. There are useful ones, with analytical potential, like scapes (Appadurai 1996), or problematic and rather confusing ones, like Volk (not to be confused with nation).

This erosion of the classical collective identity concepts means that people who are irritated and angry about (real or imagined) ruptures and disjunctions and challenged identities, perceived unjust distribution patterns, or threatened entitlements, are searching for new collective denominations that allow them to develop group feelings. These groups of angry disenfranchised people – with injured identities, sensing social decline and feeling abandoned by the traditional elites and political stakeholders - need to share their rage and to channel their confusion. These people are open to the allures of populist recipes and promises. And this is a mostly cultural process, though often also fueled by economic trends.

The less convincing the old identity markers become, the more spaces open up for recalibrating collective identities toward identity politics, which is exploited in turn by populists.

7 For sure, *economic conditions and experiences are important drivers on the demand side of populism*. The global division of labor, differences in wages and knowledge, the emergence of global chains of production, distribution, logistics and consumption have consequences especially for the workers in the old established industrial societies. Where this has not been anticipated in a timely way and accompanied by programs of re-training and programs of innovative diversification (as in parts of the German Ruhrgebiet and in areas of Detroit), people are sinking into despair, with many turning to opioids, or scrambling desperately to keep their dignity by redefining themselves as some special tribe. This is especially the case when they are, or feel, lectured to by media and told that their traditional habits and values are useless, illiterate, incorrect and out of sync. These facts matter, as much as do perceptions of decline and loss which arguably are even more powerful.

At this point, there is a fusion of economic malaise and cultural insistence, and it turns out that *identity issues are at least as relevant* as economic ones. This is what the Brexiteers, the Trump campaigners, the Putinistas and the AfD activists have correctly recognized. They just had to feed the hunger for a clear and dignified sense of belonging. While possible economic downgrading may trigger rage and fear, its conversion into cultural challenges produces anger and resistance. At the end of the day, economic grievances can, or could be solved or alleviated by redistributing funds; culturally founded emotions cannot.

A recent study by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, considering sets of data for both economic insecurity and cultural backlashes, concludes that '(l)ess educated and older citizens, especially white men, who were once the privileged majority culture in Western societies, resent being told that traditional values are 'politically incorrect' (Inglehart, Norris 2016, 29) if they have come to feel that they are being marginalized within their own countries'. Their evidence, they continue, shows that 'the rise of populist parties reflects, above all, a reaction against a wide range of rapid cultural changes that seem to be eroding the basic values and customs of Western societies' (Inglehart, Norris 2016, 30).

'Overall', they conclude, there is 'consistent evidence supporting the cultural backlash thesis' (Inglehart, Norris 2016, 1). Identity politics is the crucial component of the populist renaissance, contributing more to the renaissance of populism than economic and social changes (though these also contribute, to be sure).

In a nutshell, identity politics is a concept for 'political mobilization not through a party, an ideology or economic interests, but through markers of one's own identity like skin color, sex/gender or sexuality' (Oehmke 2018, 20 (my translation)). While this concept usually is reserved for nonwhite and LGBT minorities, it very well may be applied to white workers as well. 'Black lives matter', of course. But this quickly may lead to the conclusion that 'White lives matter, too'. Both are 'right', of course; but also, both are pointless, when shouted against each other.

It turns out to be a major *mistake to assume that identity politics and tribalism can appear only in non-white societies*, or groups. In his famous New York Times article in November of 2017, Mark Lilla outlines his idea that the Democrats, by turning away from their traditional electorate, the white working class, and rather supporting entitlements for minorities – African Americans, immigrants, LGBT groups, the small number of females on corporate boards - in the end didn't collect enough support among these minorities and lost the votes of the white workers as well (Lilla 2017). This partial 'betrayal' may also be diagnosed for European Social Democrats. With a few exceptions, they find themselves caught in voting ranges under 20% or even in one-digit traps.

As a result, tribalism 'returns now as identity politics, which is the reactionary reversion to the premodern world' (Brooks 2018). From populists' perspective, their activities are a 'form of identity politics because it's based on in-group/out-group distinctions' (Brooks 2018) which brings us back to the romantic notion of the people 'that automatically ostracizes everybody who belongs to a nation but harbors different ideas about its values and rules than populist scripts are telling us' (Brooks 2018).

The more the established patterns of cultural identities are weakened or challenged, the better the prospect for populist movements.

8 The core (but delusional) promise by populists of all sorts is to *offer simplified answers to complex challenges and problems*.

Typical rhetorical assertions employed by populist figures are: there is a growing gap between the 'elites' and the 'real' people; the 'mainstream media' are lying; and they, the representatives of populist parties and movements (often with an elite background) are representing the 'real people'.

As Grzymala-Busse (2017) and others have outlined, there are a couple with problems with this 'loose talking about the people': Mostly, this remains an abstract category, without clearly defining who this assumed entity incorporates; secondly, 'those who disagree with a populist representation of 'the people' are obviously not the 'real' nation; and thirdly, populists assume a popular rule to be 'unmediated and direct'; more often than not, populists have an 'anti-institutional predisposition' (Grzymala-Busse 2017, 53).

