# The (Resistable) Rise of Populism in Europe and its Impact on European and International Cooperation

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2016 is widely seen as the *annus horribilis* for Europe, and the rise of populism identified as the main culprit for the political crisis following the failure to deal with the refugee influx, the British vote to leave the EU, and several other events which seemed to bring the European Union to the brink. For the first time since the end of the Second World War, key decisions about cooperation in Europe seemed determined by the rise of a variety of populist parties, mostly on the far right of the political spectrum, casting a dark shadow on the health and future of the institutions of cooperation such as the European Union.

Understanding the linkages between the rise of populism and Europe's crises, however, is less clear. Have populist parties really caused this malaise? What responsibility does "the establishment" have? How can we disentangle the ways in which domestic politics impact foreign policy choices?

In 2017, Brexit and the election in the US of President Donald Trump appear to have vaccinated the rest of Europe against populism, yet its underlying causes will not be wished away by a magic wand. An understanding of the deeper reasons behind the symptoms of populism is needed to guide political and policy choices and to identify alternatives to the nationalist and anti-multilateral course advocated by populism.

## What is Populism?

Populism is not a new phenomenon; in Europe it has been a force to be reckoned with at least since the 1980s and an object of extensive study. Scholarly focus has been mostly on the impact of populism on liberal democracy, concerned with parties' illiberal, anti-pluralist and authoritarian features. This lack of attention to the consequences of international policy reflected the fact that populism, especially of the right-wing genre, is by definition nationalist; its agenda has been virtually exclusively national; foreign policy issues have hardly featured in any manifesto or in political campaigning; and, until very recently, cooperation between populist parties coming from different countries has been extremely limited.

The definition around which there is most consensus holds populism as "an 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."[1] The key point is that a populist party claims to represent "the people," while, in fact, it "ventriloquises"[2] them, in Timothy Garton Ash's words. By definition, populism is exclusive; the "other" can variously be "the elite," "foreigners" "Eurocrats," "the establishment," "immigrants". This claim to directly represent "the people" enables them to bypass institutions, as Donald Trump shows, demonize opponents, and polarize the debate between "us" and "them," "the people versus the enemy."

[1] Mudde, Cas. "The populist *Zeitgeist,*" in *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 39, No. 4, pp. 542-563, (2004).
[2] Timothy Garton Ash, Lecture at the CEPS Ideas Lab, Brussels 24 February 2017.

The populist view of democracy is majoritarian, illiberal and anti-pluralist, which is a necessary corollary of representing "the people." Hence the risk of authoritarian drift, and the seeming compatibilities and similarities with Putin's "sovereign democracy" and Orban's "illiberal democracy." In pluralist democracies, the outcome of referendums such as the British one on the EU is particularly problematic from this point of view.

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Ideologically, populism is thin and can transcend the left-right political spectrum, though right-wing populism is posing the greatest challenges to the status quo in Europe and in the US. Working on a moralistic rather than programmatic platform, populists tend to manipulate issues instrumentally and thus, unlike mainstream politicians, do not have to deal with the challenge of coherence towards a policy programme. Populists can contradict themselves or change their mind, making them adaptable to capturing the *zeitgeist*.

**Why Populism?**

With populism becoming the most fashionable topic of 2016, often ill-informed explanations as to its cause abound. The frequently made correlation between economic crisis and the rise of populism does not stand empirical testing; there are cases in which populism has grown without economic crisis (in Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands), and cases in which economic crisis has not facilitated the rise of populism (Ireland and Portugal). Greece saw a populist party grow under economic pressure, but the ongoing migration crisis there has not caused a xenophobic populist backlash beyond a few episodes. Golden Dawn, and extreme right-wing xenophobic, but not populist, party lost attraction with the refugee influx. Here too a widely held correlation between immigration and populism is not corroborated by evidence.

There is much confusion between causes and symptoms. Globalization, inequality, fears of loss of cultural identity are the usual culprits. Hyper- globalization since 1989, especially in terms of dislocation of production and its social consequences coupled with the uncertain impact of rapid technological development certainly provide a challenging environment. Gobalization's depth and ubiquity since the end of the Cold War and the narrative of its unilateral unavoidability embraced by the ruling elites, as it has spread unhindered, has no doubt caused a revolt against it and those who appear to represent it.

Against this backdrop, inequality has risen in many countries, whereby inequality is intended not just as a social and economic condition, but inequality of opportunity and inequality of access to opportunities, such as education. Culprits are seen in international organizations, the European Union, International Financial Institutions, elites, technocrats and experts, who are all seen to have benefited from globalization at the expense of those left behind.

