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European Populism: Trends, Threats and Future Prospects

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RENEWING
THE CENTRE

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SUMMARY

Europe's political landscape is undergoing the biggest transformation since the end of the Cold War. Over the past two decades, populist parties have steadily increased their support, entering most national parliaments across the continent. In many countries, they have even taken over the levers of government. An unprecedented populist belt now covers a big and strategically important stretch of Central and Eastern Europe, from the Baltic Sea all the way to the Aegean.

Europe's political landscape is undergoing the biggest transformation since the end of the Cold War. Over the past two decades, populist parties have steadily increased their support, entering most national parliaments across the continent. In many countries, they have even taken over the levers of government. An unprecedented populist belt now covers a big and strategically important stretch of Central and Eastern Europe, from the Baltic Sea all the way to the Aegean.

This report describes the key components of this populist surge and assesses how it has allowed populists to transform the continent's politics. The rise of the populists has already changed the social and economic policies pursued by many countries, created new tensions between nation-states in Europe, and begun to put pressure on democratic institutions in a variety of countries that were once seen as consolidated democracies.

The analysis in this report is based on a novel database that tracks electoral results of 102 populist parties in 39 European countries between 2000 and 2017.¹ This allows trends to be isolated across multiple electoral cycles and countries and geographic regions to be compared. In short, it provides an empirical foundation to situate the present surge of populist parties in a wider historical and geographic context. It has also allowed the creation of a first-of-its-kind time-series map that illustrates the pervasiveness of populists, especially in Eastern Europe, and highlights the rapid increase in populist vote share since the turn of the millennium.

The mercurial nature of the word “populism” has, in the words of Rovira Kaltwasser, “often exasperated those attempting to take it seriously”. This report makes only two claims about the meaning of

¹ Parties are classified as populist on the basis of the Trans-Regional University of Melbourne Populism Dataset. The authors of the Melbourne data considered different party characteristics that are generally accepted as indicators of populist politics in the academic literature. For example, they recorded whether a party opposes the political class, financial institutions, immigrants, or ethnic minorities. They also scored the relative dependency of each party on the personality of its leaders (rather than, for example, its political programme or an entrenched constituency with special interests), and assessed whether its actions violated liberal democratic norms. On the basis of these indicators, confidence scores were assigned to each party that range from 1 (little evidence of populist appeal) to 5 (ideal-typical populist). We use the Melbourne tagging with discretion, e.g. adding Moldova and Cyprus (which are missing from the Melbourne dataset) and re-classifying the Progress Party in Norway and Politics Can Be Different in Hungary as populist on the basis of prevailing opinions among political scientists. Electoral results are drawn from national voting datasets of the respective countries studied, as well as from the Parliaments and Governments Database (ParlGov). Additional details like parties' founding dates are drawn from publicly available sources, such as each party's website.

the word.² Firstly, populism is not a deep ideology but rather a logic of political organisation. At its core lies a sharp distinction between friend and enemy, in which populists' supporters are portrayed as the legitimate people and all opposition is painted as illegitimate.³ Populism can thus take root anywhere on the political spectrum, including both the far right and the far left.

Secondly, this report's definition of populism includes only parties and politicians that claim to represent the true will of a unified people against domestic elites, foreign migrants, or ethnic, religious or sexual minorities. Merely claiming to speak for the common man is not sufficient to qualify; what sets populists apart from other movements calling for social justice or decrying corruption is that they explicitly define 'the people' against elites, immigrants or some other minority, framing the interests of these groups as diametrically and inevitably opposed.⁴

Since 2000, the number of populist parties in Europe has almost doubled, from 33 to 63.

Although this is not part of the definition used here, the rhetoric and programmes of populist parties also converge on a number of important policy issues. For one, nearly all of them embrace elements of direct democracy like referendums. For another, nearly all of them have resorted to inflammatory attacks on independent institutions like the media or the judiciary. They frequently advocate for highly restrictive immigration policies and protectionist economic policies. And in their right-wing incarnation, they embrace nationalist ideology and defend Christian cultural legacies.⁵

2 Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira. 2014. "The Responses of Populism to Dahl's Democratic Dilemmas." *Political Studies* 62 (3): 470–487.

3 For a discussion of this first claim, see: Manent, Pierre. 2017. "Populist Demagoguery and the Fanaticism of the Center." *American Affairs*, 1–16. Also see: Jansen, Robert S. 2011. "Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism." *Sociological Theory* 29 (2): 75–96.

