
The rise of anti-EU populism: why, and what to do about it

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BACKGROUND

It is undeniable that populist forces are on the rise in most European countries – North and South, East and West – and that they resort to anti-EU rhetoric to increase their political and electoral support. The combination of the global financial and economic crises (since 2008) with the specifically European sovereign debt crisis (since 2010) has only strengthened this trend. It is equally undeniable that mainstream parties now embrace some elements of that rhetoric. They use it both to hold and to win-back supporters and to strengthen their hand in EU-level negotiations, but they achieve meagre results in both areas.

The growth of populist forces is variously linked to a number of distinct, and originally separate, phenomena. However, when this is coupled with the rising use of populist language in the media and public discourse and with the lack of effective responses by mainstream parties and leaders, it can create a dangerous mix that could potentially undermine mutual solidarity and trust inside the European Union.

First, one needs to define the terms. '*Populism*' is often used in a derogatory sense to describe a type of political discourse and style. This usually takes the form of an appeal to 'the people' against 'the elites' in defence of the (supposed) genuine interests of common citizens against the political agenda of powerful 'outsiders'.

Populist discourse tends to oversimplify policy issues that are intrinsically complex, controversial and/or poorly explained to the public. Populism often represents a symptom of, and contributes to highlighting the broader difficulties and deficiencies

that advanced liberal democracies experience in dealing with both policy and citizens – their ultimate source of political legitimacy.

Historically speaking, populism dates back to the agrarian movements of 19th century America. Although some of its traits were also discernible in the totalitarian ideologies of the first half of the 20th century, populism, as we know it, emerged after World War II in the most diverse democratic political systems. These have ranged from Latin America, where it has the most distinctive and durable roots, to the developing world, from France and Pierre Poujade in the 1950s, to the Scandinavian countries since the 1970s, and to the US and Ross Perot in the 1990s.

Most of the time, it has focused on a single issue, such as high taxation in Northern Europe or NAFTA for Perot. It has appealed to frustrated voters on both sides of the political divide, making it difficult to identify it with either the extreme right or the extreme left; and it has materialised into 'flash' parties with a very short life span.

The rise and decline of populist forces and the spread of anti-EU rhetoric have not always gone hand-in-hand. Nordic countries have long experienced recurrent, if volatile, surges of populist parties and lists, often driven by tax revolts, while being mostly indifferent to the issue of European integration. Moreover, some regional parties initially combined support for the EU against the national state with elements of tax revolt and anti-immigration sentiments, often with xenophobic overtones.

Their record shows that their ability to maintain a certain level of mobilisation among sympathisers and to achieve some degree of institutionalisation may allow them to consolidate, last, and even thrive further. Alternatively, they often deflate and disappear.

For its part, vintage 'euro-scepticism' (originally from Britain) has shaped some core elements of the anti-EU arsenal, although Britain's political and constitutional make-up have mostly managed to contain its most destructive effects, if not its rhetoric. Elsewhere, in both Northern and Southern Europe, anti-EU arguments have often been popular on the left as part of an ideological, but not necessarily populist, platform in which parties opposed to neo-liberal policies earmarked the European Commission as their main agent and enforcer.

Referenda as game changers

Populist forces' chances of electoral success have traditionally depended on the configuration of *electoral systems*. Strict proportional representation has normally acted as a facilitator especially for 'flash' parties, whereas bipolar and first-past-the-post arrangements have curbed

them, although their campaigns have created political damage.

At the same time *referenda* have often acted as powerful catalysts for spreading populist sentiments and messages, regardless of the legitimate reasons for calling them. This has occurred as referenda tend to over-simplify the debate and resort to a quintessential populist theme: just saying 'No' to the establishment.

Since 1992 with the referenda on Maastricht, popular votes on subsequent EU Treaties have become recurrent occasions for campaigning against 'Brussels' and consolidating a populist narrative. As a result, few people have dared proposing sweeping treaty reforms or launching an open debate on the need for more and better integration. This reluctance has, in turn, risked leaving the public space entirely to the anti-EU camp.

It will be extremely difficult to resort or return to the old ways. The kind of 'permissive consensus' driven by enlightened and far-sighted elites (the "blessed plot" described by the late Hugo Young) that long characterised the European integration process is gone. Instead the pressure for transparency and legitimacy is here to stay.