9 But their main argumentation is organized around the *malfunctioning of governments and states*.

Typical substantial issues are transnational trade ('killing jobs'), unregulated immigration ('killing jobs', and modifying the composition of a Volk), and (in Europe) the erosion of national sovereignty by the EU ('taking away national independence') (Grzymala-Busse 2017, 55). All these issues are linked with the blurring of borders, or the transfer of

sovereignty upwards (mostly voluntary to the EU and UN and WTO), downwards (global cities, NGOs), or sideward (markets) (Pierre, Peters 2000, 77).

The solution seems to be easy: National borders must be strengthened, international organizations weakened, and multilateralism destroyed, and everything will be fine.<sup>3</sup> While the role and performance of nation states is decreasing on a broad scale and across continents due to the power of global flows moving across borders, populists are singing the romantic song of the advantages of state sovereignty, and they promise to make good use of it. They flatly deny that the traditional model of Westphalian nation states is in crisis (and along with it, also the welfare state). And they do whatever they can to belittle, criticize, weaken, and damage the liberal international order (Luce 2018).

This corresponds with many peoples' irritation about the existing legitimacy of their governments – people go and vote on a national scale, while many challenges are emerging from transnational or global sources. Naturally, many of these governments are underperforming. The nation state cannot deliver on many counts, thus causing disappointment. This disappointment is redirected by populists against the traditional elites and individuals, disguising the fact that the core problem is a structural one, not one associated with specific elite groups or persons. The more problematic the performance of classical nation states becomes, the more successful populists' rhetoric will be.

10 Populism is *directly attacking liberalism both on a national and global scale*. Domestically, populist actors increase the pressure on 'the elites' by calling for more referenda, and they emotionalize people before elections. To the extent that this is effective, even core pillars of liberal democratic politics and institutions can be voted down, for example, the independence of the judiciary in Poland and of the media in Hungary; the lack of civility and respect on the part of the current U.S. administration for other, especially minority, opinions.

This has already happened with the referenda on the draft EU constitution in 2005 in France and the Netherlands; in the Brexit case, in 2016; by emotionalizing the American presidential elections (aided by the use of micro census data based on social networks) in 2016; in the referendum in the Netherlands on the economic association of Ukraine with the EU, also in 2016; and to some extent also with the emergence of Beppe Grillo's Five Star movement and of the Lega Nord in Italy, where in the spring of 2018 half of the country voted populist. Syriza, Podemos, AfD are phenomena along the same lines, and they also have a liking for referenda (Syriza got one, in 2015, against a new round of austerity politics, won it and ignored the outcome). Populists can win referenda and elections, and they may threaten

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<sup>3</sup> This also may occur by the seceding of territories from former states, as in the case of Spain/Catalonia, or possibly in Belgium.

democracy. Proponents of liberal democratic values may lose and find themselves on the defensive. And, so far, there is no response to this prospect – except improving the work of the media and educational organizations.

11 One of the most interesting aspects of the current ‘domestic’ and global developments is the *applicability of Robert Putnam’s ‘Two Level Games’ to the recent rise of populism.*

Putnam’s idea is basically that most international agreements achieved by diplomats representing nation states (sitting around table one) become valid only after some kind of domestic ratification, formally or informally (table two). The number of all possible agreements on table one that may be ratified on table two – he calls a win-set (each country has its own, and it may vary, i.e. grow or shrink).

A country with a strong or growing veto player like a populist movement or party that positions itself against an international topic hereby decreases the win-set for this issue, making it less likely that a ratification at table two can be found, thereby deranging the whole deal.

By putting additional pressure on national governments (as well as on the EU), populists are actually reducing the win-sets their governments may have in international negotiations, thereby weakening the standing of these governments and countries even more (two-level game effects) (Putnam 1988). The focus on sovereignty and national borders works as an advantage for populists: They simply ignore the weakening of states, while actually contributing to it.

Examples are Hungary’s intransigence in refusing to accept the EU quotas for refugees (under the domestic pressure of Jobbik); the last-minute delay of the EU-Canada trade agreement CETA, due to opposition from the regional parliament in Wallonia, Belgium (though in the end, the agreement was signed); the insistence if Brexiteers on reclaiming sovereignty from Brussels, President Trump’s furor directed at global and international treaties, displayed in order to please his electorate; the German government’s hesitance to accept a mutualization of EU bonds; the new Italian government’s resistance to accept boats with asylum seekers (to name just a few).

This mechanism – the impact of domestic stakeholders on a government’s external behavior – may work independently of what kind of government is in power, and even be relevant for populist regimes.

12 The expectation (or hope) that populists emerging from their movement phase and evolving into governing forces will delegitimize and disavow themselves is unfounded. They cannot easily be unmasked. More often than not, they tend to keep election promises

and to disregard institutional safeguards against rule violations. This pertains to both formal and informal rules (Peters 2017; Grzymala-Busse 2017, 56; FES 2017).