The cultural dimension of globalization is another frequently examined area to explain the rise of populism, whereby national identity is seen as under threat because of immigration, globalization and terrorism. These are areas in which populists have been very successful in influencing policy and shifting center-right immigration policies closer to restrictive positions, for instance in Denmark in the 2000s when the center-right government needed the support of the Danish People's Party. Italy too under the populist government of Berlusconi, pursued restrictive immigration policies to satisfy the xenophobic junior coalition party Northern League.

More recently, the German AfD showed a surge when switching from its original anti-Euro rhetoric to an anti-immigration one during the refugee influx, reaping some short-lived electoral benefits from it during 2016. Indeed, fears of immigration have probably been the easiest sentiment to mobilize and manipulate. Yet this does not mean that cultural identity is the cause of populism; it has merely proven to be an area where rage and anger can be instrumentalized into vocal opposition, and has been

successful at paralyzing policy responses of governments.

One underexplored area that is crucial to understand the rise of populism is the crisis of advanced representative democracies. Especially in the European context, where the EU plays a major role in managing interdependence, the additional supranational or intergovernmental levels of decision-making are contested and seen as illegitimate, as a dislocation of legitimacy and responsibility. It is at the European level that the nexus between internal and external policy plays out the most, and it is seen as far away from the people – "take back control" was the slogan of the Brexiters during the referendum campaign

**Populism and Foreign Policy**

It is not by design that populists have been successful on international and foreign policy issues. Interdependence and European integration meant the domestic-foreign nexus became far more intertwined. And populists have shown a remarkable skill in capturing the dissatisfaction of large sectors of the population.

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The rise of the salience of international issues – be it European integration, immigration, trade – have provided platforms around which populists have seized their moment. In doing so, they entered a territory uncharted to the parties themselves, anew to international politics, but also novel to the traditional political parties and government representatives, who are more used to managing foreign policy with little scrutiny from the public debate, and to the community of scholars and observers, and were unprepared for understanding the arrival of such new actors.

While confirming an ability to capture the debate, dominate the news cycle, and manipulate public fears in times of crisis, what is less clear is how these parties and movements actually influence policy preferences and decisions in real terms. What pathways of influence have been seen?[3] The first and most visible level is the way in which populists have managed to gain space on the media, not just by contributing to the debate but by shaping it and its vocabulary, with some media (social media, tabloids) functioning as a megaphone to the populist call. But this does not explain the impact on concrete policy choices, especially in foreign policy.

Here the relationship between mainstream or political parties which have traditionally held government and populist parties is key. In the recent past, when populist parties have been in coalition governments (Italy, Denmark, Belgium, Austria, Netherlands), they have a track record of influencing policy limited to the key areas of concern, which mostly have revolved around migration policy. But mainstream parties in government have also shifted towards the positions of populist parties. Past coalitions of the right and far right have been behind the shift from the 2000s onwards towards the right on immigration, law and order, austerity and national security. The shift could be a reflection of changes in public opinion influencing government policy, but could equally reflect a preference of mainstream parties which take advantage of the existence of populist parties as a fig leaf to justify policy choices. While the correlation is evident, the causality is less clear. In other words, there are two possible pathways of influence between mainstream and populist views. Populists may be reacting to a changing political context, putting the mainstream under pressure to take up their agenda, or they can act as "enablers" of decisions which, essentially, are a policy preference of the mainstream government.

The successive European crises of 2015-2016 saw plenty of examples of political leaders from traditional party families mimicking populist style and rhetoric, and governments taking on populist agendas especially during election campaigns. In Slovakia,

[3] The pathways of influence are based on Rosa Balfour et al. *The Troublemakers. The populist challenge to foreign policy*, Brussels, European Policy Centre: March, 2016.

Social Democratic Prime Minister Robert Fico took on a populist anti-immigration stance to ensure his re-election and then formed a government with the far right. France's political mainstream right (Nicolas Sarkozy during the contest for presidential candidates within *Les Republicains* and then Francois Fillon, presidential candidate for the same party) made numerous attempts at taking up policy points from Marine Le Pen in the hope of competing with the *Front National*.

The copycat tactic of picking up the populist agenda and/or rhetoric is usually not successful, as it is not seen as genuine. Indeed, in France the pendulum swung unexpectedly in the other direction, with the election of Emmanuel Macron, a centrist candidate with a pro-European platform. In the case of Britain, the Conservative party's embrace of Brexit has ensured the close-to demise of the UK Independence Party which had triggered the whole debate on EU membership despite having only one Member of Parliament (none since the 2017 elections). But UKIP was the trigger of the call for the referendum, not the cause. Had the Conservative party in particular and the Labour party not been deeply divided over EU membership, UKIP's demand would have fallen on deaf ears. In other words, how mainstream governments chose to respond to populism is key. The mutual manipulation between government and populists, whether in coalition, in opposition or outside parliament, thus represents the relationship that requires closest scrutiny in order to verify the responsibility and accountability of political choices.

