

# notes

## internacionals

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## THE GHOST OF POPULISM ROAMS EUROPE

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Populism is less a doctrine (although it is based on certain ideological premises) than a political style. If “populism” is one of the most polyvalent and imprecise terms in political science and, colloquially, usually carries a negative charge that complicates its characterisation, it is a phenomenon that is both real and definable with relative precision, and about which an abundant and often refined academic literature is available. The current generalisation of the phenomenon throughout Europe is led, of course, by the radical right wing, but has a growing incidence in the *moderate* right and even in a part of the centre-left. Taking into account that a specific populism of the radical left also exists, it is, in summary, an extremely transversal political style.

### The Causes of Populism

The current surge of populism has much to do with the frightening economic crisis that erupted in the United States in 2007 and reached the EU in 2008, as well as with the inflexible neoliberal solutions of the “troika” (the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission). The above-men-

tioned policies are exacting harsh social consequences on the south and east of Europe, sharply aggravating inequality and poverty, while also contributing to a worrying hollowing out of democracy itself. Thus, the rigid orthodoxy of focussing on deficit control and austerity at any cost has widened the gap between the privileged elite and the rest of the population as never before. In the current EU framework, the winners are few and the losers many: it is in these waters that

the populists fish with growing success. So, the growth of populism follows from deep social frustration and the growing delegitimisation of representative democracy: if inequality increases and the Central European Bank (an institution of total opacity which accounts to no one) is the real European sovereign, then the ground on which protest grows is fertile. Naturally, for the neoliberals, any criticism of their policies -from whichever ideological quarter- is disqualified as “populist” by definition, in this way they trivialise the concept to serve their own interests.

The rolling back of democracy, both national and European, is particularly grievous because of the hegemony of irresponsible technocratic

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elites who make and unmake it to their taste: forcing government changes in Greece (from George Papandreou to Lucas Papademos) and Italy (from Silvio Berlusconi to Mario Monti) and impeding referendums on the economic policies insisted on by the “troika” (Greece), all of which is a clear sign of the devaluation of democratic mechanisms.

It is true that the populists, with their expeditious, unviable and even unjust solutions, oversimplify, but in their confusion they detect some real problems and reflect the weaknesses of the EU. Indeed, European integration is currently suffering a triple impasse: economic, political and cultural. And while all the dimensions of the problem are not addressed simultaneously, blockage and frustration are guaranteed. That is to say, without restoring strict economic regulation of the markets and equitable social redistribution, without the full democratisation of incomprehensible, distant and opaque European Union institutions, and without managing to forge a minimum European collective conscience among its citizens, the panorama will only get worse.

### The Degradation of Democracy

In a statement on German public radio station, *Deutschlandfunk*, Angela Merkel said that “democracy conforms to the

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market”, which suggests an emptying out and formalisation of the former in order to leave no room for alternative economic policies. The groups in government take their turns, but all must now adjust to narrow, unidirectional margins, in accordance with the interests of reduced economic circles. That is why it is impossible to re-establish strict financial regulation, to substantially tax large fortunes, to bring the informal economy to the surface and even to cut tax evasion off at its roots, not to mention those countries suffering from serious unresolved corruption. All of this reflects the fact that democratic politics is impotent in the face of the *markets* (the euphemism of the financial oligarchy) and that the representative regime is suffering from a severe legitimacy deficit. Democratic malaise has produced profound social weariness towards the establishment and the traditional political parties: the conventional “political class” is perceived as a privileged “caste” that is separate and corrupt. In other words, traditional politicians -who are showing serious signs of exhaustion- have left wide-open spaces for protest on which the populists capitalise; they, by comparison, appear to be offering something “new”. For this reason, the shortcomings of the pluralist political system provide fertile ground from which to denounce the degeneration of democracy. Thus, promises of salvation, however unreal or even dangerous, can easily take hold: promises of moving away from supposedly “unrepresentative” conventional parliaments and political parties are made, charismatic leaders and plebiscitary decision-making mechanisms are trusted.

### The Arguments of the Far Right

Right wing extremist parties are growing in Europe because they exploit the feelings of insecurity of wide swathes of the population and direct their focus to facile scapegoats such as non-EU immigration. In effect, xenophobia (and Islamophobia in particular) is perhaps the factor that pays the greatest electoral dividends to this type of party, whose demagoguery about the alleged “taking advantage” of public social service provisions by non-EU migrants, the increase in juvenile delinquency and even the reappearance of previously eradicated illnesses is blatant. As a logical corollary of the rejection of “the others”, there is a fanatical exaltation of “us”. In this way, the populists on the extreme right give their followers an exclusionary *identity* (the revival of myths such as that of the “Christian roots” of the Western world is no coincidence), a chauvinistic exaltation of their own nations with ethnic overtones, while condemning the “eurocrats” as the other face of a kind of global conspiracy against homelands.

This ultra-nationalist retreat involves an increasingly wholesale rejection of the EU, a reputedly “artificial” institution that is asphyxiating European nations. The extreme right believes it sees an elitist, denationalising European super-state at the gates. But while, on the one hand, the growing Europhobia of the extremists seems

to embody the apparition of a new cleavage (pro / anti-EU), on the other, the hatred of the EU lacks a realistic alternative as, in a globalised world, returning to the fragmentation of a Europe made

up of small states would be disastrous. In other words, the extremists never explain the extremely high cost of a “No” to Europe.

