Nationalism, Populism and Sovereignism. The Return of the Strong Men

Europe and Populist Movements

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On 5 April 2019, Italian Interior Minister Matteo Salvini announced the creation of the "European Alliance of Peoples and Nations," intended to bring together all the sovereigntist and Eurosceptic[2] forces in the context of the European elections of 26 May 2019. The new alliance rejected "bureaucrats, do-gooders and bankers" under the slogan "Towards a common sense Europe: peoples rise up."[3] This announcement seems to foreshadow a vote primarily between, in the words of French President Emmanuel Macron speaking one year earlier, "demagogic" "nationalists" on one side and Europeanist "progressives" on the other.[4] Whilst that framing of the European elections is both a political strategy and a considerable oversimplification of a much more complex reality, it nevertheless illustrates the potentially destabilizing impact of the European issue[5] for national party systems. As for Mr Salvini's remarks, they, too, illustrate the importance of a phenomenon, namely, "populism." A generic category first coined in the field of politics, in academia, "populism" refers to a type of discourse and mobilization based on the opposition, expressed in moral terms, between allegedly corrupt elites (political, intellectual, financial, etc.) and an inherently virtuous, supposedly homogeneous people, for whom the populist leader alone claims to be able to speak.

Across the world, the phenomenon as a whole seems to encompass the election or maintenance in power of authoritarian leaders, the cultivation of transgressive language and behaviour, and the rejection of intermediate bodies as just another parasitic element feeding off the direct relationship between leaders and peoples. Unlike in Latin America, where it can also refer to a means of mobilization aimed at resuscitating populations that have been dominated in the political game, in Europe populism is most often associated with anti-democratic forms of mobilization that operate by means of exclusion (of minorities, elites, etc.). Consequently, in Europe, the term "populist"[6] is strongly disqualifying and is sometimes used to lump together, under a single label, political forces (on the far right, on the anti-capitalist left), movement organizations (e.g. Pegida[7] in Germany) and social movements (the "indignados," or "indignant ones," in southern Europe, the "gilets jaunes," or "yellow vests," in France) that might at first glance seem to be united in their shared rejection of "elites" and the EU but are actually quite heterogeneous.

European populisms have very different timelines and dynamics, depending on the context (especially, the

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different paths followed by Western and post-Communist Europe). However, the 2008 economic and financial crisis, the sovereign debt crisis that began to weaken the eurozone in 2010, and, finally, the increased migratory pressure faced by several EU countries (a pressure that culminated, in the summer of 2015, in Germany, with the acceptance of more than one million refugees) have been accompanied, across the continent, by both the revitalization of existing "populist" parties and the creation of new ones that, if not "populist" per se, can at least be considered protest parties, whether on the anti-capitalist left (Podemos (We Can) in Spain, Aufstehen (Stand Up) in Germany, etc.) or the far right (the German AfD, the Czech SPD,[8] etc.). There are even some parties that deliberately blur the distinction between left and right (e.g. the Cinque Stelle, or Five-Star, movement in Italy).

Beyond the timeline of this "multi-crisis," the question is to what extent do European populisms, whilst part of the aforementioned worldwide trend, also fall within a temporality and set of dynamics specific to the context of the construction of Europe. The European Community may originally have been created to stave off the "risk" of populism. However, because it bypasses the principle of popular legitimacy in favour of an elitist, weakly parliamentary process, the deep integration that it involves indirectly fans the flames of populist mobilizations through its effects on national societies and political systems. Nevertheless, although the politicization, over the last thirty years, of European issues has helped to deeply transform national parties, we are not witnessing an overall repositioning of the latter around a transnational divide that pits sovereigntist populists against mainstream pro-European political forces.