4 This definition parallels the one used in the 2016 report "The State of Populism in the European Union" by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS). Data from the FEPS report, combined with a dataset on populist parties assembled by Roberto Foa at the University of Melbourne, forms the empirical basis for the accompanying graphics.

5 For a discussion of the link between contemporary populism and Christianity, see: Brubaker, Rogers. 2017. "Between Nationalism and

Populism, then, has both a unifying core and a great variety of empirical manifestations. To understand its recent rise, it is necessary to examine it from different angles. That is why this report starts by disaggregating regional trends and highlighting the relative strength and influence of populist parties in different parts of Europe. (For the purposes of this report, Europe is divided into four mutually exclusive regions: Eastern Europe stretches from Poland to Macedonia; Western Europe from Switzerland to the UK; Northern Europe from Scandinavia to the Baltics; and Southern Europe from Greece to Portugal.)⁶ The second part of the report distinguishes between right-wing and left-wing populist parties and discusses their respective developments in recent years. Finally, the last part examines some of the harms populism is already inflicting on European politics and considers the most likely scenarios for its future development.

Civilizationism: The European Populist Moment in Comparative Perspective.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40 (8). Taylor & Francis: 1191–1226.

6 We rely on the EuroVoc geo-scheme to group countries with populist parties into four European regions: North (Iceland, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), South (Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Cyprus, Malta), East (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Ukraine), West (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Switzerland, Great Britain). The EuroVoc scheme differs from the United Nations regional classification system in two significant ways: First, it assigns Great Britain and Ireland to Western Europe rather than Northern Europe. Second, all Balkan countries except Greece are classified as a part of Eastern rather than Southern Europe. Top-line trends described in this report are robust to such marginal changes in regional classification.

EASTERN EUROPE

Populists are strongest in Eastern Europe. They routinely out-compete the political mainstream and have already taken power in seven countries: Bosnia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Serbia, and Slovakia. Populist parties are also the junior coalition partners in two additional Eastern European countries, and dominate the opposition in three more.⁷

There are a few strong left-wing populist parties in Eastern Europe, including the Vetëvendosje party in Kosovo and Direction – Social Democracy in Slovakia.⁸ But by far the strongest populist presence in this part of the continent is on the political right. Parties like Poland’s Law and Justice (PiS) party and Hungary’s Fidesz tend to emphasise a nationalism based on soil, blood, or culture; take a hard line against immigration; and have, especially in Poland and Hungary, quickly started to dismantle key democratic institutions like the free media and an independent judiciary.

The appeal of these populist parties has increased significantly over the course of the past two decades. While populist parties in Eastern Europe took an average of 9.2% of the national vote in 2000, their vote share has since tripled, reaching 31.6% in 2017. In 2000, there were only two Eastern European countries in which populist parties took at least 20% of the vote; today, there are ten. Poland is a great example: while populist parties only had a vote share of 0.1% in 2000, PiS rapidly gained ground after it was founded in 2001, winning more than 25% in every national election since 2005. It now enjoys an outright majority in the Sejm. Similarly, in Serbia, the Progressive Party made significant advances over the past decade, winning 24% of the vote in 2012 and gaining control of 55 out of 73 seats in the National Assembly.

⁷ The latter three are Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro. During the most recent round of national elections, the populist vote share in all three countries exceeded 20%.

⁸ Vetëvendosje merged with the Socialist Party of Kosovo in 2013, and now advocates against foreign involvement in domestic and regional affairs and against the privatisation of public entities. In Slovakia, Direction – Social Democracy is pursuing similar campaigns against privatisation and has partnered with far-right populists in recent government coalitions.

The rise of the populists is not just existing parties increasing their share of the vote; newly founded populist parties are also being added to the mix. Again, this trend is most pronounced in Eastern Europe. In 2000, 12 populist parties stood for elections in Eastern European countries; in the most recent round of elections, 28 did. Looking only at vote shares per party thus underestimates the influence of populism on Eastern European politics. In Slovakia, for example, only one populist party stood for election in 2000. Today, three right populist parties and one left populist party compete for votes. The average vote share per party has increased only moderately, from 9.1% to 13.1%. But because the number of parties has quadrupled, the overall vote share for populist parties has increased by more than fivefold, and now stands at 52.3%. A similar rise in both the number and the strength of populist parties has recently upended the politics of Hungary, Bulgaria, and Ukraine.