STATE OF PLAY

More recently, following the outbreak of the financial and economic crises, a number of developments have made the appearance of populist forces and their embracing anti-EU rhetoric a more durable phenomenon, in both electoral and public-opinion terms. Such developments – on which the crisis has acted as a catalyst and multiplier – include:

- the gradual erosion of the traditional *milieux* of so-called *Volksparteien* ('catch-all' parties) across Europe and the secularisation of societies, which has boosted electoral mobility and contributed to the rise of protest voting;
- the decline of most labour unions, which has driven less educated voters and 'losers of globalisation' towards populist movements;
- the effects of trade, economic and financial liberalisation, which some citizens in both Eastern and Western Europe have associated with the EU Single Market;
- the growing pressure of immigration and the expectation of more to come, which is perceived as an economic, political and, at times, even a cultural threat;

- the change in the political discourse over Europe, which has broken old taboos and made spectacular inroads into the mass media;
- tax and even fiscal revolts, especially among the 'winners of globalisation', which now take place on a continental rather than purely national scale, thus undermining collective action and pitting national communities against one another;
- last but not least, the effects of the sovereign debt crisis, which are now hitting those sections of the middle class – mainly civil servants and teachers – who traditionally supported European integration, and whose children are now to be found among the so-called indignados.

New political entrepreneurs

Declining social cohesion, rising immigration, widening income disparities, growing uncertainty in times of change and mounting dissatisfaction with the apparent lack of alternatives to austerity: this is the background against which a growing number of political '*entrepreneurs*' –

mostly (but not only) on the right of the political spectrum – have started betting on the combination and mutual reinforcement of socio-economic and anti-EU populism, with a view to exploiting the fears of European citizens.

They emphasise the dangers to identities and communities – be they local, national, historical or social – while the only response they can offer is a more or less explicit return to a bygone and imagined past. They try to appeal directly to voters rather than activists, at least in the short term. And they try to appeal to all voters, although they only need to reach between 10 to 20% to have a major impact. When that happens, they stop being political *symptoms* and start becoming political *factors* – and *players* in their own right.

Last but certainly not least, populist forces do not care much about how their programmes hang together, and increasingly borrow from one another's scaremongering rhetoric – on the right as well as on the left of the political spectrum.

Such '*politics of fear*', which range from finger-pointing to overt 'scapegoating' of EU institutions and/or fellow EU countries and citizens (including immigrants from Europe's neighbourhoods), has often paid off in electoral terms, with some populist forces having become either formal partners in, or key parliamentary supporters of, coalition governments.

Their success has triggered a frantic race to catch up among mainstream parties, which, instead of countering the anti-EU discourse, have often contributed to feeding the populist frenzy. Even when all this is not directly reflected in electoral results, it is clearly recorded, and 'felt' in opinion polls and the media.

Tangible and possible effects

As a result, no single party or coalition in the EU now seems able to win an election exclusively and explicitly on a pro-EU platform (although Poland may soon become the exception that proves the rule). Most leaders hesitate before taking courageous and forward-looking decisions and as a result end up leading from behind and granting legitimacy to populist claims.

Finally, if and when mainstream parties coalesce, as they should do in principle to stem the populist/radical tide and form grand coalitions, they risk further consolidating the

gap between the established elites and 'the people'.

All this is by no means an exclusively European phenomenon. There is also a 'politics of fear' in the US. Some of the tools, including the web and social media, and the rhetoric used on the other side of the Atlantic have been 'imported' into Europe, as happened, for example, during the 'No' campaign for the 2008 Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty. The emphasis on identities and communities: against 'Washington' and 'big government', and the use of sophisticated techniques are also distinctive features of the Tea Party movement.

Admittedly, the US seems somewhat more used to this form of populism, having lived with it for much longer; yet the symptoms of institutional gridlock and political paralysis also abound across the Atlantic. What is peculiar to the EU, however, is that the current wave of populism is putting into question the political *acquis* and even the implicit 'covenant' that lies at the root of the Union. This could undermine the way parliamentary democracy has operated so far on the continent.