### The Extreme Right and its Incidence in the Conventional Right Wing

The French National Front seems to be converting itself into a kind of guide-party for those on the far right, and is, also, in clear electoral ascent. A party with neo-fascist origins (today superficially recycled by Marine Le Pen), it has made agreements with other right-wing populists who are on a different trajectory (the Netherlands’ Freedom Party, PVV, run by Geert Wilders), which is a sign of the convergence of all the right-wing reactionaries no matter their historical origins. They agree on the main themes: rejection of immigrants, an ultra-nationalist retreat into an exclusionary ethnic identity, and a stance that is anti-EU and against the “particracy” of the establishment.

Some clearly neo-fascist parties provoke concerns for, among other reasons, openly aligning themselves with historical movements of classical fascism: this is the case with the Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) and Greece’s Golden Dawn. The Hungarian neo-fascists –perhaps the most militant right-wing extremist movement in Europe, which has extremely hierarchical, authoritarian structures-

is the third largest party in the country and defends an anti-institutional populist agenda which is openly xenophobic and anti-EU. Still more aggressive are the Greek neo-Nazis (a paradox in a country that suffered a brutal German occupation during the Second World War) who share the same xenophobic, ethnically discriminatory, anti-democratic obsessions.

For their part, right-wing populists on a different path to the neo-fascist subfamily, such as the UK Independence Party and the Lega Nord in Italy, seem increasingly to have the same objectives. The British populists, traditionally monothematic (getting the UK out of the EU), have increased their hostility against immigrants. In turn, the Lega Nord, which was founded as an anti-centralist and anti-particracy party of fiscal protest, unceasingly increases both its emphasis on xenophobia (and Islamophobia) against non-EU immigrants, and its euroscepticism.

What is most noteworthy is how the far-right parties are managing to attract parties of the *moderate* right (and even the centre-left in some cases) to some of their positions. Various governments have applied (or announced) policies that are dear to the hearts of the far right, in terms of the expulsion of Roma people (France), or have proposed the denunciation of illegal immigrants (United Kingdom), or the expulsion “in the heat of the moment” of the same (Spain); in other cases, police harassment of those “without papers” has resulted (Greece) and the eventual imprisonment of the homeless has been suggested (Hungary). The *moderate* right believes that such measures will hinder the ascent of the right-wing extremists, but, in fact, the opposite is occurring: the radicals of the far right are more convincing in advocating these policies than their self-styled, recently-arrived *moderate* imitators. This has the objective effect of “normalising” the discourse (and practices) of intolerance and repression.

In Germany, the leaders of the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU) have made declarations that touch upon xenophobia against non-EU immigrants as well as other comments that are highly offensive for Southern Europeans. A good part of the post-Gaullists of the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) in France have expressed growing mistrust of the right to asylum and the reception of immigrants. The British Tories are increasingly eurosceptic and restrictive in their migration policies. Silvio Berlusconi has discovered the electoral dividends that a certain level of euroscepticism may reap with his criticisms of the single currency. Viktor Orbán's FIDESZ – Hungarian Civic Alliance has taken on ideas of government that are characteristic of the extreme right wing, with worrying restrictions on rights and freedoms and the cutting back of judicial independence. The Spanish Popular Party is likewise cutting rights and freedoms, manipulating state institutions and hardening their migratory policy. Finally, the Polish PiS (Law and Justice) already verges on Europhobia.

## Leftwing Populism?

The centre-right and the far left are not immune to the populist phenomenon, although it is reflected more in electoral style than in proposals that align with the previously mentioned themes, which are infrequent in this ideological spectrum. It is true that, for example, Tony Blair's populism purged any connotation of Labour as the party of the working classes and was presented as overtly business friendly, acted in a delegative manner, and used techniques borrowed from marketing. This reorientation, the “third way”, moved social democracy towards a vague social liberalism, and other parties of this ideological family followed the example (Gerhard Schröder in the German Social Democratic Party, SPD, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero in the Spanish PSOE) to increasingly demotivating and disappointing effect for the progressive electorate. A few occasional signs of xenophobic intolerance have been noted in this camp (Manuel Valls in the French Socialist Party, Thilo Sarrazin in the SPD), but they are the exceptions.

Some analysts have tried to generalise the populist phenomenon to include all of the far left because of their harsh criticism of the EU, thereby putting everyone in the same basket. However, it makes no sense to tag parties such as *Die Linke* (The Left) in Germany, the Coalition of the Radical

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Left (SYRIZA) in Greece, the Portuguese *Bloco de Esquerda* or the *Izquierda Unida* (United Left) in Spain who advocate “more” Europe (as well as “another” Europe) as “eurosceptics” and amalgamate them with others who reject integration (even though they may be linked to the same European Parliament group). Eurosceptic populism on the far left is an inheritance of traditional orthodox communism (the Communist Party of Greece, the Portuguese Communist Party, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia) and of certain Scandinavian post-communist parties (from the Nordic green left). These parties, in any case, wield a populism that has absolutely no ethnically exclusionary dimensions and concentrates on denouncing the establishment for its unjust economic and social policies and for hijacking the *true* will of the people. The populists of the far left have clung to the idea of national sovereignty (taken in a civic and democratic, rather than ethnic, sense) in opposition to the “troika” because they interpret the current path of European integration leading to a federalisation that will only benefit large oligarchic corporations.

In summary, populism is a reaction to a state of affairs that is objectively unbalanced in various areas due to the indisputable hegemony of neoliberalism, the reduction of democracy to formal electoral frameworks and the serious gap between a reduced, privileged minority (essentially

composed of high-finance speculators) and large marginalised sectors of the general population living in growing poverty. Populist solutions -channelled above all by the far right- are unmistakably reactionary in meaning, but they reflect a clearly evident backlash against the European project as dreamed up by its founding fathers.