

Populism, Nationalism and Foreign Policy in Postcommunist Europe

This paper conceptualizes *populist foreign policy*, outlining its principal characteristics and distinguishing it from its closest cousin, *nationalist foreign policy*. I claim that when national cleavages are ascendant, political leaders mobilize upon nationalist concerns such as state borders or immigration. By contrast, when ideological cleavages are ascendant, political leaders mobilize around ideological cleavages. The mobilizational logics have distinctive foreign policy effects—while nationalist mobilization more destabilizing for the immediate region, populist mobilization is likely to destabilize external relations further afield. Finally, *ethnopolitist* mobilization—combining both logics—yield foreign policies that tend to destabilize external relations in both the near- and far-abroad.

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Erin K. Jenne
Professor
International Relations Department
Central European University
Nádor u. 9
Budapest 1051
jennee@ceu.edu

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Populist governments have recently emerged in states as diverse as Russia, Hungary, Macedonia, Turkey, Russia, Philippines, Venezuela and Ecuador. Politicians appear to make ever more use of bombastic elite-versus-people rhetoric in the course of policy-making. This should not surprise us given that more than a decade ago, Cas Mudde (2004) warned that we are living in a populist “Zeitgeist” marked by a rise in populist parties and discourse around the world. Although recent work suggests that voters are no more populist in their orientation today than they were over ten years ago,¹ in the political sphere populist discourse has moved from the margins to the mainstream. It therefore bears investigating whether and how and how populism impacts a state’s external relations. Specifically, I ask whether there is such a thing as *populist foreign policy*, and if so, what are its principal features.

Until fairly recently, populism was mainly the subject of historical investigation; exemplars include the United States People’s Party and populist parties in interwar Europe. The past few decades have given rise to a new generation of populist actors—shaping state policies and institutions around the world. In Latin America, populism has assumed an inclusivist, civic nationalist form, as seen in the administrations of the late Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, Evo Morales of Bolivia, Rafael Correa of Ecuador, and Cristina Kirchner of Argentina.² In Europe, meanwhile, populism has mostly taken an exclusivist or ethnonationalist form—what Mudde termed the populist radical right (PPR), exemplified by the Austrian Freedom Party, the United Kingdom Independence Party, the French National Front, the Norwegian Progress Party, the Italian Five Star Movement, the Dutch Freedom Party, and the Danish People’s Party, among others. Right-wing parties and politicians have scored stunning political victories in recent years (Kaltwasser and Taggart 2015; Oesch 2008).³

The twin trends of populism and nationalism have emerged across a number of consolidated democracies. Rupnik (2007) explains this in Europe as an outgrowth of Euroscepticism, as the countries’ membership in EU and NATO emptied mainstream parties of their programmatic content. Populist nationalism (hereafter, *ethnopolitist*) now characterize multiple governments in Eastern Europe, including the Smer (Direction) government in Slovakia, the Fidesz government in Hungary, VMRO-DPMNE in Macedonia, and the Law and Justice party (PiS) government in Poland, the Justice and Development government of Turkey, and the United Russia government of Russia.

How to explain the twinning of nationalism and populism in mainstream political discourse, and what are their combined effects? A small but growing scholarship focuses on illuminating the foundations of populism and how it might be distinguished from nationalism (Gellner and

¹ Larry Bartels, “The Wave of Right-Wing Populist Sentiment is a Myth,” *The Monkey Cage*, Washington Post, June 21, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/06/21/the-wave-of-right-wing-populist-sentiment-is-a-myth/?utm_term=.f8ccdd51e3a7

² Populist governance can be defined by a style of politics by which political leaders mobilize societies around “us and them” ideological cleavages to gain political power against the political opposition. A key feature of populist *foreign policy* is that its logic is oriented primarily to aggrandizing wealth or political power and that it seeks to upend the political status quo both at home and abroad. Because foreign policy is mostly harnessed to achieve domestic political aims, it may thus appear inconsistent, erratic or poorly considered.