The transformation of Eastern European politics is most striking in countries where populism has become so pervasive that primary competitors to populist governments are themselves populist. Hungary is a particularly concerning case. In the 2010 election, Fidesz won around 53% of the vote, giving it an outright majority in the country's parliament. But the third biggest party was the far-right Jobbik party, which won an additional 14% of the vote, and opinion polls suggest that it is now also the main competitor to Fidesz. Similarly, in Bosnia, the right populist Alliance for Independent Social Democrats out-competed another right populist grouping, the Serbian Democratic Party, in 2010 and 2014. Together, they took over half of the vote.⁹

⁹ In some Eastern European countries, the competition between different populist parties is now so strong that formerly far-right parties are moving towards the centre-right in an attempt to distinguish themselves in an increasingly crowded field. Hungary's Jobbik party, which has long practiced an extreme form of right-wing nationalism that included openly anti-semitic appeals, has recently embraced a more moderate stance, apologising for past statements of its leaders, and making cautious overtures to the Jewish community. Jobbik leader Gabor Vona has defended this pivot as part of the natural evolution of a party that has outgrown its "teenage years." But there may also be more prosaic reasons for Jobbik's shift: as the governing Fidesz party has gradually drifted into a more extreme direction under Prime Minister Orbán, Jobbik has found itself squeezed from the right.

WESTERN EUROPE

In Western Europe, populist parties are less prominent, less numerous, and less powerful than in the continent's east. On average, around 13% of the vote in Western Europe accrues to populist parties, a 4% increase compared to 2000.¹⁰ For now, they hold governmental responsibility in only two countries: as a junior coalition partner in Austria and as part of the Swiss Federal Council in Switzerland.

But while populists are not nearly as dominant in the politics of Western Europe as they are in the East, they have made significant gains over the past years. In France, for example, Marine le Pen qualified for the second-round run-off against Emanuel Macron in the 2017 Presidential elections. While she did not come within striking distance of winning the presidency, taking one third of the vote, she roughly doubled the result her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, had achieved when he qualified for the second round of the Presidential election back in 2002. In Germany, meanwhile, the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) won 12.6% of the vote in 2017 national elections, replacing the Social Democrats as the second-strongest party in parts of Bavaria and much of East Germany. Between the AfD and the left-leaning Die Linke, populists now make up about one quarter of the Bundestag.

This points to two crucial ways in which populists have had a bigger impact on Western European politics than their topline numbers suggest. First, the rising competition on the far-right has pushed many centre-right parties to adopt more extreme positions on issues including immigration. In the past months, for example, centre-right parties in both Austria and France have embraced younger, more radical leaders; it is possible that Germany's Christian Democrats will make a similar move when Angela Merkel steps down from the party's leadership in the coming years.

Second, the rise of the populists has significantly strained the tradition of coalition government in many countries that have a system of proportional representation. Because of the strong presence of populist parties, it is now very difficult for ideologically coherent coalitions to gain a governing majority on either the

¹⁰ Excluded are countries without any populist parties: Monaco, Liechtenstein, and Andorra.

centre-left or the centre-right. As a result, moderate parties are forced to govern with their traditional rivals on the other end of the moderate spectrum or to enter a coalition with the populists; the only alternative is to fail to form a government at all. This dilemma has already complicated the formation of a new German government after elections this past fall, and will continue to characterise the politics of many Western European parties until populist parties either decline in significance or gain enough vote share to lead governments of their own.

SOUTHERN EUROPE

Populist parties enjoy considerable success across much of Southern Europe. They have dominated Greek politics over the past years; form the bedrock of the opposition in Spain; and are (according to most opinion polls) likely to play an increasingly prominent role in Italian politics after the general election in May 2018.

In general, populist parties in Southern Europe tend to be ideologically left-leaning, promising to root out the corruption of the “political caste” and to stand up to economic elites. Especially since the inception of the eurozone crisis and the rise of austerity politics, these parties have waged campaigns for fiscal sovereignty, advocated for stronger fiscal transfers within the European Union, and promised to expand the welfare state. At the same time, some of these parties have increasingly taken a nationalist turn: rooted in notions of economic sovereignty and self-determination, rather than in direct appeals to ethnic ancestry, this form of nationalism has allowed left-populists to exploit issues of immigration and rail against foreign economic influence.

