



Think Tank for political participation

# Europe's new spectre: Populist parties

*A journey around the continent's new and old populist parties*

Edited by Anne Heyer  
& Christine Hübner

December 2018

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## **Europe's new spectre: Populist parties**

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# PREFACE

# Preface

Populism has long been around as a political method. Literally, it refers to the connection of politics with the “*populus*”, the people in the street. But it is the last few decades that have seen a sharp rise in the use of populist rhetoric in politics. New and established political parties made advances based on a narrative that features strong emotions and radical demands for simple solutions to complex problems. A range of new populist parties have captivated Europe – Europe’s new spectre? Starting from France’s Front National and Austria’s Freedom Party (FPÖ), a long list of political parties all across the continent ensues: the Sweden Democrats, Belgium’s Vlaams Blok, the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), Poland’s Law and Justice Party (PiS), Syriza in Greece, Germany’s Alternative für Deutschland, the Five-Star-Movement in Italy or Podemos in Spain, to name just a few. These parties have not only made advances among voters; they have fundamentally changed Europe’s political landscape. What is the basis for populism’s recent success in Europe?

This is the question we asked ourselves in early 2016, when it seemed as if populist parties could not become any more relevant. Most of Europe’s national parliaments featured at least one party that made use of populist rhetoric. Populist parties had been elected into the European parliament and some of these parties had gone to take up government responsibility, for example in Greece, Poland and Hungary. So we set out to take a close look at the phenomenon of populist parties in Europe. We were looking for similarities and differences between populist parties across Europe and for an explanation of their recent wave of success. We were convinced that the extraordinary rise of populist rhetoric across Europe must have a common denominator: maybe it was based on the crisis experience, a change of heart among European publics, or even both. We were looking for similarities among all these different parties and the way they made use of populism as a political method.

To identify similarities between populist parties across Europe, we asked a number of local experts to tell us about populist parties in their country and explain their success. We wanted to gain an in-depth view of populism and go beyond the often generalized and pan-European coverage populist parties received. We asked our experts to recount the development of populist parties in their local historical context. Taking into account the country’s political discourse, we also wanted to learn about populist parties’ core issues and the conceptions of democracy and political participation that the parties evoked internally and in the public. Finally, we tempted our experts to make predictions for the future success of these populist parties in their countries.

Over the course of 2016, nine experts answered our questions and contributed their local knowledge of populist parties in Europe. Ioannis Vlastaris and Konstantinos Kostagiannis wrote about [the many transformations of Syriza in Greece](#), Maria Tyrberg about [the electoral successes and diverging paths of the Sweden Democrats](#), and Javier Martínez-Cantó about [the political entrepreneurs of Podemos in Spain](#). Krisztian Simon explained [Victor Orban’s rise to power in Hungary](#), and Honorata and Agata Mazepus [the success story of the Law and Justice party \(PiS\) in Poland](#). Timo Lochocki wrote about [the illusionary giant of German politics](#), the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Charlotte de Roon about [Geert Wilders’ one-man show](#) with the Dutch

Freedom Party (PVV). Their contributions were first published as a series of blogs under the title “Populism in Europe” on d|part’s blog. They were read and shared thousands of times. This volume brings together all blogs in the series and takes us on a journey around Europe’s new and old populist parties.

When we were planning the series in early 2016 it seemed as if debates about populism could not become any more topical. Today, almost three years later, they have not lost any of their relevance. On the contrary, discourses on how to understand and deal with populist parties in Europe have become more heated over the years. While the European Commission and the European Parliament are now in favour of sanctions against Hungary’s and Poland’s radical right-wing populist governments, there are serious concerns about political polarisation and an increase in conciliatory initiatives. Commenting on the dominant characteristics and likely outcomes of populism has become a minefield, not the least after France witnessed Emmanuel Macron’s success in the presidential and parliamentary election with a political style that some analysts called populist. And while some still debate their legitimacy, all of the populist parties we investigated in 2016 have gone to become established actors in Europe’s political landscape. They are represented in national, regional and local parliaments. What is more, Greece’s Syriza and Poland’s Law and Justice Party (PiS) have been in government since 2015, Victor Orban’s Fidesz in Hungary even longer, since 2010. The Sweden Democrats and Germany’s AfD reached a vote share of 18 per cent in latest national elections, securing important opposition roles in parliament. And Podemos in Spain and the Dutch Freedom Party are polling at a stable 16 per cent of voters. Considering the development of their vote share, more than ever it looks like populist parties are here to stay.

