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Explaining Populism and Euroscepticism in European Countries

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Abstract

The waves of populism are sweeping across Europe leaving the continent and its ambition shaken. One of the most significant turning points is Brexit – the UK's decision to leave the EU following the referendum that will forever change the fate of both the UK and the EU. Given the Brexit incident as a result of populism in the UK, it is interesting to explore how the rise of populism relates to Euroscepticism in other settings across Europe. This article seeks to delve into the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism movements in three different European sub-regions including post-financial-crisis Southern Europe, Western and Northern Europe along with post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. The author argues that as the EU is generally perceived by the populist movements at both end of the political spectrum as the enemy, left-wing and right-wing populism are naturally prone to being Eurosceptic. However, as an attempt to comprehend this phenomenon; different political, economic, social and historical contexts of each sub-regions must also be taken into consideration as they lead to different levels of Euroscepticism and success of each populist movement.

Keywords: populism, Euroscepticism, European Union, Brexit

On June 23, 2016, the British citizen voted by 51.9% to 48.1% to leave the European Union (EU) in the historic Brexit referendum, leading to the ongoing arduous negotiations to conclude the withdrawal agreement before the scheduled departure date in 2019. This phenomenon indicates the rise of Euroscepticism in the UK. According to Cas Mudde, it is partly resulted from a higher influence of populism, which was one of the mainstays in rally for Leave, in British society.¹ Although its origin dates back to a long time ago, populism has just moved from “the marginal” to “the more centre” of British political arena in recent decades. It has become a tempting political alternative for many constituents who find that they have no other political choices because both major political parties, i.e. the Conservative and the Labor, are not significantly different in their stances and policy proposals. From late-1990s they have consensus on neoliberal capitalist agenda, the ones that cause many constituents’ economic hardship, social conflict, and psychological insecurities.

Since the 1970s the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism is not only unique for British establishment elites. This ideology has gradually spread and been internalized across Western Europe including post-communist Central and Eastern Europe and; therefore, led to the similar

¹ Cas Mudde, “Populism isn’t dead. Here are five things you need to know about it,” *The Guardian*, July 7, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/07/populism-dead-european-victories-centrists> (accessed on August 12, 2018).

circumstance – almost identical ideologies among political parties. In the former USSR satellite states, after the communist regimes had collapsed, most of their elites were fond of this “Western/Liberal Way” as the solution to transform their post-communist economies. Later, in many other European states, their major left-right bipartisan parties also agreed on the centrist “Third Way” economic agenda as well. As these phenomena are not unique, so is the rise of populism likewise.

In domestic politics, populist movements can mobilize more and more support from the public. Some institutionalized populist parties have gained more power in national political institutions in recent years. For example, in April 2017, Marine Le Pen, from the right-wing populist National Front (FN), advanced to the final round of the French presidential election. Five months later, the right-wing populist Alternatives for Germany (AfD) could enter the Bundestag for the first time as the third largest party. Latest, the left-wing populist Five Star Movement (M5S) won the 2018 Italian general election and leads the incumbent government.

Meanwhile, in EU-level politics, it witnesses a higher influence of populism in EU member states through members of the European Council and the Council of the EU. Besides, most of major political parties elected to the European Parliament are also in the above-mentioned situation and; therefore, populist institutionalized movements can mobilize more support from wide European constituents

too. In latest 2014 MEPs election, for instance, the right-wing populist Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD), chaired by Nigel Farage from the UK Independence Party (UKIP), gained more than 5 percent of the MEP seats.

I hereby argue that while populist movements generally claim itself as the representatives of the “pure people,” who have been threatened by “the corrupt others/elites,” and proclaim to fight against them.² The EU is inevitably defined by populism in Europe as that such “other”: the international neoliberal agent for the left but the cosmopolitan and “undemocratic” elite for the right. Subsequently, the rise of populism witnesses the growth of Euroscepticism in the EU member states in various forms, based on different contexts in each sub-region and country. The crisis-ridden Southern Europe faces left-wing populist demand to reform or leave some EU neoliberal economic regime, illustrating “Soft Euroscepticism.” In Western and Northern Europe, the more powerful and exclusionary right-wing populist movements, rather, evoke strong sentiments about “Hard Euroscepticism” with a call for referendum on the membership in the EU. Meanwhile, a Eurosceptic challenge, posed by the illiberal populists in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, mainly targets EU liberal democratic values.

