

**POPULISM
IN EUROPE:
FROM SYMPTOM
TO ALTERNATIVE?**

Eckart Woertz (coord.)

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Only one third of younger people in liberal democracies such as the US and the Netherlands believe that it is absolutely essential to live in a democracy. Even two thirds of European millennials (those born since the early 1980s) would regard a military takeover as potentially legitimate to varying degrees, if the government was deemed incompetent or failing, according to a study by the political scientists Yascha Mounk and Roberto Stefan Foa. Older age cohorts are more supportive of democratic principles, but their support has been waning over the last decade as well.

INTRODUCTION

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This trend is worrying: Liberal democracies are in a fragile state. Simplistic populist messages of us vs. them with often-xenophobic undertones and attempts to undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions can count on a receptive audience and a transformed (social) media landscape. In some countries such as France and Austria populist parties have moved beyond the fringe and have run as serious contenders in nationwide elections, in Hungary and Poland they actually govern. A considerable part of the European population could imagine living in authoritarian systems. They find some aspects of such governance appealing, such as tight surveillance, compromised individual liberties, and uniform structures of society, and look admiringly for current and historical role models. For some this echoes the 1930s, when fascism in Europe was on the rise and received considerable support from sympathisers even within developed democracies, such as the British Union of Fascist of Oswald Mosley or Charles Lindberg, who played an influential role in the isolationist America First Committee in the USA.

To compare today's populists with yesterday's fascists is a stretch, though. One might argue that it is even slanderous, given their still limited role, more benign attitudes and some legitimate concerns they articulate. Still, the challenges for liberal democracies are real and are at the heart of the analysis in this collaborative volume by researchers from CIDOB and other think tanks and institutions.

In his introductory article Diego Muro gives an overview of theoretical approaches to the murky concept of populism and points to important markers of distinction between left-wing and right-wing populism, which is currently more prevalent and hence the focus of this volume. John Slocum and Jordi Bacaria provide international perspectives by analysing the transnational diffusion of populisms and their impact on multilateral institutions and economic exchange, respectively. In a similar vein Carme Colomina takes a look at how populist parties such as UKIP and the French Front National have used the EU as a funding source and a negative projection canvas for their populist aspirations, while displaying problematic work ethics when it comes to attendance record and legislative work in the European Parliament.

The following three articles by Blanca Garcés, Moussa Bourekba and Eckart Woertz look at the three European countries for which 2017 is an election year. In the Netherlands, Geert Wilders failed to extend his influence in the elections in March and the role of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) will likely remain limited in Germany's federal elections in September; but in France a presidential election victory by Marine Le Pen of the Front National is a distinct possibility. Even if she loses, an indirect influence will linger on. Other parties have adopted populist messages and the sociopolitical climate that abets them will likely persist.

The following two articles by Dominik Owczarek and Botond Feledy turn to two countries in eastern Europe – Poland and Hungary – where populists are already in power. They analyse what ramifications this has had for domestic politics, checks and balances and the legitimacy of institutions. Dragoş Dragoman and Camil Ungureanu discuss Romania's turbulent recent history of populist politics, whose beginning they trace back to the end of communism and regime transformation in 1989. With the election victory of Traian Băsescu's Democrat Party (PD) in 2004 it gained a new quality. A characteristic tension between democratic constitutionalism and populism became apparent.

Nicolás de Pedro discusses the extent to which Russia has acted as a midwife and role model for populist movements in western Europe and points to dangerous precedents. Khali El-Ahmad traces the rise of the right-wing Swedish Democrats to the considerable socioeconomic fault lines that exist in a country that prides itself on its social democratic welfare system. Pol Morillas analyses the role of UKIP in the Brexit referendum and Elena dal Zotto the situation in Italy, where the Five Star Movement (M5S) advances an equally Eurosceptic populism from the left and has recently reached out to Vladimir Putin's Russia.

In sum, right-wing populists have seen an upsurge in electoral success in Western democracies, supported by increased social polarisation after three decades of neoliberalism, entrenched prejudices among some parts of the populace,

the refugee crisis in Europe, fake news and the rumblings in social media echo chambers, and a trend towards populism elsewhere, ranging from Russia to Turkey and the USA.

For a long time right-wing extremism and populism were fringe phenomena of not more than 10% of the electorate. However, in France, Austria, Hungary, Poland and the USA it has moved beyond this threshold and has either taken power or has been given a realistic shot at it. It has moved from symptom to alternative. Even in cases where it has remained far removed from actual power, it has managed to influence the political agenda decisively, as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) showed during the Brexit vote.

Populism as alternative has raised resistance from established parties, the judiciary, the press, grassroots movements, and the general public. The bumbling incompetence and antics of populist leaders and their thinly disguised incoherence have also deflated some of the momentum behind the trend: Vladimir Putin's compulsory flashing of his bare chest and Donald Trump's 140-character stream of consciousness might be populism's worst enemy in the longer run. Those who fear a repetition of the 1930s and the rise of fascism in Europe may take comfort in the famous quote of Karl Marx: "History repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce".

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LET THE PEOPLE RULE! DEFINITIONS AND THEORIES OF POPULISM

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01- 2017

There was a time when European politics was dominated by three traditional party families: the Christian-democrats, the social-democrats and the liberals. The hegemonic position of these party families was first challenged by the “new politics” of the Greens in the 1970s and by the populist radical right, which gained substantial electoral results from the 1980s onwards. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 renewed attention has been given to defining the international wave of populism happening in both eastern and western Europe and to identifying the causes of the populist surge that could effectively change the face of EU politics in the years to come.

The term “populism” has been widely used and applied to different contexts: nineteenth-century Russia and the USA, twentieth-century Latin America, and twenty-first century Europe. The scholarship on populism is remarkably sparse and many scholars have given up on the possibility of using the term in any meaningful manner. For instance, in the European context the term has been used to describe anti-immigration and anti-EU parties like the French National Front (FN), the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), whereas in the Latin American debate populism was frequently employed to allude to the economic mismanagement and clientelistic practices of populist leaders like Juan Domingo Perón (Argentina), Alberto Fujimori (Peru), or Hugo Chávez (Venezuela). The term falls short of encompassing something precise.

Part of the terminological confusion stems from the fact that people and organisations labelled “populists” rarely identify themselves as such. Instead, the term is ascribed by others, most often as a distinctly negative label. The term populism is used pejoratively in the European media to denote such diverse phenomena as a grassroots movement, an irresponsible economic programme, or a demagogic style of politics. Thus, populism joins the ranks of other “loaded” terms in the social sciences that lack a commonly accepted

definition. In fact, the use of populism resembles the use of another value-laden term, “terrorism”, a word with intrinsically negative connotations that is generally applied to one’s opponents, or to those with whom one disagrees and would otherwise prefer to ignore.

For clarity’s sake, this volume has adopted a working definition that captures the core attributes of past and present manifestations of populism:

Populism is a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press, 2007: 23).

Because populism is a thin ideology, it can be adapted for use on the left and the right. This minimalist definition effectively captures the malleability and tendency of populism to attach itself to other “thick” ideologies (liberalism, socialism, etc.), but also the alleged confrontation between the “common people” and the “establishment”, a term that encapsulates traditional parties but also cultural, economic and media elites. In practice, however, the will of the people can also be confronted by external “enemies of the people”. When discussing migration or refugees, for instance, European populists respond with a “common sense” defence of the (native) people against a demonised out-group, namely immigrants. Crime and terrorism would be additional examples of how the populist politics of feelings oppose the elite-led politics of facts.

In the European context, it has been common to argue that populism in the east and the west remains fundamentally different, but the literature on post-communist Europe has demonstrated the increasing convergence of the former east and west. A growing number of right-wing movements now share the same mental map and provide a critique of the crooked establishment and adulation of the common people that make up the nation. For instance, populist movements across Europe have retrenched to a “put us first!” flavour of nationalism plainly visible in their slogans, from Farage’s “we want our country back” to the Austrian Freedom Party’s guiding principle, “Austria first”, but also Trump’s protectionist “America First” approach.

Another distinction worth highlighting is the right-wing or left-wing ideology of populist parties. Although the contemporary usage of the term populism has focused on far-right xenophobic movements, left-wing parties are not immune to populism (e.g. Bernie Sanders in the USA or Syriza in Greece). A noticeable example on the left is provided by the Spanish party Podemos, which does not

shy away from the populist label and champions a particular understanding of “the people”, “the elite” and “the general will”, as originated in the writings of theorists like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. It should not come as a surprise that a malleable ideology like populism is assimilated by a variety of political parties interested in using a divisive rhetoric.

This edited volume has a comparative pan-European perspective with cases from both western and eastern Europe. The cross-national selection of cases reflects the in-house expertise of CIDOB but also the shape of shocks to come for progressive and centrist politicians across the EU. The diffusion of right-wing populism has been made possible by a stagnant economy and a persistent migration crisis but also by the ability of populists to develop “catch-all” strategies capable of attracting wide support. Whether traditional party families will be able to contain the rise of populist parties all over Europe and provide an effective counter-message remains to be seen.

What accounts for the international populist surge?

In the absence of a general theory of populism, the scholarly literature has explained its emergence as the passive consequence of macro-level socioeconomic developments. Read in this way, populism is the straightforward consequence of globalisation and its unwanted effects: outsourcing, relentless automation, lost jobs, and stagnant middle-class incomes. But it is an all-too-common misperception to describe populist voters as mere losers of the process of modernisation with a misguided sense of blame attribution. Explanations citing austerity and income polarisation may account for anger and frustration but they need to be balanced out with the central role of ideology and an analysis of the will of populist leaders to gain power and change social reality. Populist parties are not mere consequences of socioeconomic changes but actively shape their destinies.

Populists’ powerful message is to give ordinary people what they want. Populists claim they want to “let the people rule” and argue that the main obstacle are the “corrupt elites”. Since the great recession, populist movements have been much more critical of the political influence of the wealthy. According to this Manichean view of society, the cosmopolitan elites have championed globalisation but the benefits of economic and technological change have not always trickled down to the unprotected masses. Populists want to be the champions of ordinary men and women deprived of the wellbeing they are entitled to. And the message is being heard by the discontented. Loud and clear.

The populist message resonates partly because it builds on the democratic promise of respecting the will of the people that is so central to European politics.

Whereas too much attention has focused on self-centred opportunists with authoritarian personalities, much less has focused on understanding why the anti-establishment message produces positive feelings. An increasing number of voters are disillusioned with the functioning of free markets and liberal democracy and have legitimate worries, such as inequality, joblessness, immigration, political mistrust, declining income per capita, etc. There is an urgent need to understand the fears, concerns and emotional responses of certain subgroups and accept that populists blurt out the occasional truth. Furthermore, populists aim to be the spokespersons for those left behind by the twenty-first century economy and claim to derive a direct mandate (and legitimacy) from their contact with the sovereign people.