Neither Europe’s new spectre – populist parties – nor our experts’ contributions have lost any of their relevance. An in-depth understanding of the development and agendas of populist parties across Europe is as pertinent today as it was in 2016. This is why we decided to publish all of our experts’ contributions in one edited volume. This volume takes us on a journey around the continent’s new and old populist parties. It goes beyond simple stories of innocent European voters, who are captivated by the ever same vicious populist rhetoric. Instead, this volume aims to offer a differentiated survey of populism as a phenomenon across Europe. Taken together, the chapters in this volume teach us that stories on populism are more complex than they seem and that the rise of populist parties in Europe does not necessarily mean the end of democracy. Rather, what we really mean when we speak of “democracy” is ever-changing. The direction that European democracies are heading to is open, not the least because of populism.

We hope that reading the chapters in this volume triggers you to have critical and nuanced thoughts and hopefully vivid discussions about Europe’s new spectre, populism, and what the rise of populist parties might mean for the direction democracy in Europe is heading to. The debate about the future of democracy, and the role of populism plays in it, has only just started.

Anne Heyer & Christine Hübner

Madrid / Berlin, December 2018

# INTRODUCTION

# (Un-)democratic populism and new parties in Europe

By [Anne Heyer](#).

## Europe's new spectre

A spectre is haunting Europe. No, this time around it is not Marx' old tale of the Communist Party that haunted Europe's then brand new nation states. This time, it is a whole range of new political parties that unsettle Europe's by now pretty established democracies.

For a few decades already, these new parties – populist ones – have not only upset the political establishment; they are significantly changing Europe's political landscape. Starting with France's Front National, the Austrian FPÖ and Belgium's Vlaams Blok, we can continue the list calling out the Danish Progress Party or the Sweden Democrats until we reach Poland's Law & Justice Party (PiS) or the Hungarian Fidesz. All of these illustrate a phenomenon of (re-)emerging right-wing populism. In the context of this spectacle some political scientists have argued that these new parties are inspired by a common European narrative: one that aims to give a voice to all those who are not united by the postmodern values of leftist social movements.<sup>[1]</sup> However, there are also rising stars on the left hand side of the political party horizon, such as Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain. Even Germany, a country that – for obvious historical reasons – has been immune to the rise of a new populist party for a long time, has acquired a new political actor right of centre. The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) does not only feature a populist tone; it is also positioned on the political right, in fact, to the right of both of the traditional conservative parties of German Christian Democracy, CDU and CSU.

## A series of blog posts: Europe's new populist parties

Many of these very different populist parties have become quite successful in the way they influence political debates and put pressure on established actors. However, we can also find more nuanced accounts of their recent wave of success. So what is the matter really with this new populist spectre haunting Europe? Some seem to believe that this phenomenon poses a serious threat to representative democracy. Others proclaim the opposite: the rise of a new era of direct or deliberative democracy. These divergent positions make it difficult – albeit all the more necessary! – to give a differentiated account of what to make of these new populist parties, both in their national as well as in the broader European context.

In this volume, we tackle exactly this challenge: we take a good look at the phenomenon of new populist parties. We do so from various different angles: we present local experts' analyses of and opinions on some of these rising populist parties individually, but also in comparison with each other when viewed in the broader European context. The aim of all of this is to give a balanced account of an issue that is highly topical across Europe. Based on deep dives into opinions on different old and new populist parties, we aim to provide a range of perspectives on what could be a pan-European phenomenon. Taken together, the contributions in this volume offer unique insights into the various perspectives on this complex phenomenon of new populist

parties. Even if some analysts have already claimed to observe parallels between the various new parties in different parts of Europe, we think it is worthwhile to take an even closer look in order to identify both similarities and differences.