2 Cas Mudde, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

To elaborate my argument, firstly, I will (1) explain the claims of populist movements across Europe in general on the EU to understand why they broadly target the EU as “the corrupt other.” Next, I will (2) explore the current status of populist movements including their Eurosceptic ideas and policy proposals in some European countries before (3) conclude this article in the last part.

EU from the Populist Perspective: International Neoliberal Agent vs. Cosmopolitan and Undemocratic Elite

In general terms, populist parties in Europe proclaim to fight corrupt elites for “the people” They seek to pursue a more powerful state by strengthening police and military as well as by nationalising banks and industrial sectors; have neither tolerance for pluralism, nor respect for rule of law; call for direct democracy and referenda; operate on “revolutionary language” to provoke an emotional upheaval; and are highly critical of globalisation, immigration, free trade deals and supranational institutions, such as the EU.³

In fact, populist parties have existed for a long time; however, they have recently been at the centre of attention in the political arena. Populist catalysts are high

3 Aamna Mohdin, “Populist, authoritarian leaders are still on the rise across Europe,” *Quartz*, July 12, 2017, <https://qz.com/1027518/populist-authoritarian-leaders-are-still-on-the-rise-across-europe/> (accessed on August 12, 2018).

levels of unemployment due to economic recessions; implementation of austerity measures in crisis-stricken Southern countries amidst the Eurozone financial crisis; and influx of predominantly Muslim refugees of Middle East and North Africa (MENA) descent who fled wars in their homeland. Besides, multiple violent terrorist attacks on European soil exacerbate voter's disillusionment with mainstream parties. All catalysts provide fertile grounds for engendering populist movements that largely oppose transnational, cosmopolitan elites and/or immigrants as well as ethnic or religious minorities.

As suggested earlier, the root cause that triggers the popularity of populists can be ascribed to a "rational response to the apparent political failures of the established parties" and an "emotional backlash to a sense of disenfranchisement and social alienation" inflicted by the bipartisan consensus over post-Cold War neoliberal agenda – in which mainstream parties have shifted ever closer towards "the ideological centre" that prioritises growth-generating economic policies. Traditional left-wing parties depoliticise left-wing ideology and embrace "post-partisan pragmatism" as in the cases of New Labour in the UK and Neue Mitte in Germany.⁴ On the other hand, traditional right-wing parties shift towards more progressive issues on sociocultural matters to attract more votes (as is the case of CDU in

4 Michael Bröning, "The Rise of Populism in Europe: Can the Center Hold?," *Foreign Affairs*, June 3, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/europe/2016-06-03/rise-populism-europe> (accessed on August 12, 2018).

Germany that launched an open-door policy regarding refugees, abandoned its nuclear energy policy and relinquished the military draft). Seeing mainstream parties as “too similar to one another” and no longer representing their interests, disillusioned traditional leftist voters, many of whom are working-class voters, and conventional right-wing supporters of conservative issues may eventually fall prey to the rhetoric of opportunistic populist parties⁵

To represent for such traditional leftists and deal with leftist economic anger, left-wing populism remains strongly opposed to the establishment as if it were the struggle of the bottom and middle class against the top-echelon elite. Unlike conventional socialist movements, radical left populism does not necessarily seek to abolish capitalism nor to politicise a class conflict; it seeks to “reform rather than abolish” capitalism. Its discourse merely assumes a basic antagonism between the majority of “the people” and a handful of elites. It represents the will of “the people” against “plutocracy”. Left-wing populists often exhort governments to tighten national regulations on businesses, nationalise indispensable industries, reduce socioeconomic inequalities inflicted by capitalism, and sap the power of business in the political realm. Although they exclude elites and global/regional financial actors as “others,” they also employ inclusion as a method to mobilise large-scale support from voters from all social sectors by encompassing youth, women, LGBTs, ethnic minorities and migrants.