³ The early populism literature defined populism as a set of policies that characterized populism in Latin America, the site of the first big wave of populism in mid-twentieth century. In more recent years, researchers have placed greater emphasis on investigating the political *style* common to both right- and left-wing populism. Populist leaders of today share with nineteenth century nation-builders an interest in fashioning a unique nation-state history that supports a given political agenda. Unlike historical nation-builders, however, today’s populist leaders tend to be longer on symbolism than on a long-term development plan. This makes populist foreign policy more haphazard and reactive, and therefore inherently more destabilizing (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013).

Ionescu 1969; De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017; Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2017). Beyond developing taxonomies, this work is almost entirely aimed at illuminating the effects of these phenomena at the *domestic* level. Relatively little attention has been given to whether populism—with or without nationalism—systematically influences foreign policy.

This paper argues that when democratic states undergo crisis, political agents respond by mobilizing society along one or more lines of contested sovereignty. As a rule, sovereignty issues involve borders or citizenship, regime type or both. I argue that *nationalist* governments are more likely to emerge during territorial conflicts when the state face questions of external sovereignty such as who belongs to the nation and/or where the state borders lie. These governments tend to craft foreign policies that reflect the preferences of their national communities. By contrast, *populist* governments are likely to emerge during crises over internal sovereignty, namely how the state should be governed and by whom. Since populists principally aim to represent their political communities, their policies are designed to gain and maintain victories for themselves and their domestic constituents. Populist governments thus likely to “localize” foreign policy decision-making, using international engagement as a tool to win domestic political battles. Finally, *ethnopolitist* governments are a response to both territorial and political crises, generating foreign policies that are *both* highly exclusionary and localized. Their foreign policy orientation is even more driven by narrow constituent interests back home, yielding conflict in the neighborhood as well as further afield.

Conceptualizing Populist Governance

What we know about populist governance is largely based on the experiences of Latin America, where leaders from Chavez to Kirchner have implemented a remarkably similar set of economic policies, including import-substitution industrialization (ISI) and other national preferences. Following the 1980s debt crisis and subsequent decline in ISI, there was a rise of right-wing populist governments with Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Carlos Menem in Argentina, and Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil, who combined populist rhetoric with neo-liberal market reforms (Roberts 2007). This shows that populism need not imply any particular (right-or-left-wing) policies. In view of this, many have abandoned efforts to identify “populist policies,” focusing instead on the stylistic and ideational parallels between right-wing European parties and Latin American populist governments. What makes political actors populist is the distinctive *style or form* or way of doing politics.

Contemporary scholars have put the global rise of populism in politics down to a number of factors, most especially the growing divide between the rich and poor and the growing political visibility and participation of ordinary people, aided by social media and the spread of communications, information, and networking capabilities.⁴ This expanded political space creates incentives for politicians to make more direct appeals to the people, both symbolically and programmatically, giving rise to populist political messaging in societies around the world. At the same time, economic and political background conditions also matter. Income inequalities, debt defaults, or massive economic downturn have provided a fertile ground for the emergence of populist forces (Kriese and Pappas 2015; Roberts 1995, 2007). Meanwhile, Hawkins (2010), Coppedge (2008) and (Silva 2017) observe that government corruption and loss of legitimacy of mainstream parties at the national level tend to fuel populist movements.

⁴ Ibid. Kriese and Pappas 2015; Roberts 1995, 2007). The spread of communications and growing importance of social media have led segments of society to reject mainstream media and political institutions (Mudde 2004; Doyle 2011; Pappas 2006).

The present paper builds on this literature, using mobilizational theory to develop a theory of *populist foreign policy*. What makes populist leaders instantly recognizable is their divisive rhetoric and the way they elevate ordinary politics to the status of existential struggles requiring a strong and defiant leader to solve. A populist leader routinely frames political conflicts in hardline Manichean terms—with the good, moral and just “people” on the leader’s side, while traitors (both internal and external) stand against the people, attempting to destroy what they hold dear.⁵ This mobilizational logic also implies *policy-making* features that transcend left-right divisions. These features can be clearly seen in the near decade-long experience of populist governance in post-communist Europe.