### **Addressing the people in the street**

We want to provide an alternative to the often one-sided coverage that these new parties receive these days. This is why our compilation of chapters on populist parties across Europe offers a differentiated survey. Especially all those who have come into office through long-established political parties seem to have little nuanced to say about this new phenomenon. When asked about the rise of these new populist parties, established party politicians often criticize them as viciously captivating innocent voters with populist rhetoric, much like Pied Piper of Hamelin who lured innocent children out of town with his magic pipe. Consequently, in this narrative the members of such new populist parties are not individuals who think and act independently, but rather are characterized as weak and “susceptible to this new populism”. In this context, the term “populist” always bears a pejorative connotation. This is quite surprising considering that populism originates from the Latin word “populus”, which simply refers to the people. Even among the most creative accounts of democracy, the people are still considered to be democracy’s main source of legitimacy. By the way, democracy derives from the Greek word “demos” which – surprise, surprise! – also refers to the people. If we wanted to provoke an argument here, we could even say that the leaders of these new populist parties, UKIP’s Nigel Farage or Syriza’s Alexis Tsipras, are doing exactly what they should be doing according to the definition of democracy: addressing the people in the street. This idiom reportedly goes back to the father figure of all Protestants – Martin Luther.

### **What exactly is populism? Is it dangerous?**

So is there any point at all in distinguishing the new populist parties from old, long-established ones? First of all, there is obviously a difference in chronology: historically the “old” parties were established before the “new” parties. However, some of these “new” parties are more than four decades old. France’s Front National, for example, already celebrated its 40th anniversary. In addition to chronology, these new parties seem to differ from established ones in their form and in the content they raise. In an effort to bring the people closer to the politics, and the other way around, they often fare radical demands for simple political solutions that involve emotions and elements of direct democracy. For those new populist parties that find their place right of centre, there is also a notable shift towards a notion of the community built on shared values and culture (as opposed to previous and outdated notions of an ethnic community).<sup>[2]</sup> Assuming that the representation of pluralistic interests is one of the pillars of democracy, this claim of cultural uniqueness poses a serious threat, not only to the political elites but also to us, the general public!

#### **Possible similarities of new populist parties**

- Positioned as true representatives of the people as opposed to the political (often corrupt) elites or other established actors
- Demand simple solutions to complex problems
- Mistrust or even oppose the EU as a political project

Nonetheless, we have to ask the question whether populism in itself is a problem for democratic societies. Many established parties also resort to populist rhetoric – and I am not only referring to Germany’s omnipresent Horst Seehofer, the former head of the Bavarian branch of the ruling Christian Democrats, later promoted to Minister of the Interior, who himself claims to have a soft spot for populist statements. Other high-ranking politicians who have uttered “clear statements” in “plain language” – arguably containing a certain populist element – can be found in any European democracy: a collection of quotes by Germany’s former Social Democratic vice chancellor Sigmar Gabriel provides an illustration or – my personal favourite – a poster featuring a rare breed of genetically modified peppers that appeared during the 2015 election campaign of the Green Party in Austria.

In the context of the rising Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), for example, a number of critics have debated the question whether or not established parties are doing anything different from what this allegedly new populist party is doing. Interestingly, the early democratic parties of the 19th century also advertised with slogans addressing the people as opposed to the political elites. And it is probably no coincidence that the slogan that peacefully toppled the GDR in 1989 was that of “We Are the People”. As a consequence, according to a number of political scientists, populism can be seen as an important pillar of democracy.<sup>[3]</sup> It is addressing the emotional side of our minds, in contrast to the rational side that considers facts and works towards compromise. In this light, we could even argue that the phenomenon of new populist parties is giving established democracies a sort of epiphany: that its political forces have neglected the mobilizing side of politics for too long!

### **All quiet on the Southern front?**

This perspective is reinforced when we look at what is happening in Southern Europe: Greece’s Syriza or Spain’s Podemos illustrate that the phenomenon of new populist parties is, in fact, not necessarily limited to only right-wing politics. Elements of populism are also discernible left-of-centre. Can we compare these left-wing populists with their stepbrothers on the right hand of the political spectrum? Intuitively, we have to ask the question what it is exactly that these new parties – whether right or left of centre – have in common. What else do they share, besides the observation that they all are fairly new kids on the block? And – to put it straight – is it justifiable to claim that all of these left- or right-wing populist parties are part of the same phenomenon? Or do we rather have to evaluate them independently, each party in its own national context?