5 Ibid.

On the other end of the political spectrum, right-wing populism also opposes the establishment, yet on different grounds. Cosmopolitan elites are accused of favouring a third group, consisting of immigrants, refugees and ethnic minorities, over their own compatriots. Unlike conventional conservatism that mainly focuses on protecting the interests of business classes against those of their labour critics and unlike authoritarian conservatism that aims to subvert democracy, right-wing populism is a struggle of low and middle classes against the interests of transnational, cosmopolitan elites, and still respects fundamental democratic principles.⁶ Unlike the method of left-wing parties, right-wing populist parties employ exclusion as their method. This involves the creation of “common enemies” to mobilise electoral support, which is usually based on radical right extremism, racial supremacy, homophobia, xenophobia, nationalism and prejudices against ethnic or religious minorities, such as anti-Semitism, anti-Roma or Islamophobia.

However, it is interesting to see that right-wing populist parties also employ an inclusion method or downplay their extremist image to mobilise support from voters at the centre, who were traditionally detached from far-right parties, such as LGBTs and Muslims. For example, prior to the Brexit referendum, Leave campaigners attempted to include

⁶ John B. Judis, “Us v Them: the Birth of Populism,” *The Guardian*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/oct/13/birth-of-populism-donald-trump> (accessed on August 12, 2018).

LGBTs and Muslims to support Brexit by organising a gay anti-EU group and Muslims for Britain, and Out and Proud, aimed at building support from different communities. The French National Front party, under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, attempted to soften its racist past and anti-Semitic image under the legacy of her father, and replaced it with Islamophobia. Meanwhile, the Alternative for Germany party attempted to detach itself from its neo-Nazi image towards an ordinary anti-immigration party, by proposing to expel Björn Höcke for his taboo-breaking speech that called for a “180 degree turn” in German Erinnerungskultur (culture of remembering) by atoning for the Nazi era and altering its leadership position. One of leaders, Alice Weidel, is the first lesbian woman to serve as the lead candidate of a party which traditionally opposes same-sex marriage.

For left-wing populists, the EU and its Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) are the “highest stages” of international neoliberal capitalist agents. With its supranational power, the EU is viewed as neoliberal policy implementer that causes working-class economic hardship and inequalities. It governs the regime of free flows of goods, services, capitals, and labors across the region; enacts the “deregulated” trade and investment regulations that prohibit its member states to protect domestic firms and support them to privatize their former state enterprises; as well as negotiates the free trade agreements to “open the market more” with external parties. It also forces the austerity measures through its financial and fiscal rules including some reform plans

and bailout packages for new or fractious countries. In this sense, left-wing populism, thus, defines the EU as “the other” in the same group with centrist establishment elites and international financial actors. However, as mentioned above, this kind of populism seeks to “reform rather than abolish” hence its claims usually indeed target some EU neoliberal principles and policies rather than the EU itself or the membership in the EU.

On the other hand, for right-wing populists, the EU is the cosmopolitan, undemocratic and unaccountable regime. Moreover, due to its supreme target to establish eternal peace and its centrist social progressivism, the EU has moral obligation to embrace all humanities; assure their natural rights in life, liberty and property; as well as protect everyone, including “the weaker,” “the marginal,” or “the other” in the society, from marginalization and discrimination. To do this, the EU is considered by the exclusionary right-wing populists that it attempts to privilege their “common enemies,” for example, minor ethnic groups, foreigners, immigrants, and Muslims, or, in other words, stands for them instead of the pure Europeans. Besides, without explicit and direct political mandatory chain with “the people,” the supranational EU is viewed as the undemocratic organization prevailing its member states’ sovereignty. Although the decisions of EU institutions are legal binding for all members and affect broad European citizens, right-wing populists feel that the ordinary people have not enough participation in such decisions. In this sense, the EU seems to take the self-

determination rights away from each national constituency. It is, thus, defined as “the other” for “the pure people” and national direct democracy. Employing an exclusion method, some movements, such as the French FN and the German AfD, call for the withdrawal of their countries from the union.

Dynamics of populism in Europe: Trends towards Euroscepticism?