Populist pressure has also led governments to choose to defend "there is no alternative" politics, using as justification the existence of populist parties. On migration, in particular, even the left has taken on far more restrictive positions compared to its more liberal ideological grounding. The result has been a narrowing of the range of policy responses to the eurozone crisis or migration influx, *de facto* strengthening the preference towards policies of austerity and of containment of numbers of refugees entering the EU.[4] In turn, if the centre advocates "there is no alternative" politics it contributes to shrinking the space for critique and devising alternative policies.

[4] Balfour et al., 2016.

Until recently, populists had never affected the principles of international cooperation in an existential way; Britain and the US could potentially represent a qualitative leap with uncertain consequences. We do not know how Brexit will evolve; we do not yet know whether the US system of checks and balances will contain the President's declarations and prevent them from turning into reality. We have seen, however, foreign policy issues being used to satisfy domestic demand, such as with the travel ban. And even the populist governments Poland and Hungary, which until recently had concentrated their efforts in curtailing liberal democracy internally, have started to make choices which affect their foreign policy, again over migration issues and on supranational governance in Europe. It remains to be seen whether this antagonism with the EU will pay the expected political dividends.

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Finally, populists have been making a disproportionate impact by exploiting the failing business model of the media, which sees outrageous statements as a means to survive in a media world where traditional journalism is struggling to stay alive. In Britain and the US, mainstream media and tabloids have facilitated the rise of populism by offering unchecked platforms, backed by the megaphone of social media. Populism has captured the middle ground thanks to the media, even if it does not represent the middle ground of public opinion.

### The Impact of Populism on Integration and Cooperation in Europe

Alongside globalization, Europeanization has widened the scope of foreign policy and at the same time domesticized it: external issues have become

more relevant at home and domestic issues have become more relevant in foreign policy. The crises of national democracy which have helped the rise of populism in European states reverberates at the EU level because the EU and its external policy is an easy target for populism. Hence the impact on areas which had so far gone largely unnoticed by European publics.

At the same time, Europeanization and cooperation among EU Member States complicates policy-making and its accountability. Not only are national democracies undergoing crises, but their linkages to accountability at the EU level are unclear. Institutional engineering by widening the powers of the European Parliament, strengthening co-decision or improving transparency have not provided sufficient solutions when the malaise is deep. The dislocation of decision-making to supranational levels, albeit carried out by legitimately elected representatives, has made European politics and policies another easy target. In essence, the EU is seen as illegitimate, regardless of the content of the discussions held in Brussels. So populism has an impact on the EU, while the EU is seen as a cause of populism.

The EU system, driven by consensus-building, compromise seeking and avoiding veto situations, makes the impact of populist *aut-auts* more dramatic. A consultative referendum held in the Netherlands in March 2016 on the EU's agreement with Ukraine risked jeopardizing the country's future. The kerfuffle over deliberating on the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with Canada (CETA) by Belgium's regional parliament of Wallonia was another case. Not to speak of the chaotic response to the refugee influx in 2016, where populists seemed to hold the whole of the EU hostage to their views, or the Brexit vote, where very slim majorities imposed existential decisions on the whole country. Yet the focus should not just be on populism. Scepticism about the EU runs deeper and wider than populism. Populism's force and rage has triggered the end of the permissive consensus which allowed the EU and governments to carry out business with limited challenge from their citizens, especially in those policy domains of less interest or impact on citizens' lives, such as international relations. Today's challenge of the basic assumption about foreign policy are being challenged: trade, development aid, immigration and external migration policies, belonging to the international community and its institutions, alliances and organizations are all under the magnifying glass.

**Where to Next?**

The degree of polarization and conflict in societies which populism has exploited has no silver lining, and there will be no turning back the clocks. The debates about international cooperation, fundamental rights, and all the key tenets of the post-World War II period have all been affected as much as day-to-day policy choices. But it does call politics to address the reasons for which this revolt is taking place.

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Instead of taking on the solutions advocated by the populists, politics needs to examine whether, beneath their cry, there is scope for better understanding why society has become so divided and with such important consequences for the rest of the world. Questioning whether globalization needs to have such consequences on inequality and whether the quality of our liberal representative democracies is in tune with technological and societal change would be a first step. And policy-makers should rise to the challenge that foreign policy is no longer reserved for the elite: citizens, some angry, some eager to participate, can contribute to the foreign policy debate. It will be challenging to "democratize" foreign policy, but it is likely the only way to address the contemporary evolution of politics and political participation.