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# Populism: New Political Parties in Europe, Governments and Ideas and their Support for a Less Integrated Europe

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**Abstract:** *Populism has become one of the most important and mentioned word in the world of politics. It has been especially important in the European politics of recent period. The very formation of the European Union holds a direct link with the need to make amends in a society that was viciously damaged by the mainstream populist rhetoric of an “us” versus “them”. This article analyses current political situation in the EU and the role of populism in it, related consequences and the possible solution scenarios.*

**Keywords:** *Brexit, European Integration, European Union, EU politics.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the Cambridge University Press chose ‘Populism’ as the word of the year. According to the publication, this choice is made not only based on the most researched words in their online platform during the timeframe of a year, but it also considers the so-called “spikes”, circumstances when that specific word is repeatedly searched much more than usual in particular days, which suggests the occurrence of an event or chain of events directly related with the sought word<sup>1</sup>.

It comes with no surprise that so much attention has been directed over the term populism, especially since for the last few years this phenomenon has grown in representation in both local and international spheres, and issues such as immigration, rising nationalism and economic discontent continue to raise tensions between people and their leaders.

However, populism should not be interpreted as a political phenomenon in itself, and that is because it has a direct link with a global political scenario that has been shaping itself for the last three decades with the advent and development of globalization. This process goes further beyond decreasing the financial, cultural, social, technological and economic barriers between countries and people, and in several cases, one of which Europe is included, this boarder globalization pattern has transformed the ways national and foreign policies interact.

As mentioned, this phenomenon is global, but perhaps it can be seen with unequalled strength in European Union - EU because no other political and economic group has yet reached such a complex and institutionalized interdependence between their member states as the EU has, with the creation of the Single Market, the common currency and the free movement of people. The way the Union has conducted its own establishment and decision making is a clear example of how governments must, in a great number of areas, make joint decisions with other states and institutions that will influence directly their domestic issues<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge University Press (Website). “Populism’ revealed as 2017 Word of the Year by Cambridge University Press”. November 30, 2017. Accessed November 19, 2018. <https://www.cam.ac.uk/news/populism-revealed-as-2017-word-of-the-year-by-cambridge-university-press>.

<sup>2</sup>Balfour, R., Emmanouilidis, J., Fieschi, C., Grabbe, H., Hill, C., Lochocki, T., Mendras, M., Mudde, C., Niemi, M.K., Schmidt, J. and Stratulat, C. (2016), *Europe’s Troublemakers. The Populist Challenge to Foreign Policy*, Brussels: European Policy Centre, p. 17.

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And while subsidiarity<sup>3</sup>, as one of the main principles of EU Law, assures that decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizens to be accountable by them, there are certain policy fields falling under EU competence that can really constrain a country's autonomy and impose a challenge to governments that have to remain approachable and accountable to their citizens when their decision-making legitimacy is under scrutiny.

In fact, European countries have become so intertwined in many different areas that unequivocally, the Union can provoke an action in the domestic developments, and at the same time, suffer from a reaction coming from each of its member states domestic policies. What has been seen on recent years is that globalization and this political cooperation/integration have made the lines of concepts such as sovereignty or national identity so faint, with their everchanging and ever evolving meanings, that some citizens feel a big gap between their claims and the Union's Policies<sup>4</sup>.

Thus, the feeling of alienation, lack of connection or representativeness with one's government or plain dissatisfaction with the decisions carried out by a governmental leader can be a political gun in the hands of people willing to promote an agenda against the elites, economic liberalism or internationalization and that is what has been occurring in several European countries as the rise of populist parties and political figures grow, gain support or representativeness in the governments and for some, threaten the very existence of the European Union and its integration project.

Understanding the connections between the rise of populism and the European momentum is not an easy task, neither it is to predict if and how the growth of populism in the form of several political parties in different countries can threaten the very existence of the EU or in the very least, how it can influence negatively its integration project.

Overall, this paper aims to shortly explain the meaning of populism, from its historical background to its main characteristics; investigate the reasons behind its popularity and growth inside Europe, highlighting the current main far right populist parties, their approach to EU integration and the challenges they represent. Lastly, this paper intends to discuss alternative measures that could be taken by the European Union and the member states to put populism into a halt.

