

Opinion **Populism**

The bright side of Anglo-American populism

Its belligerence and jingoism led it to the right position on Ukraine

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Volodymyr Zelenskyy greets Boris Johnson in Kyiv in April. The UK prime minister, according to some reports, is better liked in Ukraine than at home © PA

Janan Ganesh YESTERDAY

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Some Englishmen, Daniel Defoe is supposed to have said, would “fight to the death against popery, without knowing whether popery was a man or a horse”. The author of *Robinson Crusoe* was on to something about nativists: their indiscriminate and almost cheerful belligerence. The precise identity of the adversary matters less to them than the opportunity to show strength.

The chief political surprise of 2022 starts to make sense in the light of that centuries-old epigram. To go by form, the populists of Anglo-America should have equivocated over the war in Ukraine, if not sided with the aggressor. Britain’s Conservatives had taken [Russian donations](#) and ennobled an oligarch’s son. The US Republicans’ own dealings with Moscow led to the first impeachment of Donald Trump. For some, the eastward orientation was philosophical, not just transactional, with Russia hailed as a fortress against wokery.

What happened instead has passed with too grudging a salute from those of us in the liberal centre. For his quick and lavish support, British prime minister Boris Johnson is better liked in Ukraine than at home. Republicans have scolded President Joe Biden for not raising sanctions on Russia earlier. Neither the Tories nor the GOP is

walking on eggshells around Vladimir Putin's *amour-propre* or warning against the "humiliation" of a major power.

Whatever your view of its wisdom, this policy has so confounded the narrative of recent years as to need explaining. Embarrassment can only be part of the answer. Yes, having flirted with Russia, the British and American right had to renounce it as invasion approached, or live with an eternal reputational stain. But then so did French president Emmanuel Macron. He had called Russia "[fully European](#)" as late as 2019. He envisaged a place for it in the continent's security architecture. None of this has shamed or abashed him into a Johnsonian line on the war.

It also helped that Ukraine bucked outside expectations of its rapid defeat. Had the war gone worse, earlier, populists might have urged an invidious settlement with Russia, with "Told you so" on their lips. The dates don't quite fit, though. Some Republicans were urging harsher measures against Russia well before the invasion even began.

And so we go back to Defoe on the idea of all-purpose enthusiasm for a fight: on the prideful horror of ever taking a backward step. It is a coarse and dangerous feature of populism. But there are times when it fits the circumstances better than a more considered approach, such as the clever-clever rationalisations of *realpolitik*, which might have left Ukraine [high and dry](#) for the sake of a shortlived "stability". It is precisely the crudity of populism that has come in useful.

No doubt, Russia did succeed in gaining intellectual and financial sway over parts of the Anglo-American right in the last decade. But, by invading Ukraine, it also succeeded in forcing Tories and Republicans into a choice between pushing back or seeming weak. It triggered their national egoism, their dread of losing face in front of foreigners, even their machismo. Next to such primal urges, a cash trail and some long-distance admiration of a half-understood Russia was never going to be enough to keep the relationship going. The wonder is that the populist in the Kremlin could not anticipate this about the populists in London and Washington. Everyone believes their own national vanity is unique.

Don't assume the right's stand against Russia will endure. Young and ambitious Josh Hawley is among the Republican senators to oppose the "[astronomical](#)" aid to Ukraine. Trump himself wonders about its wisdom while Americans are paying high gas and retail prices.

Still, it is hopeless to deny that the showing so far has defied all expectations. Liberals

are left with an awkward thought: populism has its uses. Their own creed can be tough and vigilant, as Biden has shown since February. But it can also hedge, over-analyse and treat conflict as some kind of aberration, as a few other western leaders have of late. There is something to be said at times for a more primitive approach.

“Moral clarity”, it was called, around the time of the Iraq war, but the populist is less animated by right and wrong than weak and strong. On both the British and American right, it is bound up with a simplistic interpretation of the second world war as proof that anything other than confrontation is “appeasement”, and that it never works. It is nonsense, but occasionally useful nonsense.

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