

The Rise of Populism in Europe

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What is Populism?

The notion of populism has been omnipresent in newspapers, speeches and articles dealing with actual political developments for the last years. However, it seems that it is often used as a buzzword to criticise unfavourable politicians rather than as a concept of a specific political style, which emerges more and more in Europe. To analyse populism is crucial because it has an enormous impact on the electoral behaviour of voters. So, first, it is vital to define *populism* in order to identify populists. Interestingly, populism has a quite negative connotation even though the word evolves from Latin meaning “the people”, which is the basis of every democratic society. Populism, therefore, claims to represent the general will of the people, which is, in essence, a vital part of democracy.

When EU-leader Van Rompuy declared in 2010 that “populism is the biggest danger of Europe” he already saw the dangers coming along with populism. However, he overlooked an important fact, namely that populism does not have to be right-wing per se – which he obviously meant when he was referring to populism as a danger. If we look to Latin America in the beginning of the 2000¹ we also observed the rise of populism with charismatic left-wing leaders like Evo Morales or Hugo Chávez. Even within Europe there are left-wing populist leaders like Alexis Tsipras in Greece – especially in the beginning of his political career - or Pablo Iglesias Turrión, the leader of Podemos in Spain. On the other hand, we witnessed the rise of right-wing populists in Europe already in the 90ies starting with the Austrian Jörg Haider of the Freedom Party (FPÖ). Today, the leader of the same FPÖ H.C. Strache is the junior partner of a coalition with the conservatives in Austria. Especially in the east we saw the rise of right-wing populists since the end of the 90ies with leaders like Victor Orbán in Hungary, Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland, Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic and in the South with Matteo Salvini in Italy – all of them are in power. We also observe right-wing populists in opposition like e.g. Marine Le Pen in France or the leaders of the Alternative for Germany (AFD) who are gaining influence, but yet have not been able to convince either the majority of the people or the other parties to get into a coalition – especially on the federal level.

Whereas in Latin America left-wing populist leaders have been able to include people in the decision-making processes, which traditionally have been marginalized like e.g. indigenous groups or rural workers, the right-wing populists in Europe tend more to exclude minorities and to foster the rule of the majority. They focus on a diffuse notion of “the people”, which is presented as a homogenous group and based on a romanticised and idealised idea of the respective society. The refusal to accept pluralism fosters the exclusion of minorities and

¹ Populism already existed before the 2000 in Latin America with e.g. Juan Perón in Argentina or Getulio Vargas in Brazil

supports the use of offensive language against special groups like ethnic minorities, but also the so-called elite or the media.

So right-wing populism with its tendencies to exclusion and left-wing populism with its tendencies to inclusion differ in ideology but not that much in style.

To follow the argumentation of Mudde and Kaltwasser, therefore “populism can be both, a corrective and a threat to democracy” (Kaltwasser, Mudde 2011:32). It can be inclusive and exclusive, depending on the ideology they are attached to. They can be a corrective for democracies when including marginalised groups into decision-making processes, but they can be a threat for democracies by doing the opposite – by excluding groups and by attacking them on the basis of their “otherness”, which poses a danger to the own “culture”.

So if we see populism as a heterogenous political phenomenon and if all of the above mentioned are populists, what do they have in common if it is not their ideology? Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that populists are ideologically flexible. “Given that populism is a thin-centred ideology, addressing only a limited set of issues, almost all populist actors combine populism with one or more other ideologies, so-called host ideologies. Broadly speaking, most left-wing populists combine populism with some form of socialism, while right-wing populists tend to combine it with some type of nationalism” (Mudde 2007:23). Populists therefore can attach to liberalism and socialism but also to nationalism, authoritarianism and fascism – depending on their personal agenda. Whether the ideology is more attached to socialism and/or liberalism this can result in inclusiveness of diverse groups and even in democratization and whether it is attached to nationalism it tends to exclude specific groups and especially minorities. All of them, however, try to present an authentic leader, a real & strong man, one of the masses, one of you, or if a woman, a good mother, a strong woman – bringing in also a gender element.

Another key component, next to the claim of the representation of the *general will of the people* and the charismatic leadership, is the strong anti-elite or anti-establishment attitude of all populist actors. They present themselves as the pure people who are fighting against the corrupt elite. To describe the establishment as corrupt also explains the big mistrust in un-elected institutions like e.g. the media or the judicial system, which are presented as part of this establishment. The rise of *fake news* and *alternative facts* as well as the often-aggressive attacks on critical journalists and media houses can be observed as tools for populists to claim their affiliation with the normal people on the ground. They claim that the elite, the media, the politicians, the institutions are corrupt and that they are the only ones representing the general will of the people. With this kind of manipulation, they are able to attract many voters – especially of those groups who see their economic status or their living standard in danger.

So, we can observe a hostility towards representative politics because it is the “wrong kind” of representation rather than a hostility towards representation itself. Populism therefore is not anti-democratic per se, but it can threaten liberal democracies when minority rights get under the radar.