Populism also provides a moral story in which the pure and the corrupt oppose each other. This moralistic conception of politics is highly critical of elites, who are considered morally inferior, and highly generous towards the noble common people. In addition to being anti-elitist, populists are also antipluralist, for they, and only they, can represent the people. Their political competitors are depicted as insiders, timeworn politicians, or members of the shady elite whose time has passed because they lack a direct connection and identification with the authentic people of the "heartland". In addition to this moralising form of antipluralism, populists claim an exclusive right to represent the interests of the people, and idealise the nation, which they define as they deem necessary. The legitimate opposition are not "like them" and are sometimes defined as enemies who cannot discern the will of the "real people". In short, populism is also about representation and who gets to speak for the people.

Finally, the rise of populist parties indicates a restructuring of political conflict in Europe. Populist parties have become serious electoral contenders and are no longer confined to the margins of politics. An increasing number of European voters, disillusioned with mainstream politics, are shifting their allegiance from conservative, socialist and liberal parties to populist options, and anti-establishment politicians are confident their aims and goals have moved from the fringe to the centre. The populist takeover is about parties and non-party organisations but also indicates a much bigger cultural change, as suggested by the rise of anti-expert rhetoric and post-truth politics in the shadow of the great recession.

This publication

In this book, populist right-wing parties in contemporary Europe are the prime unit of analysis. These were chosen because their anti-establishment and nativist reactions suggest a renationalisation of politics which challenges the project

of “ever closer union”. Their potential to undermine the EU and create a new system in which nations work together in a much looser structure should not be underestimated. Populist supporters are not pleased with how the worlds of economics and politics have worked since the end of the Cold War and they want to regain control over their own fate.

The disintegration of the European Union is not in sight but ignoring the signals of populists could prove disastrous. The tide of nationalism is quickly rising and calls for cultural homogeneity and taking back control are proving to be compelling messages. By appealing to nationalist sentiment, populists have gained support across Europe, partly because a systemic crisis is being fuelled externally, namely, by the threat of Salafi jihadism and a relentless influx of migrants and refugees. Renewing the ties that bind European citizens will require a reformulated social compact that deals with existing discontent.



THE TRANSNATIONAL DIFFUSION OF POPULISM

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CIDOB REPORT
01- 2017

How do we account for the re-emergence of populism in one country after another? Can this be explained in terms of shared structural conditions and/or the passive diffusion of ideas across contexts? Or does an adequate explanation require consideration of the role of transnational political entrepreneurs engaged in an ideological “import/export business”?

Analysts are increasingly prone to speaking in terms of a “populist international”. If this notion is to be taken seriously, it implies the existence of a transnational network working overtly or covertly to actively promote the electoral fortunes of populist parties in more than one country.

Until recently, this would have seemed highly implausible. Analytic sensibilities were conditioned by the rise and spread of “thick” ideologies, notably including socialism in its social-democratic and communist variants – the international spread of which was advanced by active organising and propaganda. Populism, by contrast, has been understood as nationalist rather than internationalist, a within-country tactic for mobilising voters against elites in the name of the people. Right-wing populism has indeed been explicitly *anti*-internationalist; left-wing populism less so, to the extent that it draws on socialist-inspired tropes of international solidarity.

Studies of populist “contagion” tend to examine the tendency for populist techniques and messages to spread from one party to another within a single national context. Some analysts still dismiss the notion of cross-national populist contagion – pointing to the weakness, corruption, and/or ideological exhaustion of mainstream political parties as primary and perhaps sufficient explanations for the rise of populism within a given country. But in today’s Euro-Atlantic context it seems implausible to assert that the simultaneity of the Brexit, Trump, Le Pen and Wilders phenomena is pure coincidence. And while the rhetoric of right-wing populism remains anti-internationalist, its tactics increasingly include international elements.

Various common structural factors and shared conjunctures help explain the rise of 21st-century populism. In the realm of political economy, a decades-long trend toward neoliberal financialisation and trade liberalisation has seen real wages stagnate in much of the developed world. As noted in Diego Muro's introductory chapter to this volume, the Great Recession marked a key moment in the further politicisation of these longer-term structural trends. National publics bent on seeing guilty parties "pay the price" for the crisis were angered that scarcely any legal sanctions were imposed on financial executives. Traditional political parties were widely castigated for their corruption, for having fostered the conditions that led to the crisis, and for their complicity in shielding the bankers from serious consequences in its aftermath. These resentments have found expression in populist appeals and movements on both the left and the right. Decades-old party systems are breaking down. Across the European Union, the image of rule-making by unaccountable Brussels bureaucrats adds another layer of targets for populist political resentment.

Recent technological developments also helped lay the groundwork for the emergence and spread of populism. Social media allows messages and messengers to bypass traditional journalistic gatekeepers. It also reinforces sets of mutually isolated, relatively self-contained information "bubbles" marked off by wildly divergent worldviews and mutual suspicions regarding the veracity of information circulating in the bubble of one's political opponents.

The increasing political salience of migrants and refugees has also played a key role. The present era is often characterised as one of surging mass migration, even if the actual statistics tell a much more nuanced story. Immigrants have historically served as an easy target for populist scapegoating, but it took the flow of refugees from Syria, amidst a generalised fear of terrorism, to bring migration to the very top of the political agenda in Europe. Anti-migrant messages sit at the core of nearly all contemporary right-wing populist movements and parties. At the extreme, migrants are portrayed as the vanguard of apocalyptic racial, religious and civilisational struggles. Even though such views may be rejected by the rest of the political spectrum, their influence on the debate has pulled other more centrist parties in the direction of anti-immigrant platforms.

It seems entirely plausible that populism spreads in part through demonstration effects (through political entrepreneurs in one country learning from the success of populist appeals in another). But it also seems increasingly clear that populism is being intentionally exported – or more accurately, that there are attempts by specific actors to boost the electoral fortunes of populist parties in other countries. A case in point is the international expansion of the Breitbart News Network, the "alt-right" media company formerly headed by current White House advisor Steve Bannon. As of early 2017, Breitbart has added French and German services to its existing US and UK websites. This and other media outlets seem intent on reaping

advertising profits and greater exposure through promoting and amplifying their anti-globalist, anti-elite message across borders.

The leaders of Europe's right-wing political parties have strengthened ties among themselves. Members of the European Parliament belonging to far-right parties – including the French Front National, Alternative for Germany and Holland's PVV – have joined together in a new parliamentary group, "Europe of Nations and Freedom" (ENF), through which the leaders of the various parties have pledged support for each other's electoral efforts (notably at the January 2017 ENF conference in Koblenz, Germany).

In terms of the active spread of right-wing populism, no phenomenon stands out more starkly than Russian support for right-wing parties in Europe. President Putin has increasingly portrayed Russia as an anti-liberal, anti-globalist power, an international defender of conservative social values. Russia has provided active support for right-wing populist parties in Europe, including direct financing of France's Front National, and Russia's pro-Putin Rodina Party hosted a March 2015 gathering of right-wing European parties. Russia-origin hackers have actively planted "fake news" in European media, stories that seek to exaggerate the supposed threat from migrants (including accounts of rapes allegedly committed by refugees that never took place at all). These stories, sometimes of very uncertain origin, are then amplified through the efforts of Breitbart and other, less well known but locally influential, alt-right news outlets.

Brexit and the election of Donald Trump were welcomed by European populist leaders (in the case of Trump, euphorically so). These electoral victories of 2016 put wind in the sails of those populist politicians looking to elections in 2017. But those signals work both ways. It is thus perhaps not surprising that an anti-populist backlash is playing a role in European pol

itics. The Brexit-Trump effect itself can just as easily be presented as a cautionary tale as an encouragement to other populist parties. In Austria's second-round presidential election, conducted in early December 2016, the then-recent victory of Trump almost certainly contributed to the defeat of Freedom Party candidate Norbert Hofer. Similarly, the demonstration effect of populist victory clearly contributed to the stagnation of support for Geert Wilders in the run-up to the Dutch election, as well as the consolidation of anti-Le Pen sentiment around centrist presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron in France.

Just as populism is actively promoted across borders, so the coming months and years are likely to witness coordinated cross-national efforts to push back at populism – or at least to counter what Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte calls the "wrong kind of populism".



POPULISM AND ITS IMPACT ON MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS AND ECONOMIC TRADE

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CIDOB REPORT
01- 2017

In the economic field, populism is closely linked to globalisation and the fears it raises among certain groups about potential changes to people's jobs and well-being. In their report *Fear not Values* (2016), Catherine de Vries and Isabell Hoffman point out that: "The lower the level of education, the lower the income, and the older people are the more likely they are to see globalisation as a threat. Moreover, those who feel close to populist parties are mainly motivated by fear of globalisation. This effect is particularly evident when it comes to right wing populist parties, but it is also present for left wing populist parties."

The risks posed to multilateralism by the US right are clear. During his campaign, Donald Trump threatened to leave the World Trade Organization (WTO) and as president he has proposed ignoring the organisation's rules. The threat of revoking the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) also involves possible breaches of WTO rules. Although, ultimately, the US secretary of commerce, Wilbur Ross, has decided to begin NAFTA renegotiation, the difficulty of the talks could force them back to square one. This would put the WTO in a compromising position with regard to the United States, as it would involve the organisation in the resolution of a conflict resulting from non-compliance with rules such as "most-favoured-nation" in the case that higher tariffs are imposed on Mexico than those the US has with third countries.

"Trumpism" is now the most real and recent example of populism on the right wing. The simple electoral slogan "Make America Great Again" concealed a panoply of policies that all eventually lead to unilateralism and, therefore, the calling into question of multilateral organisations. The policies will not only affect treaties already negotiated or in force. They may also distort trade. This may be the case with the legislative proposal for a border adjustment tax advocated by Paul Ryan, Speaker of the US House of Representatives, as it would tax imports and subsidise exports.

The most surprising thing about these cases is that political groups that have normally been characterised by the defence of free trade and support for multilateral institutions, such as the Republicans in the United States and the Conservatives in the United Kingdom, are now – apparently with the same values as before – defending the opposite position.

It may be assumed that right-wing protectionism and attacks on trade agreements are different in terms of their objectives to those of the anti-globalisation movements of the left (Subirats, 2017). But the reality is that in Western countries the latter anticipated what later developed in the populist right wing. The difference lies not in the aims, but in the fact that in Western countries the left has not achieved the power needed to put these policies into practice. Right-wing parties have often been voted for when it appears they will have a better chance of reaching power than the left, and, with promises of jobs and welfare, will end up promoting the same policies. Whichever direction populism comes from, the impact on multilateral institutions ends up being the same.