Given the above-mentioned populist antagonist claims on the EU, some further argue that the rise of populism in view of domestic politics may be “a turning point for Europe” as it could possibly lead to the disintegration of the EU.⁷ Indeed, the formation of Euroscepticism in each country varies across time and issue areas. It relates to the essence and the location along the left-right political spectrum of populism in such contexts. Hard Euroscepticism can be defined as a “principled opposition to the project of European integration based on the ceding or transfer of powers to supranational institutions” such as the EU. On the other hand, Soft Euroscepticism can be characterized as an “opposition to the Union’s current or future planned trajectory based on the further extension of competencies” that it intended to make in instances where national interest is in conflict with the EU trajectory. Next, I will

7 Katya Adler, “Populist challenge brings Europe to crossroads,” *BBC*, February 9, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38915466> (accessed on August 12, 2018).

examine movement status and ideas from six countries in three sub-regions as case studies: Southern Europe (Greece and Italy), Western and Northern Europe (France and the Netherlands), and Central and Eastern Europe (Hungary and Poland). Since these areas are under distinct historical, political and economic contexts, the status of populist movements and Eurosceptic ideas in each are significantly different.

Regarding crisis-ridden Southern Europe, where its citizens experience poverty and high unemployment, and suffer from conditions under the implementation of austerity measures, most influential populist movements are left-wing that express their hostility towards some elements of EU neoliberal economic regime, especially the use of a common currency, the European Central Bank (ECB)'s common monetary policy, and the austerity measures. They call for EU financial and fiscal policy reform to cope up with citizens' economic hardship, and, in some most extreme cases, a referendum on the membership in the Eurozone rather than on the EU membership, illustrating "Soft Euroscepticism." Notable examples of left-wing populist movements in this sub-region are the SYRIZA in Greece and the M5S in Italy, currently leading their countries' incumbent government.

In the case of Greece, SYRIZA excludes the EU and Germany as "the others" or as uncompromising foreign "enemies" who unfairly impose austerity measures on the Greek "people". The left-wing anti-establishment SYRIZA, under the leadership of Alexis Tsipras, successfully became

the largest party in the Hellenic Parliament with 36.3% of the vote in the Greek legislative election, in January 2015, and subsequently formed a coalition government with the right-wing populist Independent Greeks (ANEL) in January and September 2015. The rise to prominence of the anti-austerity party initially raised a serious question as to the possibility of the debt-stricken country leaving the Eurozone. However, once SYRIZA came to power, it seemed to downplay its harsh rhetoric. In spite of its disapproval of austerity measures imposed by the EU, SYRIZA does not intend to pursue “Grexit” (Greek departure from the EU), yet it derides upon that option as an agenda of those who aspire to break up Europe. SYRIZA’s popularity is currently plummeting downwards, owing to the implementation of harsh austerity measures that they once vowed to oppose. Although many Greeks are no longer contented with the use of a single currency amidst the Eurozone crisis, they still want to remain in the Eurozone as they have a trepidation for consequences of Greece’s exit from the Eurozone, which may lead to a collapse of the cradle of democracy given no bailouts by the EU, upon which it is highly reliant.⁸

In the case of Italy, the M5S is a Eurosceptic, anti-globalist, anti-establishment populist party that emphasises environmentalism, sustainable development and direct

8 Helena Smith, “Grexit? Greece again on the brink as debt crisis threatens break with EU,” *The Guardian*, February 3, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/03/grexit-greece-debt-crisis-eu-germany-us> (accessed on August 12, 2018).

democracy. Beppe Grillo, the party's co-founder, calls for a referendum to draw Italy out of Eurozone, reintroduce Italian lira and proposes an "Italeave" (Italian departure from the EU) referendum. In 2016, two party members, Virginia Raggi and Chiara Appendino, were elected mayors of Rome and Turin. Latest, at the 2018 general election, it became the largest individual party in the Chamber of Deputies and subsequently formed a coalition government with the right-wing populist North League (LN) in June 2018. However, despite its victory in the last election, a poll in March 2017 suggests that 61% of Italians support the use of single currency.⁹ Meanwhile, on the other end of the political spectrum, the LN is an anti-immigration party that supports national regionalism in Northern Italy. It seems to be in a position of "Hard Euroscepticism" that is in favour of allowing a referendum on the EU membership. However, it does not pose a serious challenge in the form of "Italeave" as it still gained limited support at the latest general election.¹⁰