Between Technocratic Governance and Political Demand: The Limits of a Strategy of Depoliticizing European Issues

At the global level, the emergence of populism has, since the early 1990s, generally been attributed to two types of factors related to the existence of populist "demand" and "supply." First, a number of trends or situations fuel the demand for a "populist" political option. These include the postmodern condition (decline of the great mobilizing ideologies, of class identities), globalization (economic, cultural), and growing dissatisfaction with the political offer of mainstream parties, which are regarded as all the same and no longer representing two clearly identifiable competing alternatives. Second, populist mobilizations entail the establishment of lasting organizations, usually partisan, highly personalized, and centred on the figure of a popular and charismatic leader claiming to have a monopoly on representing the voice of the people.

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However, in many ways, the construction of Europe impacts both factors. For one thing, it exacerbates the redistribution of resources (economic, financial, political) caused by globalization. At the same time, by depoliticizing the choices made in the name of a "best practice" backed by technocratic legitimacy, it contributes to the erosion of politics or even the weakening of intermediate bodies. Both are trends in which some[9] see the main causes of populism. For another, because European elections function according to different rules from those governing the "front-line" national polls (legislative or presidential elections), in terms of electoral behaviour and voting methods, they have made it possible for several "populist" political parties that lack parliamentary representation at the national level but are represented in the European Parliament to accumulate a number of resources (financial, political), which they then invest, sometimes successfully, in the national electoral arena.[10]

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[8] *Svoboda a přímá demokracie*: Freedom and Direct Democracy.

[9] See: MOUFFE, C. *L'illusion du consensus*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2014; and MAIR, P. *Ruling the void: The hollowing of Western democracy*. London: Verso, 2013, p. 199-142.

[10] One notable example is the French RN, which has been continuously represented in the European Parliament since 1984, but had no representation in the French national parliament from 1988 to 2012.

In this regard, the destabilizing impact of the construction of Europe on national party systems is all the more powerful because European issues themselves have gradually been reclassified, over the last thirty years, as political and election issues. Although for several decades (with the exception of the United Kingdom) mainstream parties managed to protect themselves from the potentially corrosive effects of European issues (which cause rifts within them whilst exacerbating differences amongst their voters) by refraining from making them election issues,[11] this strategy of depoliticization was gradually defeated by three trends. First, with the establishment of the Economic and Monetary Union in the early 1990s, the EU became an organization whose decisions directly affect the redistributive logic within its Member States, making it difficult not to make it an election issue. Second, political parties' and people's positions on the construction of Europe are increasingly closely correlated with their positions on highly politicized subjects, such as immigration or minority rights.[12] Third, if deepening the logic of integration ultimately entails redrawing the boundaries of collective solidarity (on financial, migratory and energy issues), the EU cannot base that change on the existence of a European people in whose name that solidarity would be practiced. As an "empty place" devoid of people, it is the main target of a type of discourse that absolutizes the latter.

It is thus in the name of the people that a number of political parties have sought to politicize European issues, most often in an illiberal way. This has been particularly true of the sovereigntist or even anti-European "populist" formations resulting from schisms in the mainstream parties. Such formations would include, for example, the sovereigntist party Debout la France (Stand Up France), which emerged in 2008 following a split with the French UMP, or Germany's AfD, created in 2013, mostly by former members of the CDU and the liberal FDP party, in response to the sovereign debt crisis in the eurozone. This politicization is also embraced by single-issue parties, whose main goal is to get their country out of the EU, from

the British UKIP (created in 1993) to the Dutch Forum for Democracy (FvD) (founded in 2016). Although these parties contribute to the politicization of European issues in an essentially illiberal way (here, rejection of the EU goes hand in hand with rejection of immigration and cultural and societal pluralism), they nevertheless give voice to a dissatisfaction with how democracy is functioning amongst the mainstream parties' voters, in particular by calling for regular referenda on European issues.

As we have seen, the tension at the heart of Europe's construction exacerbates the dynamics underlying populist mobilizations, namely, the existence of a predominantly technocratic form of government that cultivates the illusion of being apolitical, even as it drives an integration process that is eminently political, insofar as it strongly impacts the distribution of resources (between employees, between territories) within the Member States. Nevertheless, the gradual politicization of European issues in national electoral arenas has not led, in its current state, to a general reshuffling of alignments pitting Eurosceptic populists against mainstream "Europeanist" parties.[13]

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Towards a Repositioning of Alignments around the "Populists" vs "Europeanists" Divide?