Thus, when it comes to trade and economic integration, the social movements and ideologies that are opposed to globalisation must be taken into account. All claim globalisation is the source of inequality and the failure to distribute the benefits of trade. This vision, shared by political positions on both right and left, is currently growing strongly. It also strengthens populist positions clamouring for greater “nationalism”, which, in turn, affect integration processes and opening up to trade through trade and investment treaties. Indeed, the right has taken up job protectionism, the expulsion of immigrants and border closure, along with expressions of xenophobia. It adds up to an effective trade protectionism proposal with strong limits on the movement of people. By contrast, the left has limited itself to lifting tariff and regulatory barriers without closing borders – a proposal with little credibility among populist voters. Hence, starting with the crisis, the trend has been marked by the consecutive victories of Brexit and Trump, as their proposals – despite affecting global free trade and European integration itself – are credible for their apparent effectiveness, based on the post-truth fed by populisms of all colours.

The anti-globalisation movements that began in Seattle in 1999 grew by opposing government initiatives on international free-trade, investment and services agreements. They mobilised against the Trade in Services Agreement (TiSA). In the European Union, they have demonstrated against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA). They also managed to secure the rejection of the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) by the European Parliament, which for the first time made use of the new powers to challenge an international agreement granted by the Treaty of Lisbon.

Classic free-trade agreements responded to a specific arena of international trade, as eliminating tariffs was meant to reduce protectionism. These days, production fragmentation has produced global value chains which mean that, even in the short term, protectionism is no longer useful, not to say counterproductive. Thus, bilateral and multilateral agreements on trade, investment and services concentrate on non-tariff barriers and regulatory cooperation in order to achieve common standards. This was the rationale and the justification that prevailed prior to the rise of the populisms, which have focussed their attention on the costs of globalisation on the side of production without considering the benefits on the consumption side.

The attacks on multilateral institutions will not reverse globalisation – a phenomenon that is determined by technological change – but they will halt and limit the structuring of trade and investment by a necessary and democratic global governance. On top of this there is the risk of a collapse of the multilateral system and a backsliding in economic activity and employment. Hope lies in resisting populism, propping up multilateral organisations through democracy (Europe and Latin America) and, paradoxically, autocracy (China).



POPULISM “MADE IN THE EU”

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01- 2017

For some years now, populism has sat at the table with heads of state and government. Fed by EU funding, it has used the European Parliament as a high-profile platform for projecting Eurosceptic rhetoric. European populism would have been unable to reach the heights of representation and influence it currently enjoys without the money and political instruments provided by the European Union it seeks to destroy.

Access to European funds is key to understanding the gestation and rise of the Eurosceptic populist forces. In 2016 alone, the Movement for a Europe of Liberties and Democracy (MELD), led by Marine Le Pen’s Front National, received €1.55 million as part of the annual subsidies granted by the European Parliament to cover up to 85% of expenses related to the European political agenda of EU political parties. Another group in the parliament, the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) – led by the British Eurosceptic party, UKIP – received €1.4 million. Although these contributions may only be spent on expenses connected to their European legislative work, repeated cases of corruption have revealed the fraudulent use of these funds by the members of UKIP. Likewise, Marine Le Pen has recently found herself embroiled in a legal scandal, with the European Anti-Fraud Office demanding she return €339,000 of European funds that, rather than being used to hire assistants in the parliament in Strasbourg, instead went towards funding her party.

Even the summit of populist “patriotic leaders” (Le Pen’s words) held in Koblenz in January 2017 to announce the political assault these xenophobic and Eurosceptic forces hope to mount in various elections throughout the year, was paid for using European funds, EU Parliament sources admit. But, access to funding aside, to what extent have they managed to change the European Parliament’s politics?

For these populist forces, the Strasbourg chamber is more of a television studio than a workplace. In general, most of the MEPs in these groups –

whether in Le Pen's group, Nigel Farage's or independents – have a poor record of parliamentary work and participation in the commissions in which legislative proposals are debated. Nevertheless, their capitalisation on their statements in the chamber – through the minutes on the floor the regulations afford all the parliamentary groups in the debates – has been so successful that they have managed to place their pro/anti-Europe ideological focus at the same level as the traditional right/left axis. The emergence of these populist forces and their electoral growth in the midst of a European economic crisis – and the resulting application of unpopular austerity programmes that widened the geographical divisions between member states – brought the large groups in the chamber (EPP, S&D and ALDE) to an almost uncritical consensus in opposition to the Eurosceptic rhetoric beginning to take a hold from the margins of the political debate. Thus, if for years, the metaphor used to describe the European Parliament was a monster with two heads – one ideological and the other national – this evolution of the populist rhetoric would have brought into being a third based on the anti- and pro-European division.

But though the European Parliament is the highest profile instrument, the real arena of political influence is the Council of the European Union. The European loudspeaker has allowed many of these populist forces to make themselves important players in their respective countries' national politics. Eurosceptic, populist and clearly xenophobic parties currently govern in Hungary and Poland, are part of a coalition government in Finland, and are key players on the French, Dutch and Danish political scenes. It is from this decisive position – supporting governments, influencing political agendas and becoming the real alternatives to power – that populism, and its strategy of opposing European integration, currently manages to make its mark both on national politics and on the threatened European construction. The Eurosceptic party UKIP provides the textbook example of this indirect power: without having ever won a single seat in the Westminster parliament Nigel Farage managed to drag the British Conservatives into calling the referendum on the European Union.

The same European construction has created the necessary conditions to make the EU the recurring scapegoat for the multiple crises tormenting Europe. The states retain essential competences in migration, social security, culture and education policies. But nevertheless Brussels has taken the brunt of citizens' discontent about Europe's lack of response to the arrival of refugees from the war in Syria, the social inequalities produced by strict economic policies (these, at least, were dictated by the EU) and the unease about identity on which the populist forces have built their anti-European rhetoric. National governments' old habit of using the abstract, depersonalised notion of Brussels to avoid taking responsibility for unpopular measures approved in their cabinets has now taken on a new dimension.

The Community method is being put to the test by governments and political parties that take refuge in the discourse of national sovereignty, the rhetoric of "taking back control" and place specific proposals on the table for renationalising competences and the democratic control of decision-taking.

Populism has not restricted itself to «fighting the EU from the inside», as its slogan claims, and it has done so using all the weapons the EU itself has placed within its reach.



“TROUBLE IN PARADISE”: WHAT HAPPENED IN THE NETHERLANDS?

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On the morning of November 2nd 2004, the Netherlands seemed suddenly to have been jolted awake from the dream of multiculturalism. The murder of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a young Dutch man with Moroccan parents caused a great deal of shock. In the following days, a number of attacks were made on mosques, Muslim schools and, to a lesser extent, Catholic and Protestant churches too. Nobody could believe this was happening in the Netherlands. “Trouble in Paradise”, the *Financial Times* called it.

In March 2017, the Netherlands was in the news again. It was feared that Geert Wilders’ Party for Freedom would become the country’s leading political force. Beneath the title “Make the Netherlands ours again” Wilders’ concise programme (11 points, no more) proposed less immigration, less Islam and recovering independence by leaving the European Union. All of this in an idiosyncratic style: patently discriminatory declarations (like wanting fewer Moroccans) and absurdly unconstitutional proposals (such as the promise to prohibit the sale of the Koran and to close mosques), all announced on Twitter and with no greater party structure than Wilders himself as its sole member. So, again, who would believe this could happen in the Netherlands, where the old saying goes that “acting normal is crazy enough”?

Still shaken by Brexit and Trump’s victory and with French elections around the corner, Geert Wilders’ xenophobic message and the fear that his victory would mean populism had arrived in continental Europe made us lose sight of the wider picture. We must remember that the Wilders phenomenon is nothing new. The party of his predecessor Pim Fortuyn received 17% of the vote in 2002. Geert Wilders himself got 16% in 2010, 10% in 2012 (after supporting the first Rutte government) and now 13% in 2017. Even when surveys suggested he would be the candidate to receive most votes, the percentage of that vote was not significantly higher. The real novelty lies in the fragmentation of the

political spectrum: there are more and more parties in parliament and they are increasingly small.

We must also remember that xenophobic and Islamophobic discourse, in particular, are not used by Wilders alone. After the Dutch elections, many breathed a sigh of relief to see the victory of the liberal-conservative, Mark Rutte, and the defeat of the populist Wilders. The European Commission president himself, Jean-Claude Juncker, declared with relief that "The people of the Netherlands voted overwhelmingly for the values Europe stands for: free and tolerant societies". But, as has been pointed out, Rutte's victory came at a price: influenced by the polls, Rutte adopted some of Wilders' populist rhetoric, above all that relating to immigration and Islam. But that is nothing new either. We need look no further than the hardline policies and clearly Islamophobic declarations made by Rita Verdonk, minister of immigration and integration for Rutte's party from 2003 to 2007.

The question we should therefore be asking is not so much what explains the rise of populism in the Netherlands, but how and why a country that boasted about its multicultural policies has in part succumbed to the discourse of fear towards the other. To explain it, some point to the feeling of loss generated by the austerity policies of recent years. Although economic growth has stabilised at around 2% and unemployment is below 6%, the reality is much more complex. The unemployment figure is not real: those working part-time are left out of it, as are those not seeking work and those who have a permanent incapacity pension. The Dutch central bank estimates that if these people were taken into account, the figure would rise to 16%. Job insecurity has also grown: one in five workers has a temporary contract and around 17% are self-employed. Meanwhile, the austerity policies of recent years have led to significant cuts in health, education and programmes to help the disabled, infrastructure and social housing, among others. It is in this context that we must explain the populist argument of "our people first".

But the anti-immigration discourse began early in the 2000s, long before the economic crisis and the austerity policies. At the heart of these debates has always been identity, that is, what it means to be Dutch. The centrality of this issue is connected to profound changes occurring in Dutch society. Until the 1980s, the Catholic and Protestant communities lived in separate worlds, each with its own schools, newspapers and hospitals. In this setting, immigrants were accommodated as culturally distinct social groups in an already divided society ("pillarised" is the Dutch word). Nevertheless, a strong secularisation process transformed the Netherlands into one of the most homogeneous societies in Europe. The defence of liberal values (around issues such as abortion, homosexual marriage and gender equality) became the new core idea of Dutch identity. Those

who did not share it were systematically identified as not Dutch and invited to leave. This does not happen in countries such as France and Spain, where the population is much more divided and, as a result, being for or against abortion, for example, does not make you more or less of a citizen.

Finally, the political component must not be forgotten. Throughout the 1990s, the language of the politically correct prevented a certain discomfort accumulated in some sectors of society from being shown and thereby diluted. Politicians preferred not to talk about immigration, when they should instead have been explaining it better. When this discontent was expressed, it came through the mouth of Pim Fortuyn who – just as Geert Wilders later would – accused the traditional politicians of ignoring what was happening in the street. What is surprising is that many politicians went to the other extreme very quickly. On both left and right, the “failure” of integration policies was soon taken as read, Islam was systematically placed under suspicion and the binary language of us and them began to prevail. All of this came accompanied by a media that systematically placed the focus on those who «spoke loudest and clearest». Thus the most extreme messages have been amplified while all the others are silenced.