Populists use of “us versus them” ideological frames in a no-holds-barred battle against their domestic political rivals. Their aims may vary, but at bottom they make a fundamental challenge against status quo institutions. Populists may be of a right-wing persuasion (contemporary Macedonia, Turkey, Philippines, Russia and Hungary) or a left-wing bent (contemporary Greece, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia). What both strands have in common is an urgent campaign to reframe the nation as a heroic community under siege by nefarious internal and external forces. Due to the externalities of populist governance on societies as a whole, their influence transcends both the formal and informal powers conferred upon them by their office. Their real power lies in the ways in which they use this “extraordinary times” governance to fundamentally recast the country’s sovereignty, setting a course for its people that can far outlast their time in office, with knock-on effects for the country’s international standing.

According to populists, policy problems are more often than not the work of nefarious ill-defined “elites” (referring variously to organizations, groups, or foreign governments) who exploit the “people” (referring broadly to the citizens of the state) for personal gain. Having framed the problem thusly, populists pledge to wage a battle against enemies of the people to free them from the predations of said elites. Their programmatic positions are very often poorly-specified or contradictory, making populism a uniquely “thin-centered” ideology, as Mudde put it, capable of being grafted onto widely-varying political programs. This is what makes left- and right-wing populism two sides of the same coin—what is distinctively populist is not the policies themselves or the policy program they champion, but a take-no-prisoners style of governance that has ripple effects far beyond what may have been intended.

Once in office, populist leaders spare little time in implementing new policies that transgress a range of internal and/or external policy norms and commitments. Each is justified as part of a broader effort to even the playing field between predatory elites and the people they claim to champion. Rather than merely using nationalist symbols to mobilize the population against perceived foreign or domestic threats, populists seek to “rewrite sovereignty”—away from the rule of law and toward personalistic rule (Abts and Rummens 2007; Urbinati 1998).

Populist versus Nationalist Governance

Is populism just another term for *nationalism*? If not, what are the key differences? Like populist leaders, nationalist leaders *also* seek power and instrumentalize popular sentiments in the service of expansive political aims. Populists and nationalists alike seek to mobilize a

⁵ This follows Hawkins (2010), who puts forward an ideational theory of populism involving Manichean understanding of politics in which the good “people” are preyed upon by “evil elites.”

“people” against internal and external threats. However, nationalist leaders mobilize around ethnic identities in ways that populist leaders sometimes do not. Ernest Gellner famously stated that nationalism is a principle of political legitimacy according to which “ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones...[and] ethnic boundaries within a given state...should not separate the power-holders from the rest” (1983, 1). Nationalist mobilization or “movements” aim to align ethnic with political borders, in an effort to ensure that one’s ethnic group is not subjected to foreign rule.

While nationalists *can* be populists—and in the case of ethnopopulism—these are two separate governance logics that can exist apart. Nationalists mobilize around ethnic cleavages and consistently elevate the interests of a given ethnic group over the interests of other groups—whether inside or outside the state’s borders. Populists, by contrast, are more narrowly focused on power struggles *within* the country, privileging domestic political power over national concerns, sometimes setting national struggles aside to gain a narrow political advantage. These logics are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Nationalist versus Populist Governance

	Nationalist Mobilization	Populist Mobilization
Identity Appeals	Ethnic identity	Political identity
Goals	Promote interests of ethnic or national group	Promote interests of state or political constituencies
Who is the “we”	All those with membership in the nation	All those aligned to the political leader
Constituencies	Ethnically defined	Politically defined

Unlike pure nationalists, populist leaders routinely circumvent institutional constraints by asserting that their legitimacy derives not from the system, but from their popularity, referencing the numbers of people participating in pro-government rallies as well as their generally positive showing in national elections. In this way, populist leaders claim an inside track on the wishes of the people, obviating the need for media freedoms, transparency, and other democratic institutions (Canovan 1999). What is important is not their institutional mandate, but their self-proclaimed popularity. Arguing that existing state institutions are prone to capture by moneyed interests over the interests of ordinary citizens, populist leaders make the case for extraordinary measures that go beyond the bounds of liberal democracy in order to create a “true” or legitimate democracy (Levitsky and Loxton 2013).