Opinion polls across Europe (including the latest Eurobarometer) have started to show a tangible loss of trust in (all) EU institutions and a marginal rise in trust in national ones. At the same time, the correlation between concerns over the economic crisis and over immigration appears more complex; it is virtually non-existent in the EU-12 and uneven elsewhere, but strongest in those countries most affected by both.

An ageing and increasingly conservative population seems to be turning to those national institutions which give the impression of being better able to defend its entitlements, while in its lack of hope in the future the younger generation is turning against all institutions.

This situation generates the potential both for a further spreading of populist messages and for political gridlock inside the EU itself. While virtually all *policies* now need a continental or even global framework and scope to be effective, *politics* remain primarily national (or even sub-national). On top of that, *polities* remain fragmented and disconnected, with 27 (and counting) different political and constitutional systems and distinct electoral cycles coexisting and overlapping across the Union. The rising populist challenge to parties, elites and institutions risks making the equation of EU policy-making insoluble.

PROSPECTS

While appreciations of the gravity of the populist challenge still vary, offering a political response is not easy, especially for EU officials and institutions. Good policy coupled with good communication is the first obvious answer: taking convincing, bold and timely decisions based on agreed strategies, and then presenting them to the public in a clear, direct and coordinated way. This combination is also a quintessential source of 'output legitimacy'.

But what if agreeing and implementing good policies are made more difficult as a result of the mounting populist tide and its growing influence on citizens and governments? The second obvious answer is that the only lasting solutions lie at the national level: it is national leaders who have to make the case for Europe and the policies agreed in Brussels (which, unfortunately, they tend to do less and less) and to win elections not only for themselves but also for the EU.

This said, no matter how good the policy and its presentation may be, these are based on a predominantly *rational* narrative, while populism appeals to, and feeds on, mainly *irrational* feelings. In this case, there may always be an irreconcilable difference between the message 'from above' and the populist narrative.

Still, get smart(er)

While taking these structural difficulties into account, there are some practical moves that could be taken to engage with anti-EU rhetoric:

- *Dispel the myths*: the EU could engage in full-scale, real-time action to de-construct and rebut all the anti-Europe myths built and spread by populist forces. Some groundwork has been done by the EU Delegation in the UK as well as others in support of the 2009 'Yes' campaign in Ireland. Why not generalise this approach and make it more systematic?
- *Compare and contrast*: the populist rhetoric is often contradictory. It can be both ultra-liberal and protectionist, nationalist and regionalist, for and against regulation (depending on who is to be regulated). The internal divisions that plague fringe groups in the European Parliament offer ample evidence of this.
- *Emphasise legitimacy*: neither European Commissioners nor MEPs are 'faceless bureaucrats':

they have a mandate, either as appointees of elected national governments, often with a political profile and a record in office, and/or as elected representatives. They can and should claim full 'input legitimacy' for their choices, and perhaps push for more *politicisation* at all levels, particularly as there is no way back to the "blessed plot".

More broadly, however, the key challenge for the EU is to articulate its messages in a more punctual and inspirational way. European leaders have to learn from Americans how to frame concrete policy choices in order to appeal to the imagination and hopes of citizens and to cast such choices in the *future* rather than the *past*. This is too often presented as a scarecrow, to prevent the wars of centuries past, and/or a sacred cow, in that integration has made those wars 'unthinkable'.

All the core themes populist forces thrive on today are opportunities rather than liabilities or constraints: structural reforms, mobility and migration, regulated liberalisations, fiscal coordination and even centralisation. They are real issues that demand adequate solutions. Addressing them effectively, however, requires acknowledging and confronting the problems for what they are. This, in turn, would also help create political momentum and mobilise support. Minimising or downplaying them risks producing weak policies and ultimately feeding populism.

At the same time, there is clearly no silver bullet against anti-EU populism. It is there to stay, as are the underlying factors that triggered it in the first place. And it will stay as long as the kind of converging (re)action suggested above does not produce some tangible effects.

This is going to be a quasi-systemic challenge for the years to come, especially *vis-à-vis* the younger generations. Facing it will require more coordination and cooperation, and arguably less competition, among EU leaders, with a view to producing better policies and communicating them in new, more appealing and direct ways. But it will also require publicly and commonly defining the challenges, articulating the stakes, identifying the goals, and the means to achieve them, and taking full responsibility for the decisions that have to be made and implemented.

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