The Dutch case shows that the xenophobic and Islamophobic discourse goes far beyond the populists. It is essential to step out of this binary logic (populists versus the other politicians and citizens) in order to become aware of the point to which we are repeating their arguments. But also to understand their reasoning, which is the prior step that must be taken in order to fight them with facts and arguments as well as with more (not less) public policy.



POPULISM IN FRANCE: TOWARDS NORMALISATION?

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According to the new Coface Political Risk Index published in March 2017, France is the second most populist country in Europe, with a score of 70%, just behind the United Kingdom (73%). The discourse about public order and national identity as well as distrust of multiculturalism are among the main reasons for the French score.

After Donald Trump's election last year, many observers consider France to be the next crucial vote. France's presidential election is seen as a test that will confirm (or not) the theory that Trump's victory would give a boost to anti-immigration rhetoric, xenophobia and populist parties in Europe. Although conditions are different in both countries, the current presidential campaign of Marine Le Pen and her Front National (FN) shows interesting parallels with US right-wing populism: the anti-elite discourse against the candidates of "mainstream political parties", the anti-centralist agitation against Brussels and Washington, respectively, and the rejection of the European Union. Both Trump and Le Pen also blame their respective states for insufficient border control, which is seen as responsible for social dumping, the loss of national identity and terrorism.

Le Pen's programme essentially revolves around these dimensions in order to help France to ensure what the Front National calls the "return of four sovereignties": monetary, legislative, budgetary and territorial. Achieving this implies either renegotiating the conditions under which France belongs to the EU or organising a Frexit referendum to make France "free again", pulling the country out of the eurozone, drastically limiting immigration to the needs of the labour market and reaffirming the republican model and its values through a fight against multiculturalism and radical Islam and by promoting the "national priority", which consists of a series of protectionist measures favouring French goods, companies and individuals.

As France is one of the two main pillars of the EU along with Germany, the outcome of the next presidential election could have greater implications for the European Union, such as the collapse of the euro or another financial crisis. Furthermore, it could resolve the ongoing debate over “open Europe” – the post-Berlin Wall European states open to the world and open to one another – versus “closed Europe” in favour of the latter. At the global level, France’s diplomacy – including counterterrorism efforts in Syria, Iraq and the MENA region (Middle East & North Africa) at large – could be damaged as French diplomats have recently insinuated.

Beyond the case of Marine Le Pen, several indicators tend to show that populism is not only the preserve of the far right in France. Recently, the 2017 presidential candidate of the French Republican party, François Fillon (under formal investigation in a scandal over misuse of public funds), repeatedly accused the government and the judiciary of having staged a plot against him. He thus resorted to a classic tool of populism by playing popular sovereignty against the sovereignty of institutions. His rhetoric on French identity and immigrants is similarly stark and he has shown great openness towards Russia, just like the Front National, which has received funding from Russia and has called for an end to sanctions against the country.

Europe has entered a new phase in which the concept of “populism” is actively claimed by left-wing and right-wing parties, as sociologist Eric Fassin underlines in his book *Populism: the Great Resentment* (2017). In France the Front de Gauche led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon epitomises this trend on the left, in the same vein as Greece’s Syriza, Spain’s Podemos and Italy’s Movimento 5 Stelle.

On the right, populist movements and political parties also pretend to speak on behalf of “the people”, they just play on another register of emotions. While François Fillon and Marine Le Pen essentially allude to fears (migration, borders, terrorism), Jean-Luc Mélenchon insists on the urgent need to get rid of the elites, whom he accuses of concentrating the country’s wealth and monopolising power. He calls for a “controlled revolt” (“Disobedient France” being the motto), rejecting globalisation and European integration. Like Marine Le Pen, Mélenchon also promises to hold a referendum on leaving the EU in the case that he fails to negotiate new conditions with Brussels.

The French political scene seems to be caught between populist views from both sides of the political spectrum. On the one hand, the far-right Front National is poised to get the most votes in the first round of the presidential elections. On the other hand, a plethora of political parties, labour unions and movements such as the Front de Gauche, Workers’ Struggle (Lutte ouvrière), the Revolutionary Communist League, the New Anticapitalist party, Les Indignés or Nuit Debout fail to get behind one single candidate for many reasons (refusal to be instrumentalised

by a political party, internal quarrels, legislative voting method, weak presence in the media, etc.).

In contrast to the disunity on the left, the Front National has focused on winning elections (local and European) to try to secure a victory in the presidential election. However, according to polls Marine Le Pen is unlikely to succeed in the run-offs of the second round of the elections, where she will most likely lose against independent candidate Emanuel Macron or Fillon if he can withstand the headwinds of his scandal. Yet in an indirect way the far-right populist discourse may still bear fruit, as its rhetoric is increasingly present among The Republicans and large segments of the populace.

France is still in a state of emergency, the risk of terrorist attacks remains high and the refugee crisis is still at the centre of the public debate, although it reached a peak in 2015. It is unlikely that populist trends will disappear after the presidential election, though a defeat of Marine Le Pen in the final run-offs is likely. Given the uneven distribution of populist discourses across the political spectrum and the uncertainty about the outcome of the next legislative election, there is a high risk of further political polarisation.



**GERMANY:
POPULIST
PRESSURES
ON “MUTTI”
MERKEL**

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Already present in the US, the UK and Israel, the right-wing conspiracy website Breitbart is now expanding to Germany and France. One may disagree with its former executive chair, Steve Bannon, who helped to propel Donald Trump into the White House and is now his chief strategist, but he is certainly a successful political entrepreneur with a knack for turning populist sentiment into votes and money. The choice of Germany is not coincidental. It is the EU's most populous country and xenophobic views have witnessed an upsurge in the wake of the refugee crisis. Alongside Sweden, Germany was a preferred destination and received over one million refugees. Merkel invested her political capital in a solution of the crisis. After her initial humanitarian gestures and accommodating stance she tightened border controls, hashed out a deal with Turkey to limit migration flows and pushed for a pan-European redistribution of refugees that has come to naught so far.

Her transformation mirrored shifting public opinion. Germany witnessed an outpouring of solidary civic engagement at the beginning of the refugee crisis and such engagement still exists today, but concerns have been growing about the integration challenges involved. They are not restricted to the right-wing fringe. Integration of newly arrived migrants into labour markets is estimated to take five years on average, more than initially expected and there are security issues as well. Sexual harassment by groups of North African migrants at the Cologne railway station on New Year's Eve 2016 marked a turning point. Terrorist attacks in Würzburg and Ansbach by asylum seekers from Pakistan and Syria were followed by the Berlin attack, when a rejected Tunisian asylum seeker who was slated for deportation ploughed a truck into a Christmas market, killing 12 people.

These events have given pause. Merkel is now under constant pressure from her junior coalition partner, the Bavarian Christian Social Union (CSU), which is pushing for tougher security policies to block the

further ascent of the newly emerged right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD). Founded only four years ago, the party veered to the right in 2015 when it ousted its founding chairman, Bernd Lucke, who had run on a ticket of fiscal conservatism and opposition to euro bailouts, but had comparably liberal views on migration, provided migrants had the right qualification. With the onset of the refugee crisis AfD has increasingly developed into a single-issue party that has tried to capitalise on fears about the influx of migrants and Muslim migrants in particular.

The AfD has landed a string of successes in regional parliaments, where it achieved double-digit results. It is now present in the parliaments of 11 of the 16 *Länder*. In Saxony-Anhalt it got in 2016 over 24% of the vote and became the second strongest party after the ruling CDU, hinting once more at a greater prevalence of xenophobic dispositions in the east of Germany, where Dresden is home to the infamous Pegida marches. In Baden-Wurtemberg it got 15.1%, overtaking the social democrats (SPD), whose share of the vote almost halved to 12.7%. In Rhineland-Palatinate its success was slightly more subdued, with 12.6%. It was particularly successful among males, workers and the unemployed, receiving support from former conservative and leftist voters alike and attracting a lot of former non-voters. In May 2017 it could continue its success during the regional elections in Schleswig-Holstein and North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous *Land*, with almost 18 million people.

Right-wing parties are a sensitive issue in Germany for historical reasons and there is cross-party consensus on containing them. Should the AfD be able to enter the Bundestag during the federal elections in September this would be a first since World War II: Other right wing parties such as the Republikaner, the NPD (National Democratic Party of Germany) or the DVU (German People's Union) have come and gone and have occasionally managed to enter regional parliaments, but never the Bundestag.

As the AfD is shunned by all other parties, forming coalitions has become more difficult. Apart from the AfD, results for individual parties are also increasingly uneven across different *Länder* as the 2016 regional elections have shown: the Greens, a former fringe party, is now the strongest party in Baden-Wurtemberg, but collapsed in Rhineland-Palatinate and barely made it through the 5% hurdle in Saxony-Anhalt. The SPD collapsed in Baden-Wurtemberg and Saxony-Anhalt, but achieved slight gains in Rhineland-Palatinate where it remained the leading party. The CDU had massive losses in Baden-Wurtemberg, where it had been the ruling party for decades, but only slight decline in the two other regions. The Left (Die Linke) still has a much stronger presence in East Germany than in the west.

All this points to an increased fragmentation of the party landscape in Germany, where large "people's parties" (*Volksparteien*) have lost their power to attract

cohesive voting blocks. Elections are increasingly volatile and about mood swings and personalities rather than programmes. For many decades of its post-war history Germany had a bipartisan political landscape that consisted of the two *Volksparteien* CDU/CSU and SPD on the centre-right and centre-left with the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) as kingmaker in the middle. With the advent of the Greens in the 1980s and the Left in the 1990s this changed and led to a dispersion of the support base of the SPD, which now is only a shadow of its former self. While the CDU was better able to maintain its status as a *Volkspartei*, it is now subject to similar erosion processes to the SPD, losing votes to the AfD on the right and to the Greens on the left.

Meanwhile the AfD is feeling vindicated by Trump's election victory and is reaching out to other populist parties in Europe. In January 2017 they attended a congress organised by the right-wing Europe of Nations and Freedom (ENF) group of the European Parliament whose member Marcus Pretzell heads the AfD in North Rhine-Westphalia and is husband of federal AfD leader Frauke Petry. While the right-wing populists are in agreement on limiting migration and Muslim migration in particular, considerable differences exist in terms of social policies. Where Marine Le Pen tries to secure the welfare state for her national constituency, the AfD wants to cut it back and has in fact a rather neoliberal agenda aside from its xenophobic positions. In the foreign policy realm a considerable openness to Russian positions can be observed. While the AfD has not received official party funding from Russia like the French Front National, its leading member Alexander Gauland has close contacts in Russia and has pushed for a rapprochement with the country. This has added to the spectre of Russian meddling in the election campaign. Such concerns existed in Germany even before the Russian interference in the US elections by hacking the computers of the Democratic Party. A hacking attack on offices of the Bundestag originated in Russia and in the "Lisa case" Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov egged on demonstrations by Germans of Russian descent over an alleged rape of a girl by foreigners that later turned out to be untrue.