Populist governments engage in take-no-prisoners policies, casting themselves as champions of the people who stand stoically against an array of domestic and international enemies of the people. Today’s populist governments have proven fond of invoking powerful *external* threats to the people, such as specific foreign governments, international organizations or multi-national corporations. At the same time, they cast internal groups, the political establishment and political opponents as *internal* enemies who serve as agents of foreign influence. Previous governments are typically denigrated for their inattention to the ways in which outside interests prevailed over the nation’s sovereignty. Throughout, parallels are drawn with past experiences

of colonialism or national humiliation, and to the complicity of former governments in collaborating in their foreign subjugation.

Populists and nationalists are both prone to appropriate national heroes in their efforts to rewrite sovereignty. In doing so, both nationalist and populist leaders routinely appeal to storied revolutionary leaders who are widely regarded as the “fathers” or founders of the nation or to those who presided over the nation during its heyday, suggesting a direct line from the vaunted historical visionary to the populist leader in question. Russian President Vladimir Putin has deliberately cast himself as “father of the people,” in multiple small ways hearkening back to the Russian tsars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski has played on parallels between himself and Alexander the Great, and the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez styled himself as the latest incarnation of anti-colonial Latin American revolutionary, Simón Bolívar. In general, however, nationalists make a greater attempt to play up myths that *unify* the nation, as compared to populists, who are more prone to utilizing those national myths that divide the nation, to be used in the prosecution of domestic political struggles.

Ethnopolitist regimes combine both logics. Such regimes are ethnic in that they utilize highly ethnicized set of national appeals to the dominant ethnic group control over territory or people that “belong” to the mother- or fatherland. Typically, nationalist governments emerge in newly-independent countries where the government in question is focused on establishing sovereignty rights *as well as* relations with adjacent national groups. The government may also be populist if the regime mobilizes around political cleavages *in addition to* nationalist cleavages in a struggle for political dominance at the domestic level. Vladimir Putin’s Russia fits this model, as does Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey and Slobodan Milošević’s Yugoslavia. In each case, the country underwent both internal and external sovereignty crises, incentivizing political elites to mobilize around *both* ideological and ethnic cleavages as they intervened into neighboring countries to defend their “national interests,” while at the same time challenging international obligations. These policies generated considerable instability in the region and beyond.

In ethnopolitist regimes, ethnic minorities are particularly likely to be cast as internal enemies. Territorially concentrated minorities with outside homeland states (long marginalized and distrusted) routinely figure as fifth columns in ethnopolitist narratives. Meanwhile, groups that occupy a crucial economic or political niche may also be styled as an internal threat. Historical examples include Jewish minorities in Tsarist Russia, who were targeted by local mobs (sometimes with the backing of governments) due to their presumed control of financial and other economic institutions. Contemporary examples include Chinese or Indian minorities throughout Southeast Asia, who are seen as undeserving recipients of economic successes. Jewish minorities and immigrants have traditionally figured as internal threats in the populist discourse in Europe and the United States.

Table 2. Populist versus Nationalist Governments in Central and Eastern Europe

Populist Governments	Ethnopolitist Governments	Nationalist Government
Hungary (2010-2014)	Yugoslavia (1989-1999)	Macedonia (1992-2001)

Serbia (2015-present)
Poland (2015-present)

Russia (2000-present)
Macedonia (2008-2016)
Hungary (2015-present)

Serbia (2000-2015)
Hungary (1990-1993)
Hungary (1998-2002)

Implications for Foreign Policy

This section asks whether there is such a thing as populist foreign policy, and if so, what are its components. I argue that populist leaders are inordinately focused on power struggles at the domestic level so that even on the international stage, their policies are calculated to help them win domestic struggles. Populists are foremost motivated to play to their domestic audiences—and specifically, their constituencies—to achieve ambitious political goals or consolidate power. International relations theorists use the term “gambling for resurrection,” to refer to the actions undertaken by embattled elites—often at the international level—to regain popular support in the face of regime challenges (Weingast and de de Figueredo 1999; Downs and Rock 1994).