Considering Western and Northern Europe, where member states enjoy relatively better economic situation, the left-wing populist rhetoric of economic reform is less powerful. Due to public anger and sentiment of insecurity

9 Kate Lyons and Gordon Darroch, "Frexit, Nexit or Oexit? Who will be next to leave the EU," *The Guardian*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/27/frexit-nexit-or-oexit-who-will-be-next-to-leave-the-eu> (accessed on August 12, 2018).

10 Ibid.

resulted from the influx of who are defined by “the pure people” as “the others” in recent years, the right-wing populist parties can mobilize more and more support from constituents, and generally gain more influence than the left. Employing an exclusionary rhetoric, they evoke strong sentiments about “Hard Euroscepticism” – some call for a referendum on the membership in the Union. Notable examples of right-wing populist movements in this sub-region are the FN in France and the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands.

In the case of France, Marine Le Pen, leader of the Eurosceptic far-right National Front party (FN) became runner-up to the pro-European, liberal, centrist candidate of the Forward party (EM), Emmanuel Macron, in the second round of the French presidential election of 2017. The rise to prominence of both candidates signified a break from bipartisan coalitions, which alternated between centre-right Republicans party (LR) and centre-left Socialist Party (PS); it indicated voter disillusionment with mainstream parties. Le Pen and her party’s unprecedented popularity has grown in the wake of a series of terrorist attacks, an influx of refugees from the Middle East and the French economic malaise of high unemployment and stagnant economic growth since the 2008 economic crisis. She strongly proposes a return to the franc currency, would opt France out of NATO, and supports a “Frexit” (French departure from the EU) referendum, promising to hold it within six months if she got elected. Despite Le Pen’s electoral defeat, many are still

afraid that other parties might co-opt her party's agenda to initiate a sort of referendum on the future of the EU.¹¹

In the case of the Netherlands, the general election in March 2015 showed the most significant rise in popularity of the anti-immigrant, Islamophobic PVV, under the leadership of Geert Wilders, who calls for "de-Islamification of the Netherlands" and signals an electoral move towards the right based on discontent with a significant Muslim community, at estimated level of 5% in 2014. He also proposes to hold a referendum on the EU membership in close association with "Hard Euroscepticism" on sociocultural issues, such as Dutch national identity, migration and a large number of Muslim communities. However, a poll suggests that a slim majority of the Dutch are against holding the referendum and the majority favour staying in the EU.¹²

Looking at Central and Eastern Europe, "a critical mass" of populist leaders in this sub-region ascribe to peace-threatening and ethnic nationalism, and openly reject the idea of "liberal democracy."¹³ Brexit and Donald Trump's

11 Holly Ellyatt and Nancy Hungerford, "First Brexit, now Frexit? Fears grow over the power of populist politics," *CNBC*, June 30, 2016, <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/06/30/ppopulist-politics-first-brexit-now-frexit.html> (accessed on August 12, 2018).

12 Lyons and Darroch, "Frexit, Nexit or Oexit? Who will be next to leave the EU."

13 Gašper Zavřník, "Brexit and Trump encouraged Eastern Europe populism: report," *Politico*, April 4, 2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/brexit-and-trump-encouraged-eastern-europe-populism-report-hungary-poland-democracy/> (accessed on August 12, 2018).

administration in the US, to a certain extent, emboldened anti-democratic populists in the region and exacerbated their shift towards “illiberal democracy” Hence, their Euroscepticism is manifested by its hostility towards the idea of “liberal democratic” Europe and preference for certain authoritarian, nationalist and illiberal values, which are a legacy left from its communist past in which Central and Eastern European countries were relatively less exposed to liberal democratic values, cosmopolitanism and a high level of migration. It is worth noting that public Euro-enthusiasm seems to be relatively high in sharp contrast to a high level of party-based Euroscepticism. This implies that their citizens view the EU as a benign actor, thanks to their desire to “return to Europe” following the end of the Cold War and their reliance on the structural funds of the EU, particularly in cases of Hungary and Poland.