Of late the star of the AfD shows signs of fading in opinion polls where it hovers around 10% of voters. With fewer refugees arriving in Germany, its single issue lobbying is less attractive and it has got bogged down in internal party squabbles. Its initial endorsement of Donald Trump threatens to backfire, as the antics of the new US president and his chaotic administration are also unpopular among conservatives and right-wing sympathisers. The SPD on the other hand has witnessed a remarkable resurgence since it chose Martin Schulz, the former president of the European Parliament, as its front-runner in January 2017. A mildly leftist message of rolling back some neoliberal reforms from the 2000s and a certain weariness about another four years of Merkel was enough to propel the SPD from 20% to over 30% in the polls. A Merkel loss against a coalition of SPD,

Greens and the Liberals (FDP) or a leftist coalition of SPD, Greens and the Left, unthinkable only a few months ago, now appears a distinct possibility.

Substantial losses for the CDU/CSU would cause internal party uproar and Merkel would face increasing domestic pressure. Her positions on the refugee crisis are more popular among supporters of the Greens and the SPD than within her own party. Should Merkel's CDU/CSU lose the government to an SPD-led coalition it will likely veer to the right. Together with a stronger and more assertive left this would make it more difficult for the AfD to establish itself lastingly in the German party landscape.



THE ROOTS OF POPULISM IN POLAND: UNSUSTAINABLE GROWTH AND CULTURAL BACKLASH

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In 2015 the populist authoritarian party Law and Justice won both parliamentary and presidential elections in Poland for the first time since the collapse of Jarosław Kaczyński's government in 2007. The victory came after eight elections in a row (local, parliamentary, presidential and European) that were lost against the Civic Platform party (Platforma Obywatelska) and their coalition partner the Polish Peasants' Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe). Formally, Andrzej Duda and Beata Szydło are president and prime minister, respectively, but actual power is in the hands of Law and Justice's chairmen – Jarosław Kaczyński – whose only official position is as a regular member of parliament. Since the new political formation has taken power, populism has entered Poland's parliament and dominated its public debate.

The Polish “golden age” and the populist turn

Economically Poland has been one of the best-performing countries in Europe since the collapse of the Iron Curtain. Its GDP per capita growth has been the best of all post-Soviet and post-socialist countries. Since accession to the EU structures in 2004 other key indices have been improving as well: nominal average yearly earnings nearly doubled between 2004 and 2016 (60% when adjusted for inflation), the minimum wage more than doubled nominally (80%, inflation-adjusted), unemployment decreased by over 12 percentage points, relative poverty dropped by nearly four percentage points and extreme poverty dropped by over five percentage points. There has not been a single year of economic contraction, not even during the 2008 economic crisis or the subsequent eurozone crisis.

However, much of this growth has been uneven. Income inequality grew strongly as a result of the

neoliberal shock therapy of the 1990s: the Gini coefficient rose from 0.27 in 1990 to 0.33 in 2000 before stabilising around 0.34-0.35 since 2005; and the unemployment level reached a peak of 20% in 2003 and 2004. The level of earnings in Poland is still three times lower than the EU average and just over a fifth of the average wage in the UK. Poland has a large share of temporary work contracts (28%) and leads the EU in terms of weekly working hours. Uncertain labour markets and limited opportunities have prompted nearly 2.4 million Poles (over 6% of the total population) to migrate to western European countries in search of a better life.

However, contrary to most western European countries, it was not the post-2008 recession that provided fertile ground for populist movements. The social impact of the crisis was much smaller than the impact of the transformation process of the 1990s and in fact never led to a recession. Therefore it is hard to argue that the success of populist movements and parties in 2015 was purely the result of a deterioration of social and economic conditions, because the populist electoral successes were much larger than the economic climate seemed to warrant.

There is a striking discrepancy between Polish people's assessment of their personal living conditions and their views on politics and economic conditions in general. While they have judged the latter to be bad year after year since 1989 (with minor exceptions), they have reported improvements in their personal living conditions.

Law and Justice has capitalised on this discrepancy in its long-term race for power. It built the narrative of "Poland in ruins" (in contrast to Civic Platform's electoral slogans of "green island" and "Poland under construction"), focusing on subjective negative perceptions of public life and the unfulfilled expectations of some groups. At the same time the narrative omitted facts about improving the socioeconomic indicators and proposed alternative explanations of reality in a post-truth fashion. The Polish case illustrates that growing prosperity per se is not necessarily an antidote to authoritarian populist rhetoric. It was precisely clever political leadership and fine-tuned rhetoric that appeared to be decisive in the Law and Justice party's victory.

The victory of populist rhetoric and onset of "demokratura"

Accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and EU structures were the great goals of the transformation period. Society could be motivated to make sacrifices for the sake of these goals, but once they

were achieved, Poles felt they were facing an uncertain future. The sense of hope that unified social aspirations was replaced by fear of external threats: the economic crisis that came from the USA and the eurozone, war between Russia and neighbouring Ukraine, and later on, the refugee crisis, Brexit and the possibility that Polish labour migrants' entitlement to work in western European countries could be reduced.

Meanwhile, the emerging middle class started to see the limits of growth. Some of its members were badly hit by the increase in the value of the Swiss franc, which affected thousands of holders of mortgages denominated in that currency. Similarly, frustration and fear among the young generation mounted. Millennials in Poland were the first generation with college attendance rates at the level of western European countries (some 50% of those under 30 years of age). They have acquired high occupational qualifications, learnt foreign languages and visited foreign universities during scholarships, which have created expectations about their future careers and lifestyle. Young Poles believed that they have equal economic status and perspectives to their Erasmus friends from western countries. Graduates collided with reality when entering the labour market. They have been forced to take unpaid internships or temporary and unqualified employment, and had to live with parents due to limited chances to rent or buy a flat and start a family.

Besides the economic grievances there has been growing uneasiness among parts of the populace about the diffusion of liberal social norms and human rights, such as feminism and LGBT rights. Studies show a growing social and political divide on moral-cultural rather than socioeconomic issues. The refugee crisis – and especially the European Commission's controversial policy for mandatory quotas of Syrian refugees for each member state – brought about an upsurge of xenophobia, similar to the populisms in western Europe.

The star of Civic Platform began to fade as economic and moral frustrations grew. The Law and Justice party spoke not only to their usual electorate in the 2015 campaign: older generations in rural areas and small towns with lower education levels and staunch Roman Catholics with conservative moral views. The party also reached out to younger generations (animated by young hip intellectuals – the so-called "hipster right") and to swing voters who were disappointed with eight years of rule by Civic Platform. Moreover, no left-wing party was able to reach the entry threshold, meaning the winning party benefited by gaining additional seats in the parliament.

To build the country back “from the ruins” Law and Justice promised to roll back the retirement age reform (to 60 for women and 65 for men from 67 for both men and women), to vastly expand family benefits under the Programme Family 500+ (Rodzina 500+), and to build many new apartments on state-owned land. All three programmes were introduced in 2016 on the basis of majoritarian doctrine, despite criticism from experts and funding concerns. The increase in public spending was supposed to be covered by improved VAT collection, a new sales tax and a new bank tax, but none of these programmes have yet been implemented and Poland will likely violate European budget rules.

Generous public spending was used to please constituencies and assuage critics in order to introduce radical changes “in the name of the people”. Law and Justice applied its doctrine of majoritarianism to the court system, violating liberties and using its majority in the parliament to dismantle existing checks and balances within the Polish democratic system. The independence of the Constitutional Tribunal and public broadcasters has been undermined and laws on public gatherings and the funding system of NGOs have been tightened. This so-called “*demokracja*” severely limits the role of the opposition parties and opportunities for public consultations, prompting the European Commission to issue a stark warning and start complementary Rule of Law Recommendation proceedings in January 2016.

This was not the only setback in foreign affairs. The current government has ruined good relations with European institutions and strategic partners (e.g. Germany, France), but also with Russia. Preferred partners have lost importance and reliability, namely the United Kingdom since Brexit and the USA with the advent of Donald Trump. Even the Visegrad countries are only moderately interested in cooperation with Poland under these conditions. In March 2017 the government of Beata Szydło caused a scandal during the elections of the president of the European Council. Instead of supporting Donald Tusk running for re-election, the government put up its own candidate, who failed to convince a single state – including Victor Orbán’s Hungary and other Visegrad countries.

Nevertheless, large majorities of Law and Justice party supporters feel their party has done well or very well at improving the quality of life, keeping its promises and maintaining democracy and the rule of law. Above all, the figures show a divided Poland: 50% think the government is performing badly in implementing its electoral promises, while some 56% are critical of its approach to democracy and rule of law. Among the liberal and left-wing opposition – Civic Platform, the Modern Poland party (Nowoczesna),

United Left and the Together party – this figure shoots up: some 70% of them think that the Law and Justice party government has performed very badly in safeguarding democracy.



HUNGARY: POPULISM OR POLITICS?

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The Hungarian political spectrum has been one of the most polarised bipolar party systems of all the former socialist countries. For the last twenty years, the heirs of the communist elite have gathered under the flag of the Socialist Party (MSZP) while the conservatives have rallied around Fidesz, led by Viktor Orbán. The Socialists were in government for three mandates and Fidesz is currently in its third term. Of the Visegrad Four states (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary), Hungary's public is the most inclined to question whether actual regime change occurred. The country has been a member of NATO since 1999 and the EU since 2004, but in several election campaigns it has been usual to hear "we need to finish the regime change *now*".

Hungary has never disclosed the entirety or even large parts of the secret service's archives from the times of the one-party system before 1989. It served the Hungarian political elite well to delegitimise each other by claiming that someone collaborated with the secret police in the past. It provided blackmailing opportunities and set press agendas. As an example, Péter Medgyessy, the Socialist prime minister elected in 2002, was forced out two years later when revelations about his past as a paid agent of the secret service were widely published. All these examples and social context show how antagonistic Hungarian political life has become. Since 2002, when Fidesz narrowly lost the elections after taking power for the first time in 1998, the polarisation of society has reached family levels. Unlike in neighbouring countries, politics is omnipresent.