Populists use policies—both at the national and international level—to engage in winner-take-all struggles back home. Populists thus craft foreign policy primarily to optimize their position of power. This can even lead to unintentional foreign policy, as an accidental by-product of waging these struggles. This inverts the neo-classical realist model of foreign policy-making. Rather than choosing foreign policy by first optimizing “national” interests given geopolitical opportunities and constraints and then factoring in domestic political, institutional and psychological factors that have an intervening impact on foreign policy,⁶ Populist foreign policy begins and ends with political fights at home. In fact, one of the distinctive hallmarks of populist governance is that diplomacy, statecraft and other long-term policy goals are likely to take a backseat to the all-consuming focus of vanquishing domestic political opponents.⁷

None of this implies that populists do not concern themselves with statecraft. Rather, they engage in the *kind* of statecraft that will be most likely to gain popular approval back home. This means elevating the geopolitical status of the country, particularly if they can thereby extract windfalls for their people. Populist leaders do not make reliable status quo oriented leaders on the world stage. They are challengers rather than respecters of the status quo, and are likely to revisit all major commitments to discern whether there are immediate benefits to the country (and therefore to their popularity) for cleaving to that path or choosing a new one. In the absence of such discernible benefits, they are likely to abandon such policies.

The logic of this argument draws significantly on the work of Saideman (1998, 2001). In his domestic competition model of ethnic foreign policy, Saideman argues that governments engage in ethnic interventions when the regime depends for its survival on the support of those groups that have ties with the kin in question, and when the government is facing intense political competition. To illustrate, Slobodan Milošević relied for support of Serbian nationalists at home, who had ethnic ties with Serbs in Kosovo. In an effort to retain their nationalist base in the late 1980s and 1990s Serbia, Belgrade engaged in interventionist foreign policy aimed to assist co-ethnic Serbs in Kosovo as a means of winning the nationalist vote.

⁶ See Lobell, Ripsman and Taliaferro (2009) for an overview of neo-classical realist theories of foreign policy.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24. Reinhard Heinisch (2010) argues that in fact populist parties are ill-equipped for governance, and fare better in the opposition.

Saideman's insight that irredentist policies are basically driven by domestic political competition extends also to populist foreign policy. During political crises, political agents emerge who attempt to "rewrite" internal sovereignty in favor of the "losers" of the political establishment—groups that are culturally or economically dissatisfied with establishment institutions and policies. For instance, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's political base is disproportionately rural and religious; Hugo Chavez's base was likewise disproportionately poor and indigenous (Coppedge 2008). Meanwhile, UK voters opting for Brexit and US voters who selected President Donald Trump did so primarily as part of a cultural backlash to progressive change (Inglehart and Norris 2016)

Political agents who attain political power with the support of economically or culturally marginalized groups are likely to craft or talk about foreign policy as a means of grandstanding and demonstrating resistance alliance commitments to far-away powers and other existing international obligations. They are hence likely to harness foreign policy largely in service of this aim, in response to their constituent preferences. This can yield highly transgressive foreign policies that threaten to upend the state's alliance commitments.

This logic leads to a number of empirical implications for foreign policy. Whereas *nationalist* governments should be expected to take their stated national goals more seriously, having campaigned on the protection and elevation of a given nation, they should be less willing to compromise on so-called "indivisible goods" like sacred territories or other assets of symbolic value. By contrast, *populist* governments—while also using nationalist tropes and arguments—are more likely to strike out unpredictably, and often indiscriminately—always on the hunt for politically fortuitous policy positions. Given their crisis mentality and great impulse for the consolidation of power, populists tend to be far more sensitive to political costs and have a notably shorter time horizon than non-populist leaders. This stands in contrast to *traditional* nationalist leaders, who, due to their greater political socialization, usually have longer time horizons and are more likely to hew to established policy positions and honor international commitments. Given their greater risk aversion, purely nationalist leaders are likely to cleave to traditional nationalist positions, restricting their revisionist claims to a narrow (mostly symbolic) bandwidth. They are also less likely to abandon these in the interest of short-term political benefits. This means that outstanding national conflicts with foreign governments are unlikely to be resolved under such governments, who are in turn likely to view them as "indivisible" issues that defy ready settlement (Toft 2003, Hassner 2009); such conflicts may simmer on for years, if not decades. Because populist leaders tend to be less politically socialized than non-populists (including most nationalists), they may sometimes facilitate the resolution of long-standing national conflicts abroad. However, they are also more likely to generate new ones as the result of brazen defiance and alliance shifts internationally.

