



## THE TRANSNATIONAL DIFFUSION OF POPULISM

John Slocum

Visiting Research Fellow,  
CIDOB

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How do we account for the re-emergence of populism in one country after another? Can this be explained in terms of shared structural conditions and/or the passive diffusion of ideas across contexts? Or does an adequate explanation require consideration of the role of transnational political entrepreneurs engaged in an ideological “import/export business”?

Analysts are increasingly prone to speaking in terms of a “populist international”. If this notion is to be taken seriously, it implies the existence of a transnational network working overtly or covertly to actively promote the electoral fortunes of populist parties in more than one country.

Until recently, this would have seemed highly implausible. Analytic sensibilities were conditioned by the rise and spread of “thick” ideologies, notably including socialism in its social-democratic and communist variants – the international spread of which was advanced by active organising and propaganda. Populism, by contrast, has been understood as nationalist rather than internationalist, a within-country tactic for mobilising voters against elites in the name of the people. Right-wing populism has indeed been explicitly *anti*-internationalist; left-wing populism less so, to the extent that it draws on socialist-inspired tropes of international solidarity.

Studies of populist “contagion” tend to examine the tendency for populist techniques and messages to spread from one party to another within a single national context. Some analysts still dismiss the notion of cross-national populist contagion – pointing to the weakness, corruption, and/or ideological exhaustion of mainstream political parties as primary and perhaps sufficient explanations for the rise of populism within a given country. But in today’s Euro-Atlantic context it seems implausible to assert that the simultaneity of the Brexit, Trump, Le Pen and Wilders phenomena is pure coincidence. And while the rhetoric of right-wing populism remains anti-internationalist, its tactics increasingly include international elements.

Various common structural factors and shared conjunctures help explain the rise of 21<sup>st</sup>-century populism. In the realm of political economy, a decades-long trend toward neoliberal financialisation and trade liberalisation has seen real wages stagnate in much of the developed world. As noted in Diego Muro's introductory chapter to this volume, the Great Recession marked a key moment in the further politicisation of these longer-term structural trends. National publics bent on seeing guilty parties "pay the price" for the crisis were angered that scarcely any legal sanctions were imposed on financial executives. Traditional political parties were widely castigated for their corruption, for having fostered the conditions that led to the crisis, and for their complicity in shielding the bankers from serious consequences in its aftermath. These resentments have found expression in populist appeals and movements on both the left and the right. Decades-old party systems are breaking down. Across the European Union, the image of rule-making by unaccountable Brussels bureaucrats adds another layer of targets for populist political resentment.

Recent technological developments also helped lay the groundwork for the emergence and spread of populism. Social media allows messages and messengers to bypass traditional journalistic gatekeepers. It also reinforces sets of mutually isolated, relatively self-contained information "bubbles" marked off by wildly divergent worldviews and mutual suspicions regarding the veracity of information circulating in the bubble of one's political opponents.

The increasing political salience of migrants and refugees has also played a key role. The present era is often characterised as one of surging mass migration, even if the actual statistics tell a much more nuanced story. Immigrants have historically served as an easy target for populist scapegoating, but it took the flow of refugees from Syria, amidst a generalised fear of terrorism, to bring migration to the very top of the political agenda in Europe. Anti-migrant messages sit at the core of nearly all contemporary right-wing populist movements and parties. At the extreme, migrants are portrayed as the vanguard of apocalyptic racial, religious and civilisational struggles. Even though such views may be rejected by the rest of the political spectrum, their influence on the debate has pulled other more centrist parties in the direction of anti-immigrant platforms.

It seems entirely plausible that populism spreads in part through demonstration effects (through political entrepreneurs in one country learning from the success of populist appeals in another). But it also seems increasingly clear that populism is being intentionally exported – or more accurately, that there are attempts by specific actors to boost the electoral fortunes of populist parties in other countries. A case in point is the international expansion of the Breitbart News Network, the "alt-right" media company formerly headed by current White House advisor Steve Bannon. As of early 2017, Breitbart has added French and German services to its existing US and UK websites. This and other media outlets seem intent on reaping

advertising profits and greater exposure through promoting and amplifying their anti-globalist, anti-elite message across borders.

The leaders of Europe's right-wing political parties have strengthened ties among themselves. Members of the European Parliament belonging to far-right parties – including the French Front National, Alternative for Germany and Holland's PVV – have joined together in a new parliamentary group, "Europe of Nations and Freedom" (ENF), through which the leaders of the various parties have pledged support for each other's electoral efforts (notably at the January 2017 ENF conference in Koblenz, Germany).

In terms of the active spread of right-wing populism, no phenomenon stands out more starkly than Russian support for right-wing parties in Europe. President Putin has increasingly portrayed Russia as an anti-liberal, anti-globalist power, an international defender of conservative social values. Russia has provided active support for right-wing populist parties in Europe, including direct financing of France's Front National, and Russia's pro-Putin Rodina Party hosted a March 2015 gathering of right-wing European parties. Russia-origin hackers have actively planted "fake news" in European media, stories that seek to exaggerate the supposed threat from migrants (including accounts of rapes allegedly committed by refugees that never took place at all). These stories, sometimes of very uncertain origin, are then amplified through the efforts of Breitbart and other, less well known but locally influential, alt-right news outlets.

Brexit and the election of Donald Trump were welcomed by European populist leaders (in the case of Trump, euphorically so). These electoral victories of 2016 put wind in the sails of those populist politicians looking to elections in 2017. But those signals work both ways. It is thus perhaps not surprising that an anti-populist backlash is playing a role in European pol

itics. The Brexit-Trump effect itself can just as easily be presented as a cautionary tale as an encouragement to other populist parties. In Austria's second-round presidential election, conducted in early December 2016, the then-recent victory of Trump almost certainly contributed to the defeat of Freedom Party candidate Norbert Hofer. Similarly, the demonstration effect of populist victory clearly contributed to the stagnation of support for Geert Wilders in the run-up to the Dutch election, as well as the consolidation of anti-Le Pen sentiment around centrist presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron in France.

Just as populism is actively promoted across borders, so the coming months and years are likely to witness coordinated cross-national efforts to push back at populism – or at least to counter what Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte calls the "wrong kind of populism".