These developments are especially clear in Greece. The main governing party, Syriza, has grown out of an assortment of far-left movements, and took an unprecedented 36.3% of the vote in 2015 elections. However, since Syriza was unable to govern on its own, and was determined to eschew mainstream coalition partners like the centre-left PASOK party, it ultimately formed an uneasy coalition with the right-wing populists of ANEL.

NORTHERN EUROPE

While populism remains a minority phenomenon in Northern Europe, the vote share of populist parties has rapidly grown in recent parliamentary elections. In Sweden, the anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats are now the country's third largest party, with most polls predicting that they will become even more powerful in elections to be held in September 2018. In Denmark, the right-populist Danish People's Party has already become the country's second largest; while it is not formally in power, the governing coalition depends on its votes for its survival. Meanwhile, populists are also well-represented in multi-party governments in Finland and Norway.¹¹

What is more, the influence of populist parties in Scandinavia has probably been bigger than their share of the vote suggests. Especially on issues like immigration, they have also had a real impact on mainstream parties, leading both centre-right and, in some cases, centre-left parties that face new competition from the right to adopt more hardline positions on matters of immigration and social welfare spending.

It is in the three Baltic countries, however, that the influence of Northern European populist parties has been most significant. Since the early 2000s, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia have regularly been governed with populist participation, and have often seen sizable populist blocs in their respective parliaments. In Lithuania, the agrarian populism of the Peasant and Greens Union has enjoyed considerable success in recent years. In Latvia, the right-populist Who Owns the State party entered the national parliament during its first electoral campaign in 2016. These parties' proportional gains in vote share are among the largest in Europe.

¹¹ The populist True Finns split into two competing fractions in June 2017 after the party decided to elect anti-immigration hardliner Jussi Halla-aho as its new leader. The more moderate New Alternative (which united 21 of the original 38 True Finns parliamentarians) has remained in the governing coalition.

RIGHT POPULISM

The geography of populism is key to an understanding of political transformations in Europe: the trends in Eastern Europe differ from those in Western Europe, and those in the North differ from those in the South. An account that looks only at European averages, or only at individual countries, would mask some of the most consequential trends. But there is also a second dimension along which it is important to disentangle populist movements: ideology.

In recent debates, populism has sometimes been used as a shorthand for nativism. Since there are some left-wing populist parties that do not (as yet) have strong nativist elements, this is a conceptual mistake. However, there is strong empirical reason why this mistake is so common: As a look at our dataset demonstrates, right-wing populist parties are much more influential than left-wing populists.

The clear majority of European populist parties are on the right: 74 out of 102 parties in our dataset are right populists. Part of the reason for this preponderance of right-wing populism may be a rapid increase in the number of right-wing populist parties: While only 24 right-wing populist parties stood for election in 2000, their number had doubled by 2017, when 46 right populist parties appeared on ballots across the continent. What's more, it is not just that there are more populist parties; it is also that they have a stronger share of the vote. Indeed, in 2017, populist parties across Europe had a vote share of 24.1%; of which 17.7% went to right-wing populist parties. In Eastern Europe, five of every six populist votes went to the far-right.

The map below illustrates this development. It shows, first, the historical strength of right-wing populist parties in Eastern Europe dating back to the early 2000s; and, second, the uptick in popular support for right populists in Western Europe during and after the refugee crisis.

Existing trends and pre-election polls suggest that right-wing populist parties will continue to consolidate their influence. In Austria, the so-called Freedom Party now has significant

governmental influence. In Germany, the AfD aims to establish itself as a leading voice of the opposition by the time of the 2021 parliamentary election. Meanwhile, populists remain popular in Hungary and Poland, and are expected to achieve significant gains during upcoming elections in Moldova, Slovenia, Bosnia, and Latvia.