Obviously, '(t)his tribal mentality (see above, KS) is tearing the civic fabric and creates a war of what Goldberg thinks of as "ecstatic schadenfreude" – the exaltation people feel when tribal foes are brought down' (Brooks 2018). This is pretty much the opposite of a civil society and the institutional foundations of liberal (or, for that matter, all democratic) societies.

The long-range effects of this type of tribal populism, in Europe and beyond, are hard to predict, and difficult to overestimate. A review article by the Economist at the beginning of this year came to the conclusion that 'the populist tide will continue to rise'. Joist van Spanje, from the University of Amsterdam, who analyzed 296 post-1945 European elections, has found 'that, in general, welcoming formerly ostracized parties into the mainstream tends not to reduce their support' (Economist 2018, 18).

One of the sharpest critics of the current political developments under the influence of populists, Roger Cohen, saw a relation to politics that considered themselves as "without alternative" – like Angela Merkel in 2015: 'The resurgent nationalists and nativists insist there are alternatives – alternatives to openness, to mass migration, to free trade, to secularism, to Europe's ever closer union, to the legalization of same-sex marriage, to gender as a spectrum, to diversity, to human rights (Cohen 2018).

13 Behind this uncertain state of affairs, which still leaves open the option of a later return to a liberal order, waits another, even more disturbing question: namely *whether 'our liberal vision sufficiently account(s) for people's fears and passions, collective bonds and traditions, trust, love, and bigotries'* (Zielonka 2018, quoted from Wolf 2018). Zielonka also muses on whether the 'institutional pillars of political representation have crumbled: politics have become oligarchic; and the media mere purveyors of entertainment'. In addition, 'national democracies cannot control a transnational market economy', leading to the question of '(h)ow the democratic ideal [is] to be made real in the contemporary world?' (Wolf 2018). Lilla adds some major social changes to the challenges a liberal social order has to take into account: 'We are no longer those we once were. Couples get divorced, kids are single kids, half of our existence is happening in the Internet, and we, as a community, have been fragmented' (Oehmke 2018, 23 (my translation)).

Leaving aside for a moment the worrisome aspect of reversibility of populist gains (not only in electoral votes, but also through institutional changes), an emerging hegemony of populists (also in the Gramscian sense) in the European landscapes would have significant effects: 'One might expect more authoritarian law-and-order policies, burqa bans, greater opposition to multilateral bodies like EU, NATO and the WTO, and greater sympathy for Russia... Expect too, frequent referendums, less well integrated immigrants, more polarized

political debates and more demagogic leaders emoting directly to and on behalf of their devoted voters' (Economist 2018, 19).

14 Recent trends in the programs of national populist movements and parties indicate that *leading populists are very well aware of growing social cleavages*, once more due to national effects of globalization, and accelerated by processes like automatization and artificial intelligence. There will be more disruptions in labor markets, for example. So it is remarkable that parties which were (wrongly) labeled as 'rightist' come up with quite 'leftist' social remedies in their programs (Hank 2018). This is not only the case with the German AfD, but also in the new Italian governing coalition between the ('rightist') Lega, and the ('leftist') Five Star movement (Piller 2018) (as well as in the Greek case between the 'leftist' Syriza and the far-'rightist' 'Independent Greeks'). Populists are very well able to selectively compile social, economic and cultural themes from traditional parties, for which this often is a 'kiss of death' (especially for the socialist European parties).

15 An important side effect of this is that there is *no primary difference between (traditionally) left and right populism*. Both camps are very much in favor of strengthening borders. Both harbor illusions about the strength of nation states today. Both have problems analyzing the effects of globalization properly. Both have an ideal-type vision of a nation state, meandering somehow between Karl Marx and Carl Schmidt. Globalization and global flows make states smaller and more competitive with each other. In Europe, sovereignty has been transferred voluntarily to the EU bodies so that the EU is quite well positioned to cope with global effects.

Also, in current political debates, 'right' and 'left' parties tend to overlap in their analysis and their recipes. At least those parts of the traditional left that cater more to their (literally) old voters tend to be as critical about immigration and trade as the populist right (Rooduijn, Akkerman 2017). Voters' movements between them confirm that these notions are shared.

So populists offer political recipes that converge toward traditional left and right positions. This is the reason why the classic extreme parties keep attacking each other, and hate the populist groupings.

16 A (not irrelevant) postscript is devoted to the *style that populists use in their communication*. With rare exceptions, incivility, rudeness and lies carry the day, combined with hollow promises (Peters 2017). For a graphic selection of examples, see the paradigmatic comment by Roger Cohen, 'Moral Rot threatens America' where, among other

observations he juxtaposes Donald Trump and John McCain, concluding that '(a) universe where morality ceases is the one in which Trump is most comfortable' (Cohen 2018b).

Experts, politicians and the media – none of us have short and convincing answers to the populist allures. We are unaccustomed to responding in kind, and, as a result, appear weak in public debates. In addition, social networks are amplifiers for populism.

These style-related considerations are relevant as well.

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