Even though it is very tempting to put the president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan or even the president of Russia, Wladimir Putin in line with the populists mentioned above, they lack

the essential element of being anti-elite or anti-establishment. Something which is surely not true for Donald Trump. Many of them form part of the elite and are strongly depending on it. Otherwise nearly every politician could be described as a populist during their election campaign. This is also true for the young chancellor of Austria, Sebastian Kurz, who is very popular and gained many of his voters by typical right-wing claims, most of them referring in a negative way to international migration. However, he himself is a career politician and therefore represents the establishment nearly like almost no other.

However, we can observe, that the success of populist strategies has become clearly visible for ordinary political actors who – in many cases – use these strategies as a form of political style now. It is certainly true as well that ordinary politicians more and more use populist strategies in order to gain voters. The success of populism has been noted by every-day politics and has to be analysed by region or country in order to tackle impending challenges coming along with the rise of populism.

Practical Examples

Even though it is nearly impossible to compare different styles of populist behaviour because the strategies are heterogenic and depend very much on specific circumstances in the respective countries the populists are active in, a closer look to existing populism can be useful in order to analyse possible future trends and to tackle future challenges.

If we look at the nature of populism we see that we have populists in opposition, populists governing alone and populists in a coalition – either as the strongest party or the junior party. From the case of Austria, we can see that the populist leader from the Freedom Party (FPÖ), H.C. Strache, who is forming part of the government as a junior party to the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) with Sebastian Kurz as chancellor, is getting down in the opinion polls, whereas Victor Orbán just recently nearly got 50% in the Hungarian parliamentary elections in 2018 – governing already for 18 years. Marine Le Pen from the Rassemblement National, the former Front National, was not as successful in the elections in 2017 in France, as expected and in the elections to the German Bundestag in 2017, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) gained most of the votes (about 8 % to 12,6% in total) but a participation in the government was excluded. There exists – due to the historical background of Germany - a consensus between all parties not to get into a coalition with the far-right.

Therefore, the argument that the exclusion of populists supports them in their popularity seems to be valid, but this is also true for the argument that populists as the junior party in the government lose popularity. The case of Hungary shows us that if a populist is governing alone or as part of the leading party, it gets very sustainable. Of course, the electoral behaviour, also depends on historical experiences of the societies as well as of the economic status, on the possibilities of/and leaders of the other political parties but also on the performance of the populist leaders and their party – either in opposition or in the government. Alexis Tsipras, prime minister of Greece, is losing constantly in the opinion polls because many people are not happy with his economic program; he gets less popular.

The case of Brexit is actually a very interesting one, because it also showed the limits of populist activities, which have mostly been spreading misinformation and lies during their

campaign. As the leaders of the leave-campaign have not been willing to overtake the responsibility of the outcome of the referendum, people realized that they might have been exploited for power-purposes. The day after the referendum the citizens of GB googled - according to google trends - “What does it mean to leave the EU? What is the EU? Which countries are in the EU and what will happen now we’ve left the EU?” The campaign itself very much relied on the feeling that the British culture is somehow in danger, using especially migrants and foreign workers as scapegoats. The high influx of refugees in 2015, with its high media coverage, facilitated this process.

Why does populism work?

In times of globalisation, an interconnected world, rapid technologies, challenging work and life balance and the cross-border cooperation of various institutions, people often are not able to understand the complex mechanisms, which are responsible for the functioning of societies and states. Therefore, populists give simple answers to complex problems, sometimes even create problems artificially, they often contradict themselves and they build upon feelings and emotions. A strong feeling of crisis is vital for the success of populists, which is the reason why they are instrumentalising issues of concern for “the people”, namely that their society and culture is somehow in danger. Scapegoats like refugees and migrants in Europe are well suited for right-wing populists whereas the USA, financial market or the fiscal policies of the EU serve as scapegoats for the left-wing populists in Latin America and in Europe. By promoting fears and stigmas people feel united and they feel that they are addressing issues which are essential for their survival – regardless if these “threats” are real or not.

Scapegoats and conspiracies, like e.g. that George Soros is responsible for the “migration crisis”, which has been said by Victor Orbán and has even been taken up by high level politicians of other countries, serve as an easy answer to very complex events, taking into account that migration is very multifaceted and depends on manifold different experiences, events, on the individual and collective level. Furthermore, the countries taking the most refugees are not within Europe, but their names are Turkey, Lebanon, Pakistan, Uganda and Iran. All of them belong to the poorer countries. Still the fear of a “flooded Europe by refugees” is real for many citizens – right-wing populists have been very successful on this agenda.

Especially right-wing populists misuse the European Union by presenting it as a bureaucratic institution which is stealing money from the people and which is occupied with the negotiations of useless regulations. This was actually very successful in Great Britain with the Brexit campaign, lead by the populist Nigel Farage. Even though e.g. the region of Blaenau Gwent is one of the regions profiting most from money of the EU, 61% voted to leave. The same is true for Victor Orbán who is attacking the European Union on a regular basis, knowing that the complex functioning of the different EU institutions are an easy target to present to his voters although Hungary is 4th in the list of net receivers of EU-money².