LEFT POPULISM

Left-wing populism has been strongest in the debtor nations of Southern Europe (as well as in Lithuania), where populists have focused their defense of “the people” on campaigns against privatisation, national political elites, and European austerity politics. About three out of four populist votes in Southern Europe are cast for left populist parties. But although it has commanded considerable attention in recent years, left-wing populism, for now, remains a far more marginal phenomenon than right-wing populism. This is expressed not only in the lower vote share across much of Europe and the smaller number of left-wing populist parties, but also in their much lesser participation in actual governments: except for Greece, where left-wing populists lead the government, and Lithuania, where they are part of a governing coalition, left-populists barely hold any actual power.¹²

But while left-populism has not yet attained the same significance as right-populism, it too has made significant inroads over the past two decades. Since 2000, the average vote share of left populist parties has increased from 8.1% to 16% and recent developments suggest this trend may continue in the coming years. In France, for example, the France Insoumise movement led by Jean-Luc Melenchon performed much better than in the past during the first round of 2017 Presidential elections, taking close to 20% of the vote and coming within 2% of qualifying for the second-round runoff. Meanwhile, other left-wing political parties, including Labour in Britain, have in recent years embraced some elements of

¹² Interestingly, the comparative weakness of left populism appears to be, in part, a function of the small number of left populist parties. The total number of votes for right populist parties is significantly higher in most countries than the number of votes for left populist parties, but it is also split between a much larger number of parties. In the most recent electoral cycle, 46 right populist parties stood for election across Europe, but only 11 left populist parties. On a per-party basis, the average left populist party performs 1% better than the average right populist party. (In line with much of the academic literature, we exclude most communist and socialist parties that are defined by ideology rather than by populist appeals to the people. This mirrors and balances our simultaneous exclusion of ideologically driven parties of the far-right fringe.)

populism, and illustrate the effects that populist politics can have on the mainstream.

Right populists are strongest in Eastern Europe. Left populists are strongest in Southern Europe.

There are many cases in which the distinction between left and right populist parties is clear-cut. Podemos, for example, does not have much in common with PiS; similarly, Die Linke is a very different beast than the AfD. But there are also many cases in which populist parties combine left economic programmes with hard-right positions on immigration and minority rights. The Italian Five Star Movement, for example, claims to fit neither on the left nor on the right of the political spectrum, and we have for that reason excluded it from each of these categories.¹³ But it is worth noting that, led by a popular comedian who cut his political teeth by railing against the centre-right and proto-populist government of Silvio Berlusconi, Cinque Stelle had once been perceived as being firmly on the left; it is only as his movement evolved, and became more willing to make anti-immigrant appeals, that its positioning on the ideological spectrum came to be a matter of doubt in the public imagination.

Indeed, while important differences thus continue to exist between left and right populist parties, the twin legacies of the Eurozone crisis and mass migration have increasingly challenged the rigid distinction between them. Whatever their ideological self-classification (or indeed their classification in our data set), more and more populist parties on both the left and the right have become willing to combine redistributive economic policies that emphasise opposition to austerity and support for a redistributive welfare state with restrictive immigration policies building on openly hostile rhetoric against immigrants. Whether this rapprochement between populists on the left and right continues will be one of the key things to watch over the coming years.¹⁴

¹³ We classify seven parties as neither left nor right: The Italian Five Star Movement, Human Shield in Croatia, the Pirate Party in Iceland, Path of Courage in Lithuania, the Party of Socialists in Moldova, Self-Defense of the Republic in Poland, and Citizens in Spain. Most of these parties combine left populist campaigns against privatisation and financial elites with right populist denunciations of immigrants, minorities, and liberal rights.

14 One reason for this overlap is a growing similarity in constituencies. Voters of left and right populist parties tend to be more skeptical of political and civic institutions than supporters of mainstream parties, according to recent data from the European Values Study. Some of the traditional constituencies of the Left have also begun to shift towards the far Right in the wake of mass migration. In Germany, for example, the AfD has now replaced Die Linke as the party with the lowest median voter income, and has supplanted the social democratic SPD as the party with the highest proportion of working-class voters. These macro-political realignments have weakened the class-based voting patterns that long dominated multi-party democracies especially in Western Europe, and have fueled the salience of identity and culture as predictors of voting behavior.

THE NATURE OF THE POPULIST THREAT

Amidst these changes, the predominant reaction from social scientists has been an insistence on the durability of liberal norms and the stability of democratic institutions. Following Adam Przeworski's famous observation that no wealthy, established democracy has ever collapsed, observers have frequently dismissed populist challengers as ephemeral threats; claimed that they are powerless to undermine democratic institutions; or predicted that they will gradually come to embrace the regular rules of parliamentary democracy.