## **“US” VERSUS “THEM”: THE POPULIST AGENDA AND ITS CONTRIBUTION FOR A LESS INTEGRATED EUROPE**

What is Populism? Where does it come from? What does it eat? Even though the idea of populism is not exactly new, having its first manifestations in the modern society taken back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the Narodnik movement in tsarist Russia and the People's Party in the United States, there is no commonly accepted definition to the term yet<sup>5</sup>.

One of the reasons to this lack of a concept is because the expression populism has been attributed in the last two centuries to a very significative number of different political movements, some so conflicting between themselves that they could be positioned to very different edges of the political spectrum. For instance, populism has been used to define the politically oriented coalition

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<sup>3</sup> European Union Law, EUR-Lex (Website), Glossary, Accessed in November 20, 2018. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/subsidiarity.html>.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Surel, Yves. 2011. “The European Union and the Challenges of Populism, in Notre Europe Policy Brief, 27”. Accessed in November 20, 2018. <http://institutdelors.eu/publications/the-european-union-and-the-challenges-of-populism/?lang=en>.

of agrarian reformers that sought a change in legislation to give American farmers economic parity with business and the industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whereas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Latin America, the term is employed to allude to the economic mismanagement, sometimes dictatorial and demagoguery practices of leaders like Argentinian Juan Domingo Perón, Peruvian Alberto Fujimori or Hugo Chávez, from Venezuela<sup>6</sup>.

Currently, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the concept in Europe is largely used to describe political right-wing parties that defend Anti-EU and anti-immigration agendas like the Austrian Freedom Party, the Dutch Party for Freedom, France's National Front, Alternative for Germany, UK Independence Party and so many others; the left-wing Latin American Pink Tide and also both right and leftist groups in the United States, personified by politicians such as Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders.

Hence, there is no precise way to comprehend a term that is far too ambiguous, but an attempt can be made by observing what these different political movements from different political and socio-economical time all have in common.

According to Yves Surel, there are three constants that can be identified in populist speeches, which are:

the reminder (as an extension of the previous point) that all power derives necessarily from the people, a group defined by nationalism or other social criteria ("the people against the powerful", for example, as shown by Pierre Birnbaum, 1979); the idea that institutions and politicians have undermined this ideal by diverting the exercise of power from its first mission, that of respect for the sovereign people, which gives rise to a rhetoric focusing on betrayal by various elites<sup>5</sup>; and the desire to restore a previous and/or more legitimate order guaranteeing the sovereignty of the people and their representatives<sup>7</sup>.

In sum, populism can be regarded as a 'thin-centered' ideology<sup>8</sup> that very simplistically, divides society in two homogenic and very antagonist groups, the "pure people" and on the other side, the "corrupt elite". For populists, politics should be an expression of the general will of the people, giving them what they want. And as it was seen, the fact that it is a thin ideology, makes it possible for it to be easily shifted, some might say manipulated, to work alongside "thicker" ideologies like socialism or liberalism, for example.

Interestingly, whichever side of the political scale decides to engage the populist rhetoric believes that only they are fit to make people's voices heard and people's wills fulfilled, and that happens due to the fact that populism is by nature exclusive. The "elite" opposed could easily be "foreigners", "Muslims", "eurocrats" or "the establishment", this dichotomy often tries to use people's will as a way to bypass institutions or vilify opponents, generating a permanent feeling of "us" versus "them", unable to coexist in harmony<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Muro, Diego. "Let the people rule! Definitions and theories of populism", In *Populism in Europe: from Symptom to Alternative?* edited by Eckart Woertz, p. 9-14. Barcelona: CIDOB, 2017. Accessed November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018. [https://www.cidob.org/en/articulos/cidob\\_report/n1\\_1/let\\_the\\_people\\_rule\\_definitions\\_and\\_theories\\_of\\_populism](https://www.cidob.org/en/articulos/cidob_report/n1_1/let_the_people_rule_definitions_and_theories_of_populism).

<sup>7</sup> Surel, Yves. 2011. "The European Union and the Challenges of Populism, in Notre Europe Policy Brief, 27". Accessed in November 20, 2018. <http://institutdelors.eu/publications/the-european-union-and-the-challenges-of-populism/?lang=en>.