Twenty years before Macron's framing of the European elections, the political scientist Stefano Bartolini[14] outlined the scenario of a global repositioning of political alignments within the Member States and at the EU level around an opposition between, on one hand, globally pro-European mainstream parties and, on the other, the political forces that he referred

[11] Mair, P. "The limited impact of European integration on national party systems." *West European Politics*, vol. 23, p. 27-51, 2000.

[12] See: Hooghe, L. and Marks, G., "A postfunctionalist theory of European integration: from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus." *British Journal of Political Science,* No. 39, p. 1-23, 2008.

[13] In the sense that the latter would favour either maintaining the institutional status quo within the EU or deepening the integration dynamic.

[14] Bartolini, S. *The consequences of European integration for national political representation*. Florence: European University Institute, seminar paper, 1999.

to as "anti-establishment" at the time, advocating alternatives to the current EU and its policies. What has actually come of this repositioning?

As noted, the use of the term "populist" makes it possible to (wrongly) equate forces that at first glance seem similar in their opposition to the EU but are actually situated at opposite ends of the political spectrum, namely, the anti-capitalist left and the far right. A global repositioning of alignments based on the struggle between "populists" and "Europeanists" would thus bring together the voters of both political "families," at least in their shared hatred of the EU and "elites," in the model of the Italian coalition government including both the League and the Cinque Stelle movement (although the latter's position on the left is clearly open to debate). However, as we will see, whilst certain evolutions within Europe's anti-capitalist left might point to a degree of convergence, on a limited number of issues, with far-right "populists," such a realignment is currently impossible due to the divisions within each of these political "families" and the existence of differences between their constituencies that are unlikely to be overcome.

In terms of their positions, at first glance, some points of convergence between the anti-capitalist left and the far right do seem to be emerging. This is especially true of their relationship with the EU. Although most of the parties concerned no longer object to EU membership on principle, they nevertheless retain a certain ambiguity in this regard. Thus, whilst the French RN, the Austrian FPÖ or the Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) party have, for electoral reasons, abandoned their principled and explicit opposition to the EU and the euro, the parties on the anti-capitalist left comprising the "Now, the people!"[15] electoral alliance call for "casting off the shackles of the European treaties," albeit without explicitly advocating leaving the Union. Likewise, although the anti-capitalist left does not share the far right's xenophobia, it is nevertheless affected by migratory issues. That is the case of Die Linke (the Left Party) in Germany, which, since 2018, has had to compete with the new Aufstehen party, which favours a restrictive migratory policy, or La France Insoumise (France Unbowed or

LFI), which is divided on the issue. Finally, the anti-capitalist left and the far right overlap on the crucial geopolitical issue of EU-Russia relations, with support for some of Vladimir Putin's actions sometimes being found in similar votes by the ENF[16] and EUL[17] groups in the European Parliament (e.g. on the issue of the sanctions adopted by the EU following the annexation of Crimea).

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Nevertheless, the scenario of a global repositioning that would bring together "populists" from opposite ends of national political spaces in a shared hatred of the EU is made unlikely, first, by the extreme diversity of positions within each of these "families," whose ability to transnationalize their action thus remains weak. Within the anti-capitalist left, "Now, the people!" suffers from the absence of the heavyweight Die Linke party, as well as from the unique position of the LFI, which, unlike its partners, continues to raise the possibility of leaving the EU. Similarly, the establishment of a sovereigntist alliance bringing together nationalist conservative and far-right parties, united by a shared rejection of multiculturalism and societal liberalism, is compromised, amongst other things, by the demarcation strategies that set some parties against others (the Polish PiS, for example, wants to avoid any risk of being equated with the French RN). It is further hindered by profound differences on socio-economic issues and, especially, on how open the common market should be to the rest of the world (with the French RN espousing more protectionist views than economically more neo-liberal formations such as the Austrian FPÖ or the German AfD).