It is too early to come to firm conclusions about the effect which the rise of populist movements will have across Europe. But in countries where populists have now been in power for multiple years, the picture is not nearly as reassuring as optimists like Przeworski might have predicted. Indeed, there are two distinct kinds of harms which the rise of populism is already creating: the first is in the realm of policy, and threatens to harm the rights of minorities; the second is in the realm of institutions, and threatens to undermine the long-term stability of democracies across the continent.

Populists are likely to transform European public policy in radical ways. Many populist parties advocate for the weakening or abolition of international institutions like the European Union; push for protectionist trade policies as a supposed panacea to economic anxieties over stagnating labor markets; or seek to impose stringent controls on immigration in response to cultural anxieties about the identity of European nations. In some countries, populist governments have already succeeded in implementing such reforms. In others, electoral threats from populist parties have pushed the mainstream into more nationalistic directions.

Although all of these policies are potentially destructive, they do not, in themselves, constitute a violation of the norms of liberal democracy. That, however, is not true for all of the policies favored by the populists. In particular, many populist parties, especially on the right, advocate policies that may be democratic (in the sense of being popular) but also deeply illiberal: with the backing of the majority of the people, they undermine the rule of law and violate

the basic rights of unpopular minorities. The Swiss referendum on the minaret is an excellent example of this: with broad popular support, the country has essentially restricted the right to free worship of the country's Muslim population.

That isn't all: The past years demonstrate that the nature of the populist threat extends beyond deviations from sensible policies and even beyond violations of individual rights. Although populists usually retain an outward commitment to democracy, and have at times swept to power with broad popular support, they can pose a real threat to democracy itself.

The number of European countries with populist participation in government has doubled since 2000, from 7 to 14.

Hungary offers one of the most striking examples of the degree to which populist governments can radicalise rather than moderate while in the government—and do a lot of damage to basic democratic institutions as a result. A country with a per capita GDP of more than \$12,000 and a democracy that had once been hailed as consolidated by many political scientists, Hungary has over the course of several years descended into quasi-authoritarianism. With state institutions like courts and electoral commissions firmly in the hand of government loyalists, independent media under constant attack, and critical institutions including universities threatened with closure, it is far from clear that the country still retains free and fair elections. While the populist government in Poland has been in power for far less long, it is already following in these footsteps: with a recent judicial reform seriously undermining the separation of powers, Polish democracy is looking much more brittle than most observers predicted two years ago.¹⁵

This suggests that there are three basic scenarios for the future of populism in Europe. Populists might prove to be a mostly

¹⁵ At the European level, Hungary's government is now using its voting power to block European sanctions in response to the Polish judicial reform, which must be passed unanimously. Thus, populists with a firm hold on power are not just able to shape the development of democracy domestically, but can also facilitate illiberal reforms abroad and insulate other populists against international backlash.

innocuous interlude. It could represent the new normal, changing public policy for a long time to come without posing a real threat to the stability of the system. Or it could be a harbinger of “democratic deconsolidation,” raising the prospect that the future of democracy is more embattled in Europe than most social scientists have long believed.

POPULISM AS AN INTERLUDE

There is some evidence that populist parties, especially in Western Europe, have hit temporary ceilings. Recent polling from France indicates that President Macron is enjoying considerable support despite sweeping and controversial labour market reforms, while radical parties on the far left and the far right are suffering from sliding poll numbers and mounting internal tensions in the wake of recent electoral defeats. In Germany, for example, recent opinion polls suggest that public support for the AfD has either stagnated or mildly declined since the last election.¹⁶ In Great Britain, support for the UK Independence Party has significantly declined since the Brexit referendum and now hovers in the single digits. Meanwhile, in Latvia, recent polls suggest that support for the right-populist National Alliance has roughly halved since the last election.

It would be tempting to extrapolate a range of optimistic and far-reaching predictions from these recent data points. Perhaps the rise of populist parties will prove to be short-lived because they are unable to institutionalise or to avoid tearing themselves apart. Maybe the rise of populist parties will prove to be a salutary wake-up call, with establishment parties successfully upping their game in response to the new competition. Or perhaps the underlying reasons for the populist rise are starting to fade, making it less likely that populist parties will continue to grow stronger in the coming years. (The pressures of refugee flows and budget deficits, for example, are less acute at the moment than they have been in recent years.)