<sup>8</sup> Matthews-Ferrero, Daniel. "Populismo europeo contemporáneo y la vuelta de la historia". *Revista CIDOB d'Afers Internacionals* n.119, p. 85-111, September 2018. Accessed in November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328036611\\_Populismo\\_europeo\\_contemporaneo\\_y\\_la\\_vuelta\\_de\\_la\\_historia](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/328036611_Populismo_europeo_contemporaneo_y_la_vuelta_de_la_historia), p. 88-89.

<sup>9</sup> Balfour, Rosa. "The (Resistable) Rise of Populism in Europe and its Impact on European and International Cooperation". In *IEMed. Mediterranean Yearbook 2017*. (Barcelona: 2017). p. 56-57. Accessed in November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018. [https://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxius-adjunts/anuari/med.2017/IEMed\\_MedYearbook2017\\_rise\\_populism\\_europe\\_Balfour.pdf](https://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxius-adjunts/anuari/med.2017/IEMed_MedYearbook2017_rise_populism_europe_Balfour.pdf)

Without a doubt, populism can be portrayed in a pejorative demeanor by the mainstream media, which do not reflect every political group activities and beliefs. In the European case, the presence of populist parties or representatives is not recent, they have been part of the political system since the 1980's, nevertheless, the results of recent elections and exponential growth of populist influences in several countries have raised a red flag to those concerned with the impact of populism in liberal democracies and what the parties' illiberal, nationalist, anti-pluralist or even authoritarian attitudes can represent for European Integration's future.

### THE GROWTH OF POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT PARTIES, THEIR APPROACH AND CHALLENGES TO EU INTEGRATION

Data as recent as June of the current year shows that the European Parliament is currently composed by one Left-wing Populist Party, two Centrist Populist Party and seven Populist Radical Right Party<sup>10</sup>. For the purposes of this research, the analyses will focus under the group composed by the Populist Radical Right Parties – PRRP for two main reasons: first, their political representation composes a majority in comparison with other populist governments/coalitions and second, their anti-establishment and nationalist responses suggest a setback in transnationalization of politics by focusing in national policies that can jeopardize the project of an “ever closer union”.

There is no denial that some of the populist claims are founded in real grievances, that being said, the criticism on integration, globalization and the growing Euroscepticism are actually based on cultural and economic aspects that shouldn't be taken for granted. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that the populist approach is not limited to a mere divergence in policies, if that was the case, populism wouldn't be an issue since dialectic is the very point of democracy. Rather than that, populists tend to claim that they are the only legitimate representative of the “real people” and not the so called “elites” or “establishment”<sup>11</sup>.

Previously, it was highlighted that the EU Law works in a complex multi-level competence when it comes to its policies, applying whenever necessary the principle of subsidiarity. Ironically, it is EU's own framework that makes it such an easy target to blame for the multiple crises that fall upon Europe. EU is a convenient scapegoat to populist onslaught, which uses the criticism over European Integration as means to succeed in their main scope of increasing power and influence in the domestic sphere.

To illustrate, we can point out that the nation-states are actually the ones that hold the competence to deliberate and establish policies regarding migration, social security, education and culture policies. Be that as it may, the mass discontent of the European citizens when the refugee crisis broke down in 2015 fell mostly upon Brussels, even though it was not competent to legislate on the matter. For political parties, transferring blame to an abstract and impersonal notion of EU is easier than facing potential unpopularity for measures approved by them<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Falker, Gerda. Plattner, Georg. “Populist Radical Right Parties and EU Policies: How coherent are their claims?” In *EUI Working Papers RSCAS 2018/38*. June, 2018. Accessed in November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018. [http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/56165/RSCAS\\_2018\\_38.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/56165/RSCAS_2018_38.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y). p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Buti, Marco, Karl Pichelmann. "European Integration and Populism: Addressing Dahrendorf's Quandary." *Seven Things I Learned about the Transition from Communism | VOX, CEPR Policy Portal*. February 22, 2017. Accessed in November 20, 2018. <https://voxeu.org/article/european-integration-and-populism-addressing-dahrendorfs-quandary>.

<sup>12</sup> Colomina, Carme. “Populism “made in the EU” In *Populism in Europe: from Symptom to Alternative?*, edited by Eckart Woertz, p. 23-26. Barcelona: CIDOB, 2017. Accessed November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018. [https://www.cidob.org/en/articulos/cidob\\_report/n1\\_1/populism\\_made\\_in\\_the\\_eu](https://www.cidob.org/en/articulos/cidob_report/n1_1/populism_made_in_the_eu).