One feature that all new populist parties in Europe have in common is their distrust of and opposition to the influence of the EU on national politics. A negative image of Brussels is what unites these new parties across Europe, left and right of centre. For many of them, this opposition towards European integration also played a key role in their founding narratives. At this point we can thus conclude that there are at least some similarities and differences that deserve a closer analysis.

#### **Possible differences between new populist parties**

- Organisational structure
- Founding history, circumstances and time
- Position on the political left-right spectrum

In this volume, we have a whole series of chapters in store for you that build on these similarities and differences. A number of local experts provide their views on new (and old) populist parties and what they could have in common with their European counterparts (if anything at all). Our contributors take us on a road trip all across Europe from its Southern border, where Greece's Syriza deserves attention, to the East, where the Polish PiS made its way into government, and all the way to the North, where the Sweden Democrats have become the countries' number one opposition party. It is local experts who will provide unique insights and allow us to see the bigger picture of a European development (or not).

It seems that the biosphere of European democracies is changing for good. This volume introduces a new species of political parties to you that you should not miss to learn about.

### **About the author**

Anne Heyer is a research fellow at d|part and a postdoctoral researcher at the Juan March Institute at Universidad Carlos III in Madrid, where she works on political participation in nineteenth-century Europe. Anne's doctoral research focused on the emergence of the first democratic party organizations in the Netherlands, Germany and Britain. She is interested in the history of political participation and organizations.

### **Notes**

[1] Piero Ignazi, "The Crisis of Parties and the Rise of New Political Parties," *Party Politics* 2, no. 4 (October 1, 1996): 549–66.

[2] Jens Rydgren, "Is Extreme Right-Wing Populism Contagious? Explaining the Emergence of a New Party Family," *European Journal of Political Research* 44, no. 3 (2005): 413–37.

[3] Margaret Canovan, "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy," *Political Studies* 47, no. 1 (March 1999): 2-16.

1

**GREECE**

# The many transformations of Syriza

By [Ioannis Vlastaris](#) and [Konstantinos Kostagiannis](#).

## Some history: From one Coalition to another

The formation of Syriza (Coalition of Radical Left) as a unitary party is a recent development. Its Founding Congress only took place in July 2013. Syriza, however, existed as an electoral alliance for almost a decade before it became a party. It is as an electoral alliance that Syriza skyrocketed in the two rounds of elections that took place in 2012 and assumed the role of leading opposition in the Greek parliament.<sup>[1]</sup> When first established as an electoral alliance in 2004, Syriza was an attempt to bring together the left-of-social democracy SYN (Coalition of Left, Movements, and Ecology) and various smaller parties and organisations of the radical left.

SYN was undoubtedly the major party <sup>[2]</sup> in this alliance, and was itself the remnant of an earlier short-lived coalition between KKE (Communist Party) and the Eurocommunist EAR (Greek Left). After the withdrawal of KKE in 1991, SYN continued to participate in national elections. Its results, however, revolved around the threshold of three per cent and in the election of 1993 it failed to enter parliament. The formation of Syriza in 2004 did not immediately lead to a radical improvement in electoral performance. Indeed in the election of 2009, just before the outbreak of the debt crisis, Syriza secured only 4.6 per cent of the vote. Between the elections of 2009 and those of 2012 there were two developments that affected Syriza's composition. The social democratic wing of SYN left the party in 2010 to form DIMAR (democratic left) and in 2012 EM (Unitary Front), a splinter group of PASOK, joined Syriza.

## Radical Left and the dilemmas of Integration

Syriza belongs to the emerging party family of the radical left. Parties of the radical left look forward to a “root and branch” change <sup>[3]</sup> of the political and economic system and seek to occupy the field between social democracy and extreme left. Consequently, Syriza displays a number of characteristics that form its radical left ideological and programmatic profile: it advocates a rejuvenation of democracy through the strengthening of social movements, promotes cultural liberalism, adopts a strong critical attitude towards neoliberalism and financial globalization. It supports wider state intervention in the economy (Keynesianism), and, last but not least, takes a clear “eurocritical” (or “soft eurosceptical”) stance.<sup>[4]</sup>