In this environment, Viktor Orbán was able to rise to the height of his power in 2010, when he won the elections with a constitutional majority – two-thirds of the seats in parliament – and readily delivered a new constitution for the country that curtailed press freedom and the independence of the judiciary. Fidesz rode a wave of anti-establishment sentiment. It was based on the weak performance of the Socialist

government and exacerbated by the effects of the financial crisis in 2008. Fidesz offered to chase the corrupt Socialist elite away and “bring the people back to power”. Like Donald Trump, who threatened to lock up Hillary Clinton during the US presidential campaign, Orbán threatened to throw the former Socialist prime minister into jail – though he never followed up on this threat.

Just like the conservative political group in the European Parliament, Fidesz uses the phrase “people’s party” without any negative association. The catch-all message, populist initiatives and rhetoric are used to maintain popular support and rally the electorate around the flag. Fidesz even introduced a new term for the political community it wished to preserve after its landslide victory in 2010: the “System of National Cooperation” or NER (*Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere*). It was a one-page political declaration that people must rise above party lines and unite for the sake of the nation. The paper had to be displayed in all public offices. The NER was a tool for portraying the opposition as outcasts who acted against the nation’s interests. With the anti-pluralist move the newly established government claimed the exclusive right to represent the people.

This sentiment has not faded away; it has grown and has increasingly included non-domestic actors. By the time the elections of 2014 approached, Fidesz had found new elites to fight against: the Brussels elite and bureaucracy, the technocrats and later Jean-Claude Juncker in person. The government had serious sovereignty debates with the Commission in the first years after the otherwise successful Hungarian presidency of the European Council in 2011. There was a large populist campaign against the IMF as the root of all things bad. The previous Socialist government made an IMF-World Bank-EU troika deal that opened a €20 billion credit line and demanded serious austerity measures just before the election. Fidesz promised not to use such credit and to start repaying this debt. Even grassroots fundraisers were launched in the country after internalising the government message. Fidesz has managed to decrease the debt-to-GDP ratio since 2011, although with questionable measures such as the nationalisation of private pension funds. The nominal debt has risen only slowly over the last years.

The migration wave on the Balkan route since 2015 has offered the opportunity for the government to revive antagonistic debates in simplified terms. The chastised actors were the European Commission (allegedly unable to provide solutions), Angela Merkel (for “inviting” more migration by the opening of the German borders) and the EU as a whole (for trying to enforce the mandatory resettlement/relocation schemes that were actually never realised). This political rhetoric ended up in a referendum in the fall of 2016 when Fidesz wanted to deliver a resonating message to Brussels to refuse mandatory quotas and reinforce national sovereignty. But the migration referendum did not pass the validity threshold as voter turnout remained below 50%. However, over three million voters showed up to support

the government's position, which was more than the average number of Fidesz voters at parliamentary elections.

It is important to bear in mind that Fidesz is not the most right-wing party in Hungary. The Jobbik party has an extremist track record of anti-Semitic and anti-Roma rhetoric and is trending at around 20% in opinion polls. It has visibly softened its demeanour during the third Orbán government, leaving a void for future radical parties and at the same time tempting Fidesz to step further to the right. Fidesz has been accused of not having opposed Jobbik more clearly, although it has tried to avoid anti-Semitism, holding the Hungarian Holocaust Memorial Year in 2014, sponsoring the renovation of synagogues and driving dialogue with Jewish organisations.

Fidesz's dominance of political discourse is due to the fact that the opposition remained fragmented for two consecutive elections, while private media ownership shifted in favour of Fidesz, which also managed to capture the public media for its own agenda. Three typical populist features are present here: 1) anti-expert rhetoric; 2) post-truth politics; and 3) the renationalisation of politics. Feelings of anti-expert and anti-civil society rhetoric were emboldened by a campaign against NGOs that were accused of being foreign agents. Two Norwegian Fund-related NGOs, Ökotárs and DemNet Foundations, were searched by the police. George Soros, the liberal Hungarian-born philanthropist and his Open Society Foundations were repeatedly targeted in the media. The first large-scale appearance of post-truth politics happened during the migration crisis: false claims, fake news and completely contradictory narratives invaded the Hungarian media. Finally, it is clear that Viktor Orbán's foreign political attitude is that of a classical realist (in the sense of International Relations theory). He claims sovereignty as the starting point for any negotiations. Renationalisation of politics is the leading line in the EU debates ("bring back competences to the member states") and in the Hungarian-US relationship during the Obama administration ("no foreign interference in the Hungarian democracy").

Fidesz was ahead of its time in the sense of being a party able to capitalise on a growing anti-establishment sentiment by channelling it first against the Socialist government. Later Fidesz was successful in shifting the antagonism to the international level and diverting attention from domestic debates. In other words, Fidesz did *not* become the establishment in the eyes of its voters despite its second consecutive cycle in office. Given Hungary's size it is a feasible political manoeuvre to replace domestic conflictual narratives with international ones that can be shaped more easily in the given party's interests, as the electorate has less direct experience of them.



PUTIN: EURO-ATLANTIC POPULIST ICON

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For right-wing populists on both sides of the Atlantic Vladimir Putin is an idol. Since long before Donald Trump's arrival in politics, the most reactionary wing of the Republican Party – the Tea Party – and racist groups on the US extreme right had shown their admiration for the Russian president. During the presidential campaign, Trump cited Putin as a prototype for his presidential ambitions. Something similar is happening with most of the European xenophobic movements. The Front National (FN) in France, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) seem fascinated by the image Putin projects (and cultivates): Putin the energetic, virile, traditionalist leader. Along different lines, parties such as Syriza in Greece, the Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy and Podemos in Spain – which can be defined as left-wing populists – also align substantially with Moscow, although in this case it is for supposedly “geopolitical” reasons. Hence their sympathies tend towards a kind of wider “axis of resistance” that, besides Russia, includes countries such as Iran, Syria and Venezuela, all united by confrontation with Washington. In this context, questions must be asked about the nature of Putinism and whether it should be included as part of the populist wave in Europe or not.

The ideological characterisation of the Putin regime raises intense debates among experts, with consensus on the conservative agenda pushed since his return to the presidency in March 2012 particularly scarce. For some, like Michel Eltchaninoff, the roots of the Russian president's convictions lie in the most nationalist, conservative strands of Russian thinking (especially the work of the rediscovered Ivan Ilyin) and reflect a consistent attempt to shape a *Russian idea* and identity that is redefined along these lines and is, to a large extent, opposed to the liberal, cosmopolitan West. For others, like Marlène Laruelle or Kadri Liik, if anything characterises Putinism it is its flexibility and instrumental use of various doctrinal registers, with pragmatic goals and little interest in articulating a new official ideology. To be sure, the

Putin regime has oscillated significantly in its proposals and public narrative – or, if you prefer, evolved – but its statist conception, the centrality of the state in social and political life, is a constant and unvarying element. This, in my opinion, is the key feature of President Putin’s political thinking.

At first sight, the Putin regime does not fit easily within Cas Mudde’s definition, adopted for this volume, which places its emphasis on the dichotomy between the “pure people” and the “corrupt elite”. If the common Russian has anything clear it is that there is an unbridgeable gulf between them and the country’s wealthy political and economic elites. And if anything reveals the growing electoral disengagement, as confirmed repeatedly by the polls, it is that the average citizen considers their capacity to influence politics to be nil.

Nevertheless, the *people* axis is a constant in Putin’s discourse and in the Kremlin’s narrative. In fact, the regime presents itself as the incarnation of the aspirations and destiny of the Russian people (following the Soviet tradition). Beyond the social and political passivity, one of the keys to explaining this situation – apparently acceptable for the vast majority of the population – relates to the place given to the state in the symbolic space, as a tangible manifestation of the collective Russian identity. In this way, not only are they unable to conceive of one without the other, but the interests of the *people* and the *state* cannot, from this perspective, appear to be divergent.

To reinforce the popular legitimacy of its message, the Kremlin employs the *national-populist voices* of the loyal parliamentary opposition on both left and right – the Communist Party of the Russian Federation led by Gennady Zyuganov, and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy – which shake up the public space with fiery demagoguery, but never pose any real political challenge or question the figure of President Putin. In addition, to condition public opinion the Kremlin constructs a supposed foreign enemy – the West – which aspires to destroy the Russian *state* and with it the *people’s* prosperity. This facilitates the alleged convergence of interests and a *fortress under siege* scenario in which local critics become *fifth columnists* and *traitors*. And as it is not about the West in general, but its elites in particular, it is possible to construct a narrative in which a Kremlin run by millionaires with ostentatious lives and mansions in London and the Costa Brava is presented as the guardian and guarantor of the interests of the *common people* – the Russian people – against “globalist, cosmopolitan elites”, that are supposedly predatory in economic terms and depraved morally (and, it should be added, there is an ethno-racial aspect too).

And it is this foreign dimension that helps us grasp how an opposition figure like Alexei Navalny, who aspires to lead the resistance of the *pure people* against the *corrupt elite*, can be characterised as a *liberal in the service of foreign interests* by

the Russian media and be perceived as such by a large number of the population. And this despite the fact that Navalny's movement is based on the continual denunciation of the corruption that reigns among the ruling elite, which makes him similar to populist European movements on the left and the original spirit of the *indignados*. But Navalny also toys in his speech with the rejection of immigration from the Caucasus and Central Asia – attributed to the Kremlin and its Eurasian integration projects – and flirts on occasions with xenophobic nationalism, which brings him closer to the FN, AfD and UKIP. At any rate, the nature of the Russian political system, and the Kremlin's use of all kinds of formal and informal resources to prevent any alternative from consolidating, mean taking power by electoral means is unviable. In other words, a Podemos simply could not emerge in Russia.

The conservative agenda and the idea of the besieged fortress promoted by the Kremlin intensified with the wave of protests in Moscow and St Petersburg at the end of 2011 and the Ukraine crisis. Alongside them, the deterioration of the Russian economy and the poor medium-term prospects have obliged the Kremlin to seek new sources of legitimacy. As a result, the annexation of Crimea must be read as an operation that is motivated in part – if not mainly – by domestic political priorities. As Ivan Krastev pointed out in an interview published in June 2015, with the annexation – and the resulting *Krim nash* (Crimea is ours) fever – Putin managed “to decouple his own legitimacy and the legitimacy of his regime from Russia's economic performance”. Though on this point, it is important to note that Putin's legitimacy and his power structure are partly independent. The president's genuine popularity is in contrast to the prevailing malaise among common people in front of the socioeconomic context and low expectations. And this despite the enormous concentration of power in the president's hands. But in the eyes of many, as in other authoritarian environments with strong cults of personality, the formula “if only the king knew what his ministers were up to” holds true.