Also, the “distance” from a national perspective between citizens and a massive and bureaucratic European institution might provoke a feeling of “illegitimate representation”, lack of participation in the democratic process and loss of sovereignty by a nation and its citizens, increasing the popularity of populist speeches such as “let’s take back control of our country”.

According to Stefan Lehne<sup>13</sup>, it is unlikely that the EU and the radical-right populists could co-exist since they are fundamentally incompatible, and thus, the rise of this phenomenon and its political representation can carry serious consequences for the future of the European union. The scholar highlights three main threats that these Parties represent to EU: first, the power struggles that can happen between the Old and New Parties inside the European Parliament. Currently, the so called “old establishment” still stand as the majority of representation which can anger the new forces, these last ones often hold prestige and popularity on local or national level, but sometimes are unable to represent their countries in Brussels due to the time lag that national policies take to catch with European Union’s. This time lag in power rotation can from one hand insure stability in periods of turmoil, but at the same time, may portray the EU as lacking legitimacy. Also display Brussels’ apparent inflexibility to new ways of democratic participation.

The second challenge identified by him concerns the functioning of the European Union itself. Rapid change in the political scenario will make it hard for the union to govern considering that the whole political system is based on transnational cooperation, negotiation and stability. Open confrontation can compromise the consensus which is the main working method of the union, and the existence of partners who do not share the same views and values might bring stagnation to the entire system.

The third challenge is the menace that these parties signify to EU’s symbolic role. Anti-austerity agenda, anti-globalization, extreme conservatism opposes directly core values and attributions performed by the union such as free trade, internationalism, protection of sexual, religious and foreign minorities.

At the moment, these core values and European Integration are protected under the EU system, but the political representation is the tool necessary to start implementing change by these Parties. In positions of power, it is possible to support other governments that stand by those ideas, it is possible to exercise real influence in political agendas and lastly, becoming a very real, very personified alternative to power.

Earlier this year, in light of the recent elections and the Populist Radical Right Parties – PRRP getting much more votes than in previous decades, an empirical study was conducted by Gerda Falkner and Georg Plattner for the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies to evaluate the coherence of the policy-specific demands of different parties within the European Union and how much do they actually agree or disagree when it comes to reforming EU policies<sup>14</sup>.

This evaluation was made by analyzing the Radical Right Parties’ programmatic claims on reforming three specific EU Policy field, they are: *EU Foreign and defense policy issues*, *Actions against various forms of discrimination* and *The Internal Market*. Regarding the issue of *EU Foreign and defense policies*, the results found point out that the parties do not have a coherent vision that would implicate in joint action capable of bringing reform. The results also showed that these PRRP’s visions and goals are not converging into the same point and it seems that they are not so strongly nationalists that would completely reject any EU-level policies.

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<sup>13</sup> Grabbe, Heather. Lehne, Stefan. “Can the EU Survive Populism?”. Carnegie Europe (Website). June 14, 2016. Accessed in November 22, 2018. <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2016/06/14/can-eu-survive-populism-pub-63804>

<sup>14</sup> Falkner, Gerda. Plattner, Georg. “Populist Radical Right Parties and EU Policies: How coherent are their claims?” In *EUI Working Papers RSCAS 2018/38*. June, 2018. Accessed in November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018. [http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/56165/RSCAS\\_2018\\_38.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/56165/RSCAS_2018_38.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y). p. 11-17.

To what concerns the second field, *Actions against various forms of discrimination*, when these parties already were expected to oppose liberal policies, results show a much less incoherent approach from the PRRPs. However, conflicts were found while data was analyzed, showing that in countries like Netherlands with longstanding cultural practice of non-discrimination against LGBTQ communities, the country's political and cultural tradition could impact in the Party's approach to reform of the topic.

Finally, according to the authors, for the third topic explored (*Internal Market*), the incoherence is again the word of order. The controversy resides, from one side, in the wishful liberty to be able to alter norms and standards or end supranational competition policies and the other, countries with different geopolitical orientation and weaker domestic market saw advantages in keeping EU's regulations of services that are of common interest<sup>15</sup>.