The party's position on the process of European integration is indeed of great importance for both its ideological orientation and its strategic political choices. The rising importance of the EU created a new “cleavage” within the radical left.<sup>[5]</sup> Criticism towards EU policies has become a substantial part of radical left's distinct identity. As a result, however, radical left parties have been divided between those that reject the European integration on principle and those (like Syriza) that seek another path towards it. The formation of a party's identity is a dynamic process, subject to a variety of influences. Whilst in the early 1990s SYN (Syriza's major constituent party) declared its ‘Europeanism’ and voted for the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, its outlook changed as it gradually embraced more Eurosceptic positions.<sup>[6]</sup> Last July's agreement between the Syriza-led government and Greece's creditors might have alleviated fears of a Grexit but it

entailed the acceptance of policies that sharply contrasted with the party's ideology and led to a split of the party.

### **Kindred by Choice: Syriza's European allies**

Syriza comprises of several organizations of the left ranging from social democracy to Trotskyism and Maoism. We will focus solely on the connection of the most important constituent part of Syriza, SYN, to the European context. As mentioned above, SYN was originally formed as an alliance between KKE and EAR. This alliance could be seen as an attempt to re-combine the forces of the traditionalist KKE with the Eurocommunist elements that split from it in 1968.<sup>[7]</sup> After the withdrawal of KKE in 1991, what remained of SYN had a stronger Eurocommunist identity, operating in a catch-all framework which also attempted to incorporate parts of the new left, political ecology, feminism and others. SYN, and later Syriza, maintained close relations to parties of similar orientation around Europe such as the Portuguese Left Bloc, the French Communist Party, and the German PDS (later on 'die Linke'). SYN was a founding member of the Party of European Left (EL) and indeed played an important role in the initiatives for its formation. Alexis Tsipras was EL's nominee for the presidency of the European Commission in 2014.

### **"People" versus "Establishment"**

Syriza tried to adopt a typical mass party organizational structure, based on a network of grassroots organizations. According to its statute, it seeks to create an open framework that promotes wide political participation. Additionally, as a radical left party, Syriza promotes political participation not only through party organizations, but also through a rich array of social organizations and movements. It is difficult to evaluate how successful such endeavours have been. There are certainly those, like former chief economic adviser G. Milios, who claim that post-2012 internal democracy in the party has been steadily receding in favour of more autonomy for the leadership.

Between 2010 and 2014, anti-austerity social mobilization through participation to social movements (such as "The Indignants") was widespread in Greece and Syriza sought to assume responsibility for their political representation. The party tried to be recognized as the political link between these movements and the government, since it believed it could make anti-austerity social mobilization politically effective. This initiative became one of the most important parts of Syriza's strategy towards its 2015 electoral victory.<sup>[8]</sup>

Pursuing this strategy, Syriza adopted a populist discourse. Whilst the narrative of "people versus establishment" became central <sup>[9]</sup>, appeals to other political and social subjects (classes etc.) eclipsed. Along with this discursive choice, the promotion of Alexis Tsipras' charismatic personality became crucial for the party's endeavours to construct the image of a credible political power with strong and determined leadership. Syriza was anxious to show that, in contrast to other protest parties of the left, it was both capable and willing to come to power.

### **A future for Syriza?**

Since the outburst of the debt crisis, Greece's political system has been marked by successive bouts of instability. Giorgos Papandreou's (PASOK) government, which had formally requested the international bailout for Greece in April 2010, resigned in 2011, to be replaced by a coalition government (PASOK, New Democracy, and LAOS) led by the former banker and European Central Bank vice president Loukas Papademos. During his term of office the second bailout was

finalized (February 2012) and then elections were called for May and then, again, June as no government could be formed after the first elections.

The earthquake elections of 2012 radically altered the party system in Greece.<sup>[10]</sup> The dominant characteristics of the debate before the elections were: a profound dissatisfaction with corruption and political elites that hitherto ran the country, and controversy over the bailout.<sup>[11]</sup> In the wake of the election of January 2015 the social democratic PASOK had lost close to 90 per cent of its 2009 voters in absolute numbers.<sup>[12]</sup> It was Syriza – a political space that PASOK voters felt more comfortable with despite its radical rhetoric <sup>[13]</sup> – that capitalised most from this collapse.