Like other populists, Putin has at least had the political instinct to sense a latent state of mind among Russian citizens that, Krastev suggests in the same article, wanted fundamentally to be given *meaning* in response to crisis. This translates to nationalist and patriotic agitation that galvanises popular support and diverts attention from other issues. The so-called Putin consensus has been redefined and in the absence of economic prosperity he now provides *meaning*, spectacle and glorification – within limits clearly set by the Kremlin that are considerably tighter than is normally believed. The great unknown is, of course, whether this scheme is sustainable and for how long. We are no longer dealing, as in the first two mandates (2000-2008), with a proposal of normality (that has failed) but with one of exceptionality. It is a gamble that is highly dependent on a regional and international context with few signs of short-term improvement. Categorise it as populist or not, for these reasons the Putin regime will continue to prompt enormous uncertainty both at home and abroad.



**POPULISM IN
SWEDEN:
SOCIOECONOMIC
POLARISATION
IN THE MODEL
SOCIAL
DEMOCRATIC
STATE**

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The general election in 2010 changed the dynamics of Swedish politics when the populist party Sweden Democrats (SD) crossed the 4% threshold to get into parliament. This nationalist party with roots in Swedish fascism led by Jimmy Åkesson polled 5.7% and won 20 parliamentary seats, becoming Sweden's third biggest party. The country was in shock; the image of multicultural Sweden open for everyone was stained. Even though all parties on both sides of the political spectrum vowed not to collaborate with the SD, the SD continued its success in the 2014 general election, polling 12.9% and winning 49 seats in the parliament. This upward trend is still intact. In the latest general election polls carried out by the Swedish Institute for Opinion Surveys (SIFO), the SD climbed to 16.9%, which puts it in a comfortable position ahead of the next general election in September 2018.

What makes the SD so attractive? It promises to fight crime and provide "the real Swedish people" with opportunities to work, a good standard of living, better housing and an improved welfare system. The party targets voters that want simple solutions without complexity. SD voters are mainly male, poorly educated working class citizens, mostly heterosexual, with a traditional view of the family and female roles in society, and who don't believe in multiculturalism or globalisation. The SD promises to promote Swedish culture and identity and hold a referendum on EU membership, which it opposes. It also promises a drastic reduction of new immigration and demands complete assimilation of immigrants already living in Sweden. Many naturalised immigrants struggle to integrate as they do not speak Swedish and do not relate to the culture, which in turn affects their children – this is mainly the case for women with limited education.

According to an OECD report, Sweden is one of the most segregated countries in Europe when it comes to ethnic segregation. There is a large concentration of immigrants in the three biggest cities: Malmö,

Gothenburg and Stockholm. Some of this concentration is voluntary – people may choose to live in areas with lots of immigrants because they are new in the country and are looking for a network of people from the same background. Other immigrants with higher incomes might choose to live in areas with no immigrants as they are drawn to a certain lifestyle. However, when ethnic segregation is involuntary as a result of discrimination, this type of exclusion has negative consequences in society. Examples of this are landlords, employers and teachers not giving immigrants the same opportunities based on their ethnic background. The high volume of immigration in the last few years was concentrated in the south around Malmö, where the SD has a particularly high share of votes. This has led to strains on the welfare system, affecting housing, healthcare and schools, as well as increasing crime. SD voters see immigrants as a threat to their economic wellbeing, sense of security and identity. They feel Swedish identity is being diluted by influences from other cultures, changing Swedish values and way of life.

Globalisation, technical rationalisation and the relocation of manufacturing companies to foreign countries with cheaper labour have left the traditional Swedish working class frustrated and unemployed. This applies to its male members in particular. Highly qualified and educated people are increasingly in demand, moving around freely in the EU, leaving behind those without the required skills to succeed. Furthermore, entrepreneurs and people in low-paid jobs find themselves in competition with immigrants who may have higher qualifications and are willing to do the job more cheaply. Many feel let down by politicians on both sides of the political spectrum unable to provide them with the change in society and security they need. The resulting shift of lower and middle class voters to the SD has led to populist pressures on the established parties. In response, the incumbent Social Democratic government introduced border controls and stricter immigration policy.

What needs to change? In the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) Sweden has been classified as the country with the best integration policy, yet the majority of poorly educated immigrant families and young people get stuck in the welfare system, segregated in the outskirts of bigger cities or isolated in the middle of the countryside.

There is a big shortage of housing in Sweden, which makes moving around to find a job impossible. There is discrimination in the housing market and landlords tend to favour tenants with a Swedish name, which leaves immigrants in the hands of the black market and makes housing more expensive and insecure for them. Many immigrants also struggle to get a mortgage to buy a property, as most don't pass the credit check.

Many new immigrants who are highly qualified and have relevant experience from their home countries find it difficult to accept a job as a cleaner, waiter or bus

driver. On the other hand Swedish people have to compete against immigrants for low-pay jobs.

The government needs to address the socioeconomic problems and invest in human capital by providing the necessary resources to the increasingly changing multicultural population. Access to higher education should be made available to everyone; it is quite difficult to access education due to limited capacities at universities. Sweden has an ageing population and will need an educated and qualified workforce. Access to affordable housing is key to mobilising people in the country, which in turn will mobilise the workforce and reduce segregation.

The government recently proposed lower wages for immigrants between the ages of 25 and 45 without higher education. This will help many immigrants get off welfare and make them more attractive on the job market as well as giving them valuable experience and involving them in society, but will it make them more integrated? Will it not make them feel like second-class citizens? It is currently much harder for a jobseeker with a foreign name to get a job than a jobseeker with a native Swedish name. Will this not increase the discrimination in the job market?

In the end it is a question of allocation of resources: do we spend money on “us” or do we spend money on “them”. Political parties on both sides of the spectrum are planning to cut down on spending on immigrants in an attempt to attract voters they have lost to the SD ahead of the next general election in 2018. The SD is slowly creeping to power, normalising what they stand for. At the same time as Marine Le Pen wants to introduce reduced financial support for parents with a foreign background the Swedish government is proposing to reduce financial support for families with children born abroad. In January 2017 the Conservative party and the Moderates agreed to collaborate with the SD passively to bring down the sitting centre-left government, which was unthinkable a few years ago. By opening a door to the SD the Moderates are sending a message of acceptance and acknowledging the SD as a party. Will the 2018 general election focus on immigration or how to address the core issues in Swedish society?



SETTING THE BREXIT AGENDA: POPULISM AND UKIP IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Word has it that in the United Kingdom it is no longer necessary to vote for UKIP (the Europhobic, extreme-right UK Independence Party,) to vote for its ideas. With many of Nigel Farage's party's ideas on the government's agenda, the influence of UKIP is fundamental to understanding the dynamics of British politics both before and since the Brexit vote.

Hearing the Eurosceptic wing of the Conservative Party voice its approval for UKIP's anti-Europe proclamations, David Cameron, then leader of the party, promised a referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the EU if they won the 2015 general election. During the Brexit referendum campaign, the UKIP thesis bolstered the "leave" campaign with its calls to "restore sovereignty" and opposition to immigration. Now Brexit is secured, a hard-line starting position for the negotiations with Brussels prevails, as may be seen in Theresa May's stated desires to leave the single market in order to tackle European immigration, and to remove the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice.

UKIP's ideology has permeated the agenda of the political forces of the United Kingdom's centre ground, which is perhaps the most significant of populism's effects on British politics. So much so that, even with UKIP engulfed in fratricidal infighting following Nigel Farage's resignation as leader, many of their ideas have kept their place in the public debate since the referendum. This is true of Theresa May's government, but also of the leader of the opposition, Jeremy Corbyn, who has never appeared willing to take radically different positions to the government on handling Brexit. Using the framework established by Diego Muro in this volume, it may be seen that UKIP and post-Brexit British politics are characterised by sharing key elements with the definition of populism.

The first of these is the way Brexit was presented as a confrontation between the "common people" and the

establishment, which is characteristic of populist forces that claim to empathise with the concerns of the “people” and attack the interests of their leaders. During the referendum campaign the division in the Conservative Party on the one hand and the pressure of its more Eurosceptic wing and UKIP on the other turned Brexit into a political weapon that was used against David Cameron’s government, which watched its popularity fall as the vote got closer.

The criticisms of the *establishment* included targets as varied as the Bank of England, the International Monetary Fund, leaders of major global powers, unions and employers – all of whom favoured “remain” – and led Cameron’s former justice secretary to make his famous declaration that “Britons have had enough of experts”. This animosity towards the elites has lingered since the referendum, with British tabloids going as far as to call the judges obliging Theresa May to submit the triggering of Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union that leads to Brexit to the British parliament “enemies of the people”.

Secondly, the Brexit campaign put two key elements of the populist agenda at centre stage: sovereignty and immigration. Nigel Farage’s “we want our country back” inspired the official slogan of the Brexit campaign: “take back control”. Alongside the concerns about employment and the economy in general, during the campaign around 30% of those surveyed believed that a strong reason for going to the polls was the United Kingdom’s “right to act independently”. At the top of her priorities for negotiating an agreement with the EU after Brexit, Theresa May has placed “control of our own laws” and putting an end to European jurisdiction.

Just behind comes the need to “control immigration” from Europe, which translates into the desire to leave the single market and the freedom of movement it brings. Immigration was also high on the list of British people’s concerns in the months leading up to the referendum (nearly 50% of citizens stated this, while 30% recognised that immigration would be a decisive factor in their vote). Nevertheless, in contrast to other populisms in Europe, the United Kingdom’s rejection of immigration has not taken on such anti-Islam overtones, but has largely centred on the arrival of European citizens.

Finally, Brexit has also highlighted how difficult it is to reach consensus on the factors that cause populism. Some studies have emphasised classic socioeconomic issues such as poverty, vulnerability and lack of opportunities as explanatory factors in the Brexit vote, relating them to the wave of rejection generated by the “losers of globalisation”. Others have underlined the variable of education, without denying the existing correlations between this and other structural elements such as the economic situation. Some have even explained the vote in favour of leaving the EU as something connected to personal values, finding surprising levels of

correlation between support for Brexit and support for the death penalty and the rejection of open societies.

In any event, Brexit has turned out to be the first in a series of reactions “against the system”: from Trump’s victory in the United States and Marine Le Pen’s rise in France, via Orbán in Hungary and Wilders in Holland. All form part of a much feared “populist international” – though their roots and expressions take different forms depending on the national environments in which they act. Brexit remains something in which these leaders see themselves reflected, thanks, specifically, to its capacity to make ideas such as “taking back control” and fighting against “those from abroad” conventional. Previously in the hands of extremist parties such as UKIP, these ideas are now at the centre of Britain’s political agenda.



POPULISM IN ITALY: THE CASE OF THE FIVE STAR MOVEMENT

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Italians suffer from an inherent weakness: populism. The phenomenon is deeply rooted in the history of the country. In different forms it has been recurring ever since the Fascist project. The current versions of populism, represented by the Lega Nord of Matteo Salvini and the Five Star Movement (M5S) of Beppe Grillo, jointly account for roughly 40% of the electorate.