In the case of Hungary, the right-wing Eurosceptic populist Fidesz, under the charismatic leadership of Viktor Orbán, has dominated Hungarian politics since 2010, when they won with a landslide majority in the parliamentary elections. Supported by impressive popular majorities, he introduced new constitutions in 2011 that consolidate excessive power of the ruling government, interfere with independence of public media and limit judicial oversight, therefore, significantly undermining check-and-balance systems of liberal democracy. Instead of posing an outright rejectionist view on the question of the EU membership, its Euroscepticism seems to be relatively soft. It does not seek

to leave the EU and merely opposes certain policies that the EU imposes on itself and other member states, such as the refugee relocation scheme, which the Eurosceptic, populist and nationalist Fidesz party (under the premiership of Viktor Orbán) fiercely opposed together with Poland and the Czech Republic, and subsequently held a Hungarian referendum on whether or not to reject the scheme, albeit not legally valid, on October 2nd 2016, to demonstrate a symbolic defiance to the EU.¹⁴

In the case of Poland, similarly, the right-wing populist Law and Justice Party (PiS) has become the largest party in the Polish parliament, since 2015, with an unprecedented outright majority. Its stance towards Atlanticism and less support of the European project signals soft Euroscepticism. Its leader, Jarosław Kaczynski, openly derides the idea that independent institutions can constrain the majority rule of the Poles. Its judiciary reforms and interference with media independence seem to be at odds with the fundamental principles of liberal democracy,¹⁵ prompting the European Commission to strip Poland of its EU voting rights. However, the lack of consent from the Hungarian government for

14 Gabriela Baczyńska and Foo Yun Chee, “EU to open case against Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic over migration,” *Reuters*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-eu-infringements/eu-to-open-case-against-poland-hungary-czech-republic-over-migration-idUSKBN1931O4> (accessed on August 12, 2018).

15 Završnik, “Brexit and Trump encouraged Eastern Europe populism.”

imposing sanctions against Poland facilitated Poland's non-compliance with the EU's requirements.¹⁶

Indeed, the trend of Central and Eastern Europe towards "illiberal democracy" that disrespects rule of law, undermines democratic check-and-balance systems and subdues the judiciary and public media, regardless of its degree of Euroscepticism, also poses a serious threat to the project of the European integration, as it directly tampers with fundamental liberal values of the EU, which has a high regard for democratic governance, rule of law and protection of human rights.

In principal, Brexit and Eurosceptic trends in other EU member states raise the spectre of disintegration of the EU. The integration process that has laid the foundation for peace and economic prosperity can no longer be taken for granted.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the neoliberal European integration, as a project of the political establishment and the elites, carries the seeds of its own destruction. The seeds germinate into populist movements at both ends of the political spectrum and prompt a lack of trust in national and European political

16 “‘New Eurosceptic Union’? Hungary, Poland Poised to Jointly Defy Brussels,” *Sputnik*, February 22, 2017, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201702221050935746-hungary-poland-brussels-european-commission/> (accessed on August 12, 2018).

institutions. Left-wing populist movements leverage such distrust to construct identity of the EU as the international neoliberal agent who causes economic hardship among “the people.” In the post-financial-crisis Southern Europe, these movements can mobilize considerable electoral support in recent years as their soft Eurosceptic rhetoric and policy proposals satisfy economic anger among constituents. In contrast, the right-wings apply the distrust to fuel the exclusionary sentiments against the EU as the cosmopolitan and undemocratic elite. In Western and Northern Europe, where many populations feel insecure due to influx of “the others” supported by the supranational EU, the movements’ calls for a referendum on EU membership have gained support from considerable amount of population. Meanwhile, in the post-communist Central and Eastern Europe, despite not seeking for the withdrawal from the EU, populist movements – some as the ruling parties – question and resist against the Union’s values. Indeed, this can pose a serious challenge against the core existence of the European project as well.