Syriza, as suggested by some commentators already after the European Parliament elections of 2014 <sup>[14]</sup>, seems to have successfully established itself as the dominant centre-left party. Its success in maintaining that position, however, is far from assured. Having failed in its negotiations with Greece's creditors, Syriza's main goal should now be no less than the dismantling of clientelism and corruption that constitute the dual chronic malaise of the Greek political system. It faced after all, a demonstrably less forgiving electorate which in September 2015, and amidst an unprecedented abstention rate of 44 per cent, only returned Syriza to government as "the lesser of many evils".

### **About the authors**

Dr Konstantinos Kostagiannis is a Visiting Researcher at the University of the Peloponnese. He has previously taught at the universities of Edinburgh and Maastricht. He holds a PhD from the University of Edinburgh and is the author of 'Realist Thought and the Nation-State' (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

Ioannis Vlastaris is a political scientist (BA, MA, Panteion University, Athens) and presently works at the Greek Ministry of Interior. He is also co-author of the paper "Bridges over troubled waters? The competitive symbiosis of Social Democracy and Radical Left in crisis-ridden Southern Europe" (forthcoming).

### **Notes**

[1] The difference between a party and an electoral alliance is not negligible. According to the current electoral law (3626/08) the party that comes first in a national election is entitled to a bonus of 50 (out of 300) seats. In the case of an electoral alliance between several parties (like Syriza until 2013), however, the percentage they achieved has to be divided by the number of parties comprising that alliance. This makes it extremely unlikely that an electoral alliance would receive the bonus even if it came first in the elections. More discussion on this here: <http://www.tovima.gr/opinions/article/?aid=457244> [in Greek].

[2] According to Tsakatika and Eleftheriou, SYN accounted for "at least 80 per cent of its [Syriza's] cadres, activists and voters". Myrto Tsakatika and Costas Eleftheriou, "The Radical Left's Turn Towards Civil Society in Greece: One Strategy, Two Paths," *South European Society and Politics* 18, no. 1 (2013): 81-99.

[3] Luke March and Cas Mudde, "What's Left of the Radical Left? The European Radical Left After 1989: Decline and Mutation," *Comparative European Politics* 3, no.1 (2005): 23-49.

[4] Giorgos Charalambous, "All the Shades of Red: Examining the Radical Left's Euroscepticism," *Contemporary Politics* 17, no.3 (2011): 299–320; Γεράσιμος Μοσχονάς, "Ριζοσπαστική Αριστερά: ο μετακομμουνιστικός χώρος σε αναζήτηση ταυτότητας", *Διεθνής και Ευρωπαϊκή Πολιτική*, τ. 15 (Απρίλιος 2007): 233-242. Gerassimos Moschonas, "Radical Left: the Post-Communist Space in Search for Identity," (in Greek).

[5] Gerassimos, Moschonas "The European Union and the Dilemmas of the Radical Left: Some Preliminary Thoughts," *Transform!* (2011).

[6] Susannah, Verney "An Exceptional Case? Party and Popular Euroscepticism in Greece, 1959–2009." *South European Society and Politics* 16, no.1 (2011): 51-79.

[7] This was not the first attempt. Eurocommunist KKEint (the predecessor to EAR) and the traditionalist KKEext also participated jointly in the first elections after the fall of the dictatorship in 1974. For a general discussion of the first steps of Greek Eurocommunism before the establishment of SYN see: Basil Kapetanyannis, "The Making of Greek Eurocommunism," *The Political Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (1979): 445-460; also: Γιάννης Μπαλαμπανίδης, *Ευρωκομμουνισμός: Από την κομμουνιστική στη ριζοσπαστική ευρωπαϊκή Αριστερά*. Πόλις (2015). Giannis Balabanidis. *Eurocommunism: From communist to radical European left*. (In Greek).

[8] Michalis Spourdalakis, "Left Strategy in the Greek Cauldron: Explaining Syriza's Success," *Socialist Register* 49 (2013): 107.

[9] Yannis Stavrakakis and Giorgos Katsambekis, "Left-wing Populism in the European Periphery: the Case of SYRIZA," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 119-142.