[15] Namely, Podemos, La France Insoumise (LFI), Portugal's Bloco de Esquerda and the Nordic socialist left parties.
[16] Europe of Nations and Freedom: group encompassing the far-right parties.
[17] European United Left: group encompassing the parties on the anti-capitalist left.

Furthermore, the existence of profound differences between voters of the far right and the anti-capitalist left shows that the common hostility towards "elites" and scepticism towards the EU coexist with vastly different worldviews. This can be seen, for example, in a comparison of the voters of the French RN and German AfD, on one hand, and those of the French LFI and Die Linke, on the other: other than a deep shared dissatisfaction with the functioning of representative democracy, fears regarding economic globalization and a certain hostility towards the US superpower, the voters of the anti-capitalist left and the far right have quite clearly distinguishable positions on the issues of migration, the relationship with Islam and even membership in the EU and the eurozone, with the former being mostly in favour of religious pluralism, concerned by xenophobia and, for the most part, supporting the idea of the construction of Europe on principle.[18]

If lumping the far right and anti-capitalist left under the same "populist" label, due to the allegedly similar threat they pose to the EU's survival, is more a matter of political discourse than empirical observation, in the author's view, a more serious risk lies in the blurring of the boundary between "populism" and mainstream parties within the large party families embodied mainly by the European People's Party (EPP) and the Party of European Socialists (PES). Within the former, the blurring of the distinction between the conservative right, the sovereignist right and the far right, eloquently symbolized by the meeting between Salvini and Viktor Orbán on 28 August 2018, is exemplified by the existence of coalitions or agreements between conservative and far-right forces at both the national level (e.g. the ÖVP/FPÖ government coalition in Austria) and the regional level (e.g. agreement between the People's Party (PP) and Vox in Andalusia). It is further illustrated by the authoritarian drift of certain conservative (FIDESZ) and/or sovereigntist (PiS) right-wing governments, for whom the people's will, embodied solely by majority rule, cannot be limited by either the constitutional courts or the shared exercise of sovereignty at the European level. As for the PES, it has not sanctioned the member parties that have entered into governmental alliances with nationalist or far-right parties, be it the former Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico's SMER-SD, which was a Slovak National Party (SNS) coalition partner from 2006 to 2010, then again from 2016 to 2018, or Austria's SPÖ, an FPÖ coalition partner in the Austrian state of Burgenland since 2015.

The populist "risk" thus lies primarily within the political families of the so-called mainstream parties, rather than in the inaccurate equating of far-right and anti-capitalist-left "populism." From this point of view, the perfectly "euro-compatible" populism that the political scientist Peter Mair[19] saw at work in the mode of government of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, which short-circuited intra-partisan democracy in favour of a highly personalized leadership, disregarding intermediary bodies and dismissing the left/right divide, viewed as outdated, in the name of a "best practice" that was supposedly neutral and equally beneficial to all, is just as likely to fuel dissatisfaction with the functioning of representative democracy, as can be seen in many EU countries (an attitude itself strongly correlated with scepticism regarding EU membership), as the populism of the "extremes."

[18] Some 89% of LFI voters say that they are broadly supportive of the European construction project versus 40% of RN voters (CEVIPOF, *Enquête* électorale *française 2019*; https//sciencespo.fr.cevipof/files/rapport_ipsos_fevrier_2019). In Germany, Die Linke voters consider that a candidate's commitment to greater cooperation between EU countries would increase their likelihood of voting for him or her, unlike AfD voters (*Populismusbarometer* 2018 , Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin und Bertelsmann Stiftung, p. 15).

[19] MAIR, P. *Populist democracy, party democracy and the Blair paradox*. Florence: European University Institute, Workshop on populism, 14-15 January 2000.