² <http://www.bpb.de/nachschlagen/zahlen-und-fakten/europa/70580/nettozahler-und-nettoempfaenger>

Another important tool for populists is its very aggressive rhetoric and wording which attaches upon diffuse feelings. After the influx of refugees in Europe in 2015, which has mainly been a management crisis, rather than a “refugee crisis”³, the wording became very important. The politicians but also many newspapers and journalists uncritically overtook and keep on repeating the wording and soon we have been reading of “refugees overrunning Europe” or of “refugee waves flooding” Europe – all of them addressing negative feelings and fears. Even though addressing fears does not bring any solution to the actual problems, it is working, and people even have the feeling that saying out loud racist or other insulting comments is socially acceptable again. It somehow gives them even a sense of freedom. Concerningly, this touches upon low states of minds, because if a migrant or a person from a minority gets less social or economic support – which is planned at the moment e.g. in Austria – this does not mean that the ordinary citizen is getting it’s share from this. Still some people are content, if another person gets less than themselves, which tends to split societies rather than to support unity, empathy and solidarity, essential elements for a functioning democratic society and state.

Another reason why populism is that successful is that the media seems to like populists. As charismatic and strong leaders, they present a perfect symbol for front pages of Newspapers and articles. This is simply easier to sell, and many publishing houses suffer from financial problems anyway. In addition, populists are popular within the respective societies and media (also national media) do have the duty to cover what people are interested in as well. With the rise of social media, it became even easier for populists to attract people, because many of the articles and news are already filtered and exclude opposing opinions before it gets to the hand of the user. A culture of double-checking would therefore be essential to protect the people from decisions based on the lack of information or even of misinformation.

How to address right-wing populism in Europe?

Even though populism itself isn’t good or bad, right-wing populism with its tendencies to nationalism and authoritarianism is a threat to European democracies and especially to the rights of minorities or other social groups like the LGBTI community or specific religious groups. Therefore, it is crucial to address right-wing populism properly and to find ways how to handle it without arrogance. Because even if many of these feelings of threat may lack objective reality, for the people, they are real and therefore must be taken seriously and in an inclusive and sympathetic manner. Tools could be objective information, the implementation of education laws in the handling of social media, but also transparency in political decision-making processes and programs for integration to address existing prejudices. Interestingly, big cities who tend to be more multicultural than rural areas have less prejudices towards migrants and refugees because they get more into contact with them. Therefore, they are more resistant to populism, when it tries to take advantage of the weaker position of minorities.

³ E.g. after the wars in Ex-Yugoslavia in the 90ies, Austria alone took more than 110 000 refugees, most of them from the muslim part of Bosnia Herzegowina and the consensus was clear that these people have to be helped. A politicization of the issue did not take place.

To foster cross-cultural and cross-regional exchange is therefore vital for the handling of prejudices against specific groups or minorities. A dialogue with the people is essential for forming an inclusive society. Especially politicians on the local level, like mayors, can be very helpful in this context because they are aware of the concerns and problems of the people within their communities.

When it comes to the media, which has a watchdog function in a democratic state, it would be important to invest in the education and training. The special responsibility of journalists also includes to be critical and not to be caught by the special aura of someone. This, however, also must come in line with respectable working conditions and payment as well as with a sustainable financial background of the publishing houses. Also, special protection when it comes to the free execution of the work of journalists is needed.

The Civil Society, the other watchdog in the democratic state, is responsible for addressing leadership and dangers for democracy itself. It is the duty of democratically elected politicians to act in favour of the society and not to shape his or her own power position. Civil society organisations should keep reminding the people in power of this.

Lastly it is also essential to address values like solidarity and empathy. In every nation state there are minorities, either based on ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation et. al. and all of them form part of the nation and therefore must be protected by the representatives of the state. It is the duty of the state to balance compromises between different views and agendas.

Conclusion

Even though we can witness a rise of right-wing populism in Europe, most of the European leaders aren't right-wing populists. Angela Merkel is still governing in Germany, Emmanuel Macron in France, Theresa May in Great Britain, Pedro Sánchez in Spain, etc. Of course, it is vital to be aware about future trends, but it is also vital not to panic when it comes to populism. Populism can give a voice to groups that do not feel represented and it can even support more political participation. So, populism is neither "good" nor "bad". In the 90ies, Austria accepted more than 100 000 refugees from the Balkan wars of which most integrated well and stayed in the country. But neither politicians nor the media exalted it as a threat to the Austrian culture and therefore didn't nourish right-wing populism. Especially when it comes to basic rights, all institutions and people in power have to be reminded of decency. Supranational institutions like the EU can be supportive and we see now with the infringement proceedings against Hungary and Poland that a political culture based on the abolishment of basic democratic and human rights, is not accepted by the majority of the European countries. Even if processes are slow and sometimes are initiated late, we have to keep addressing responsibilities and to react to the challenges occurring in Europe at the moment.

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