

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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