It may be too early to draw any assumptions regarding weather or how the Populist Radical Right Parties would impact the reform of EU Policies in case their influence continues to grow in member states governments and inside EU's own institutions. It seems clear that as of right now, the different PRRP's approaches to different matters and even worse, total ideological contradiction among them wouldn't allow the creation of a single unified group in the coming months. However, their power and influence should not be taken likely as something from a distance reality, the status quo is shifting, and the European Union and its member states must shift along with it if they want to remain thriving and existing as a political and economic integrated block.

## CONCLUSION

A celebrated quote from Karl Marx said "*Hegel remarked somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce!*"<sup>16</sup>. If he was correct in that statement, and historical facts are bound to repeat themselves, then the unmerciful pages of history will do well to remind us that there were no societies left unscarred from the polarization and conflicts brought on by populism, be it from left or right wing.

The very formation of the European Union holds a direct link with the need to make amends in a society that was viciously damaged by the mainstream populist rhetoric of an "us" versus "them". Over 70 years ago, the European countries came together and decided to promote integration and cooperation in order to keep the peace, to protect the minorities, to respect the fundamental rights, to promote economic rebuild and growth by uniting.

Maybe this political moment will mend ties that once bind European citizens together, but in order for that to happen is necessary to acknowledge that there is a problem and that as a problem, it needs to be addressed. But what can be done? Well, there are at least a handful of alternatives proposed by different scholars and specialists as to what should be the European Union to put a halt on populism and get back on track towards the path of integration.

Some of the alternatives proposed in a Report commended by the European Policy Center emphasizes the need for EU Policy Makers need to work on the content of the policies, not only how they are communicated to the citizens. In that same aspect, it also underlines the necessity of

<sup>15</sup> Falker, Gerda. Plattner, Georg. "Populist Radical Right Parties and EU Policies: How coherent are their claims?" In *EUI Working Papers RSCAS 2018/38*. June, 2018. Accessed in November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018. [http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/56165/RSCAS\\_2018\\_38.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/56165/RSCAS_2018_38.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y). p. 22-25.

<sup>16</sup> Marx, Karl. *Le 18 Brumaire de Louis Bonaparte*. Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2017 [1852].

politicians to engage with newer groups of people beyond their regular constituents, using the current that can play an important role providing the environment for that to happen<sup>17</sup>.

The Report even uses humor to state that the only thing mainstream politics should be coping from the populists it's their online popularity and the easy way they can get their ideas spread among several different groups of people. If communication is key, so is the language used to get the idea through, a relatable vocabulary, with non-technocratic terms might be of aid for policy-makers to engage with the voters.

While these first solutions address mostly how to make mainstream politicians as "popular" as populists, other scholars offer suggestions that involve greater core changes in the EU, like for example how essential it is to deliver common public goods like the strengthening of security and internal and external borders, a common migration, asylum, and refugee policy and also, extending the Single Market's achievements with the creation of a dedicated fiscal capacity for the Eurozone<sup>18</sup>.

Another important challenge that needs to be addressed by the European Union is the attempt to fill the social gaps caused by globalization through the building of a European Pillar of Social Rights and also ensuring a consistency between European and the nation's action budgets.

Finally, perhaps the most important action measure to be taken by the union is the promotion a more democratic, transparent and accountable process of decision making by all the European citizens, making these decisions always more accessible and comprehensible by the average man. A clear delimitation of what is the national legislator and what is the European Union's is also a way of keeping the representatives in checks and stop the blaming attribution.

There is no magic formula to prevent populism from growing but fixing and improving on European Union's project is certainly a good way preserve the European values and the international cooperation, but it has to start by capturing the approval of the own European Citizens. The general public feels so distant to the bureaucratic and complex system of regulations that is EU that most of them hardly see it as a democracy, and yet, according to a poll conducted after Brexit in six European Countries<sup>19</sup>, a clear majority of the citizens classify their EU participation as something positive whereas only a small minority would be willing to leave the Euro. As it can be seen, the regular citizens don't blindly embrace populism, they don't even reject the democratic the democratic

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<sup>17</sup>Balfour, R., Emmanouilidis, J., Fieschi, C., Grabbe, H., Hill, C., Lochocki, T., Mendras, M., Mudde, C., Niemi, M.K., Schmidt, J. and Stratulat, C. (2016), *Europe's Troublemakers. The Populist Challenge to Foreign Policy*, Brussels: European Policy Centre.

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