Looking at the 2018 general elections, the M5S is the most concrete risk of populist drift, more tangible than the anti-European and anti-immigration positions of the right-wing Lega Nord, which grasps *only* 10% of the votes. The latest polls (on March 24th, 2017) show the M5S as the leading political force in the country, with 31% of the preferences and a 5% lead over the ruling Democratic Party (PD). The PD is still recovering from a bloody congress, from which a few secessionist exponents (Bersani, D'Alema, Rossi and Speranza) left slamming the door on Matteo Renzi, who was prime minister until December 2016 and the party's secretary general until February of 2017. In the run-up to the party's primary elections, set for April 30th of this year, Renzi's share of the vote is on the rise, leaving behind the minister of justice, Andrea Orlando, and the governor of Apulia, Michele Emiliano. The ex-premier is likely to grab back the leadership of the centre left. Nonetheless, the challenge of the federal elections would be tough for Renzi, even as newly rehabilitated secretary general of the PD, due to his limited popularity after his (too) recent – and in many ways disappointing – tenure as prime minister.

Conversely, the M5S has not yet been jeopardised by ruinous administrative mandates – the controversial term of its mayor of Rome, Virginia Raggi, does not seem to count as a discriminating factor. The capital's long-lasting state of decline, fostered by various administrations over time, seems to have contributed to its qualification as a “no man's land”. As a result, the scenario of a *starry* M5S government seems more and more real, with unpredictable consequences for

the country and possibly a new wave of instability. The first measures of a M5S government would be the establishment of a guaranteed minimum income and of a consultative referendum on the euro.

The M5S shows the typical signs of populism (as a synonym for demagoguery, cultural rudeness and inconclusive rebelliousness) that are common in many grass-roots protests. It has a pronounced hostility towards the political class, which it contrasts with the image of the common citizen who makes up for lack of experience with honesty when holding office. It rejects the categories of right and left, which it considers mere expedients to distract people from the real opposition between above (the corrupted ruling class) and below (the virtuous people). It contends that there are simple solutions to complex problems, has a propensity for elementary forms of direct democracy, rejects any kind of political alliance and refuses to organise itself in the way political parties usually do, bending to the will of Beppe Grillo and his charismatic leadership.

Founded to stimulate direct democracy and transparency via the internet, the “each one counts as one” romance of M5S has actually left few spaces for pluralism and internal dissent. Since 2012 more than 60 discordant members have been expelled from the party. Moreover, even if licit from a legal viewpoint, the code of conduct that has been imposed on all M5S candidates in the last round of local administrative elections has been highly contested. The contract binds the elected candidates to consult the guarantor (i.e. Beppe Grillo) on any crucial decision and to pay a penalty of €150,000 as compensation for the damaged reputation of the M5S in the case that the ethical guidelines are not followed.

Furthermore, M5S has recently been accused of being a main source of misinformation and propaganda for the Kremlin. A journalistic investigation has traced the information network of M5S, starting with Beppe Grillo’s blog and social media accounts, to a number of websites managed by the communication company of M5S co-founder Gianroberto Casaleggio (who died last year, and was replaced by his son Davide), which developed and controls the technologies for M5S’s internal online voting. The investigation also examined the relationship between M5S and Russia, as many items that appear on web pages linked to M5S were originally posted on websites and newspapers under the control of the Kremlin, such as Sputnik and Russia Today.

Until 2014 M5S’s interest in Russia was minimal and mostly critical. At that time Putin was considered a friend and authoritarian ally of the former prime minister, Silvio Berlusconi. As such he was demonised by M5S. When the first armed men entered eastern Ukraine M5S spoke of an invasion. It accused both the Italian government and the European Union of not taking a firm position against Russia to protect trade agreements on gas supply. Since then, however, things

have radically changed. M5S now demands the immediate removal of economic sanctions on Russia and a referendum on leaving the Transatlantic Alliance (NATO).

As far as Europe is concerned, the movement professes the desire to “stay to change the Union from within”. It is worth mentioning, however, that since 2014 M5S has formed part of the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group (EFDD) with the British far-right UKIP of Nigel Farage, of whom Grillo was early ally. Nonetheless, during the current parliamentary term the 17 MEPs of the M5S have voted more in line with the European United Left (GUE/NGL), the Greens (Greens/EFA) and the Liberals of ALDE than with UKIP. In the early days of January, Grillo activated an online vote on his blog to define M5S’s new alliance strategy and possibly leave the coalition with UKIP, as with the coming Brexit the party will no longer be a member of the European Parliament. ALDE emerged as the favoured option, after the refusal of the Greens to open up to Grillo. However, the attempt of the M5S to join the liberal and pro-European coalition failed. Guy Verhofstadt, head of ALDE, accused M5S of not providing “sufficient guarantees on a common European agenda” and having opposing viewpoints on key European issues, such as the TTIP. Consequently, the M5S came back to EFDD and its ally UKIP, promising to continue its battles against the euro and the Dublin Regulation on refugees.

In comparison to earlier forms of “leaders’ parties” and populism in Italy, such as Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia or Umberto Bossi’s Lega Nord, M5S is difficult to place on the left-wing/right wing spectrum. It proposes traditional left-wing measures such as the minimum income, but then allies with the eurosceptics. The alternation of left-wing and right-wing governments and the European Union used to be considered regenerative for the Italian political system. Now this role is compromised, as M5S aims at delegitimising Europe and the political class as a whole.

The web democracy practiced by M5S has a considerable *selection bias*. It is not representative of the entire country, which has one of the oldest populations in the world and, consequently, a low digitalisation index. Grillo’s blog and the M5S websites use the same Google mechanisms for the analysis of visits. Some commentators suspect that M5S’s political programme is the mere result of an algorithm providing the most trending issues on the internet. Former members of M5S report that the system keeps track of individual votes. This allows it to simulate voting scenarios and possibly to manipulate them. These severe accusations, if verified, could downgrade online voting to a mere formalisation of what Grillo has previously decided. Finally, Grillo himself arises as a very invasive “guarantor”, who – despite never having been elected – is decisive on all party issues, from the coalition at the European Parliament to the referendum on the euro and the construction of the new stadium of AS Roma football club.



THE FACES OF POPULISM IN POST- COMMUNIST ROMANIA

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Since the breakdown of the former communist regime in December 1989, populism has become a familiar presence in the new Romanian democracy. The direct appeal to “the People” as the ultimate repository of truth was current during Nicolae Ceauşescu’s *Nationalkommunismus*, and took new ideological shapes in the post-communist period. The vacuum created by the fall of communism was partially filled by the formation of a right-wing nationalist populism articulated by the Greater Romania Party (PRM, for its acronym in Romanian). This party, led by Corneliu Vadim Tudor, Ceauşescu’s court poet, combined xenophobia, nostalgia for communism and the exaltation of the Romanian people and its pristine values and traditions. In 2000, Tudor and his party posed a serious threat to the process of democratisation in Romania. By exploiting fears triggered by unemployment, social deprivation and the collapse of the old social safety net, the extremist Tudor managed to reach the second round of the presidential elections. In the end, due to a transversal coalition of right- and left-wing forces, he was defeated by Ion Iliescu, former top Communist Party official running for the Social Democrat Party (PSDR; today the PSD).

With the decline of the PRM after the 2000 electoral failure, the Democratic Party (PD) successfully used populist rhetoric and strategies, but not in combination with nationalism and the nostalgia for Ceauşescu’s old regime. This form of populism, led by the charismatic and manipulative Traian Băsescu, was remarkably different for being – at least at the discursive level – anti-communist and pro-European. Băsescu’s populist style of leadership was much more anti-elitist and anti-establishment than Vadim’s, appealing to “the People” in order to finally topple communism “perpetuated” by the prolonged rulership of Ion Iliescu and the PSDR. The PSDR was depicted as a cartel of old political and economic elites, cheating ordinary people and protected by a corrupt judicial system. Building the whole electoral

campaign around the alleged corruption of governing officials, Băsescu won the presidency in 2004, and his party (the PD) won the general elections in alliance with the National Liberal Party (PNL). One of his campaign slogans advanced the promise to “impale” corrupt state officials (i.e. rival party leaders), recalling the method used by Vlad Țepeș (Vlad the Impaler) to punish theft and corruption.

With the PD’s successful 2004 campaign populism entered a new stage: populism in government. The overall results of this shift are modest, in part because Băsescu proved to be a political opportunist with little regard for ideology. After the PD-PNL coalition broke apart (2007–2008) and President Băsescu had to cohabit with the PNL party leader as prime minister, the 2008 general elections helped the Democratic Liberal Party (PDL, the former PD) to once again form the government coalition, this time in alliance with its previous archenemy, the PSD (the supposed epitome of corruption and representative of the evil communist establishment). The successful presidential campaign in 2009, when the incumbent President Băsescu won for the second time, led to a PDL parliamentary majority and prime minister. Beginning in 2009, President Băsescu tried to transform the political system in order to consolidate his power. Claiming to speak for the people and that they would reinvigorate and modernise the state, populists turned against all bodies that intermediate representation in order to consolidate executive power. Depicting MPs as the expression of an obsolete, arrogant and corrupt elite, President Băsescu used his constitutional right to call for referenda. For instance, in one of the referenda orchestrated by Băsescu he asked for a vote on reducing by half the number of MPs and moving from a bicameral to a monocameral assembly. Led by Băsescu, the PDL changed the referendum law in 2011 and set up a 50% popular participation threshold for any referendum validation. The move turned out to be decisive in keeping Băsescu in power in 2012 when an impeachment referendum that the president lost with almost 90% of votes against him was invalidated because only 46% of voters took part.

Manipulating the mass media was another key strategy. Following favourable appointments to the direction of state TV and radio channels, hostile private TV channels have been repeatedly sanctioned by the mass media regulatory body, while their owners have been accused of various crimes and arrested. One of them died before the final sentence, while two others were convicted, sentenced and imprisoned. This “success” led Băsescu to overtly menace his rivals with legal inquiries, labelling them “prison candidates”.

With its popularity on the wane, the PDL used its power to marginalise the opposition. The two-round (run-off) majority system for electing mayors was replaced in 2011 by one more favourable to the PDL with a single round majority system. Finally, fearing a heavy defeat in the local elections scheduled for spring 2012, the PDL government decided in 2011 to suspend and postpone

them. It was only the decision of the Constitutional Court that forced the PDL to abandon the plan. The electoral defeat of the PDL ended the list of abuses, with an unprecedented electoral landslide victory that confirmed in government the opposition formed by PNL and PSD in December 2012.

These political episodes in Romania confirm the tension between democratic constitutionalism and populism: the appeal to “the People” and the use of direct democracy mechanisms to mobilise social discontent and attack the establishment have turned out to be a cover for political abuses, the consolidation of executive power, and the influence of a particular economic-political elite.