In short, populist foreign policy is expected to be more unpredictable and risky than (purely) nationalist foreign policy. Populist leaders (always concerned to maintain popular support at home) are also far likelier to engage in two-faced policies or double dealing in international negotiations, as they are consistently walking a tightrope of getting "good deals" for the people (and for their own power base) without paying the costs. Thus, they often make agreements with international partners that are later undermined in domestic political messaging and, more importantly, through considerable foot-dragging by which they demonstrate to their constituents that they will not give an inch to their enemies.

Finally, the hybrid *ethnopolulist* foreign policy combines the transgressive, disruptive and inconsistent elements of populist governance with the ethnic exclusionary elements of nationalist governance. As noted above, the ethnopolulists seek to gain an advantage during times of intense political competition by doubling down on the fears and aspirations of the populist leader's ethnopolitical base (usually the state majority). Ethnopolulist foreign policy instrumentalizes the country's external relations in order to score needed political points at home while vanquishing the domestic political opposition. Ethnopolulist foreign policies combines border/citizenship revisionism with alliance revisionism, increasing the odds that the state in question will assume the status of an international pariah.

Conclusions

This paper has proposed tentative hypotheses about how populist and nationalist leaders mobilize differently and what implications these have for foreign policy. In Central and Eastern Europe, populist or ethnopolulist leaders have gradually taken the place of more traditional nationalist or left-wing governments in Poland, Hungary, Macedonia, Ukraine and Greece. Turkey and Russia might also be added to the list as regional hegemon on Europe's periphery that have also assumed a more populist character.

The preliminary evidence suggests that nationalist and populist governments employ very different mobilizational patterns (ethnic versus ideological), with important implications for the country's foreign policy. Namely, nationalist governments are more likely to foment conflict with their immediate neighbors, whereas populist governments are more likely to create turbulent relations with regional or global hegemon (sometimes abandoning nationalist issues, as in the case of Orbán's post-2010 government). The populist governments of Central and Eastern Europe are on the one hand creating potential for resolving old national conflicts with their neighbors, while on the other hand creating wider instability in Euro-Atlantic organizations such as the EU and NATO, conflicts that may have even more important consequences over the long run.

This paper is mainly aimed at breaking new ground, and as such may raise as many questions as it answers. For instance, an obvious question is why a government might adopt a more nationalist versus populist (or even hybrid) character. One possibility is that newly-independent states or newly-transitioned regimes are more likely to assume a nationalist bent when they are still in the process of consolidating a viable state identity. Such identities often pit the first state against neighboring states, invoking historical grievances, as in the case of post-communist Hungary and its co-ethnics abroad. Macedonia in the 1990s serves as another case of this. In both instances, the nationalist governments acted as rules-respecters, probably due to their conviction that a future in the west would solve their problems.

By contrast, populist or ethnopolulist governance is more a product of political (internal sovereignty) trauma, such as regime change, or the gradual delegitimation of mainstream political actors. For states facing dark periods, the tendency is to gravitate toward strong leaders who seek out scapegoats for their problems and vow to protect the people against predators—both inside and outside the country. It is no accident that Orbán's populist government and Gruevski's populist-nationalist government both emerged during times of considerable national stress and economic hardship.

There are obvious things the international community can do to do a better job of handling populist and/or nationalist governments in European states. For one thing, the EU could

reinvigorate its processes of integration so that countries divided by nationalist governance might begin to perceive the net benefits of keeping a liberal peace. Pickering writes about Macedonia that “unstable neighbours, and a long EU accession process combine to create conditions ripe for instability...”⁸ Indeed, as expected by Vachudova,⁹ stalled accession to the EU and NATO undermined Macedonia’s moderate leaders, who had staked their political careers on Euro-Atlantic integration. There is no question that greater NATO timidity and ambivalent signaling on the part of the EU has given power to the nationalist and populist political elements within all countries of the region, especially those examined here. `Populism and nationalism flourish when the people see no viable alternative to a hard-line exclusionary political posture. Demonstrating that there are alternatives to this is perhaps the best that the international community can do to reign in more dangerous varieties of governance in CEE.

⁸ Pickering 2009.

⁹ Vachudova 2005.

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