Before jumping to any such conclusion, however, it is worth considering the evidence that points in the other direction. Indeed, in many countries, the trend line suggests that populists will continue to gain strength in the next round of elections. In Italy, polls predict that the Five Star Movement will perform very well in the March 2018 elections. In Belgium, the right-wing populists of the Vlaams Belang are, at present, well-poised to expand their already significant vote share in 2019 elections. Meanwhile, despite implementing legislative and judicial reforms that make it very

¹⁶ For example, see: <https://www.wahlrecht.de/umfragen/allensbach.htm>

difficult to displace them, populist governments in Hungary and Poland are as popular as ever.

POPULISM AS THE NEW NORMAL

A different scenario is currently playing out in Austria, where the populist Freedom Party has just entered the government for the second time. When the party first became part of a governing coalition in 1999, international condemnation was swift: EU member states warned against the Freedom Party's illiberal policy proposals and swiftly moved to impose trade sanctions. Yet for all its charged rhetoric, the Freedom Party governed in fairly conventional fashion. Austrian politics became more nationalistic and its immigration policy more restrictive. But the country's political institutions and Austria's conduct on the international stage largely remained unchanged.

If today's populists embrace a similar approach, they could still drive European politics into a more nationalist and protectionist direction. The basic norms and institutions of liberal democracy would remain intact. But governments would move decisively towards restricting net migration flows; make access to some social benefits conditional on citizenship status; and undermine minority rights in key respects.

In 2000, an average 8.5% of the vote went to populist parties. Today, that number stands at 24.1%.

This outcome seems especially likely in Western Europe, where most populists have, for now, remained dependent on at least one mainstream coalition partner. But it is also plausible in other parts of Europe in which right-populist parties have joined the government as junior partners in a coalition. In Finland, for example, the mainstream Centre Party has ruled with the help of the True Finns. In Estonia, social democrats and conservatives have ruled with the help of the populist Centre Party. In Norway, the Conservative Party has ruled with the populist Progress party. Finally, in Denmark, the Venstre party and the conservatives have ruled as a minority government with support from the populist Danish People's Party. In each country, these governments introduced substantial policy changes without either violating the rights of minorities in blatant fashion or doing significant damage to the independence of institutions like the judiciary.

POPULISM AS DECONSOLIDATION

If evidence for the two prior scenarios is strongest in Western and Northern Europe, respectively, trends in several Eastern European countries suggest that a decidedly darker future remains possible as well. In Hungary and Poland, populists have used positions of power to weaken democratic norms, undermine independent institutions, and intimidate or disempower political opponents. Working largely within the letter of the law, and drawing on widespread popular support, they have destroyed many of the institutions that are needed to safeguard democratic institutions over the long-run.

Since right-wing populists in Western and Northern Europe have not yet been in a position to implement similar measures, it is difficult to know whether they would do so if the opportunity arose. But this makes it all the more concerning that they have, in recent years, started to mimic the more overtly authoritarian rhetoric of Eastern European populist parties, attempting to score political points with attacks on parliaments, on the press, and on the judiciary. A denigration of the media as “fake news” or the “lying press” has by now become a standard part of the populist repertoire in Western as well as in Eastern Europe; over the past year, attacks on parliamentary procedure, on due process, and on the separation of powers have also been on the rise.

Populists win when they enter parliaments and governments—or when they shape the politics of the mainstream.

Will overt authoritarianism spread beyond the parts of Central and Eastern Europe in which populists are already undermining the stability of fledgling democracies? If populism’s corrosive effects can only manifest themselves in countries with relatively short histories of democratic governance, there is reason to believe that the gap between Eastern and Western Europe will continue to grow. While populism is poised to shape the politics of the coming years on all parts of the continent, it would only endanger the comparatively young democracies of countries like Poland or Hungary. But if the degree to which the rise of the populists leads to a process of democratic deconsolidation depends primarily on

whether they gain enough public support to form a government in their own right, then Western and Northern European countries are hardly immune. If populist parties continue to gain in strength as rapidly in the next ten years as they have in the last ten years, countries like Sweden or Germany might then find themselves more vulnerable to disruption than the past seven decades of relative stability might suggest.

Europe's political landscape is undergoing the biggest transformation since the end of the Cold War. Over the past two decades, populist parties have steadily increased their support, entering most national parliaments across the continent. In many countries, they have even taken over the levers of government. An unprecedented populist belt now covers a big and strategically important stretch of Central and Eastern Europe, from the Baltic Sea all the way to the Aegean.

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