[10] Eftichia Teperoglou and Emmanouil Tsatsanis, "Dealignment, De-legitimation and the Implosion of the Two-party System in Greece: the Earthquake Election of 6 May 2012," *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties* 24, no. 2 (2014): 222-242.

[11] Elias Dinas and Lamprini Rori. "The 2012 Greek Parliamentary Elections: Fear and Loathing in the Polls," *West European Politics* 36, no. 1 (2013): 270-282.

[12] Yannis Tsirbas, "The January 2015 Parliamentary Election in Greece: Government Change, Partial Punishment and Hesitant Stabilisation," *South European Society and Politics* 21, no. 4 (2015): 1-22.

[13] Γιάννης Βούλγαρης, "Η μεταπολιτευτική Ελλάδα 1974-2009." Πόλις (2013): 331. Giannis Voulgaris, *Greece of Metapolitefsi 1974-2009* (In Greek).

[14] Eftichia Teperoglou, Emmanouil Tsatsanis, and Elias Nicolacopoulos. "Habituating to the New Normal in a Post-Earthquake Party System: the 2014 European Election in Greece," *South European Society and Politics* 20, no. 3 (2015): 333-355.

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**SWEDEN**

# The rise of the Sweden Democrats – electoral successes and diverging paths

By [Maria Tyrberg](#).

Unlike its fellow Nordic neighbours, Sweden was for long an exception to the electoral support of radical right-wing parties. Apart from the short-lived appearance of New Democracy in the early 1990s, the country initially did not follow the trend of increased presence of radical right-wing parties as they appeared in other European parliaments. However, in 2010 the Sweden Democrats – now the biggest radical right-wing party in Sweden – gained parliamentary representation, thus bringing Sweden a step closer to a similar development as underway in much of the rest of Western Europe. The prosperity of the Sweden Democrats continues, and with almost 13 per cent of the vote share in 2014 they were the third biggest party in the national parliament, with representation also in the majority of the local governments holding roughly ten per cent of the total seats nationwide.

Turning to the origin of the party, the Sweden Democrats (SD) emerged from neo-fascist and neo-Nazi subcultures in the late 1980s. This background has caused the established parties in Sweden to treat SD as pariah, and since the mid-1990s the party has actively worked to present a more legitimate ideological profile, but they still struggle with controversies.<sup>[1]</sup> The so-called ‘iron pipe scandal’ received wide attention in 2012, when a film leaked showing leading politicians from SD using racist terms of abuse towards a Swedish comedian, and later arming themselves with iron pipes. Until today, the work towards a more legitimate profile continues. As part of the strategy SD introduced a zero-tolerance policy towards extremism and racism, which has led to the exclusion of several party members.

The aspiration to erect a more respectable image is an attempt to mimic other successful European radical right-wing parties, such as the Danish People’s Party, whose progress to develop into an accepted party in Denmark has been an inspiration for SD. As a consequence, SD has gone from focusing on nationalism to social conservatism as their core ideology in their party programme <sup>[2]</sup>, but nationalism is still central in their political speeches. As opposed to other radical right-wing parties in Europe with an authoritarian approach, SD could rather be considered to highlight more democracy and less state intervention.<sup>[3]</sup>

These strategic choices have proven electorally appealing; in 2014 SD nearly tripled their vote share in the European Parliament election, gaining two seats for their party representatives. Together with other radical right-wing parties – such as the British UKIP and the Lithuanian Order and Justice – they became members of the party group Europe of Freedom and Democracy (EFDD), which focuses on EU criticism as the common denominator. While EU opposition has become more prominent in SD’s rhetoric, it is unclear whether this has translated into action. According to a report by the EU-critical think tank OIEC, SD – among other Eurosceptic parties – has so far prioritized other issues over that of EU criticism.<sup>[4]</sup>

On the national arena, SD recently announced they want to limit their MPs appearance in the parliament in order to focus on campaigning and agenda-setting. This is an approach that somewhat resembles and is influenced by that of the Danish People's Party, but it is also a step away from the attempt to appear more statesmanlike. Measures taken so far include raising the issue of arranging a national referendum regarding immigrant reception, and handing out leaflets to refugees in Greece in an attempt to convince them not to travel to Sweden, arguing there is no room left in the country for them.

Some argue this dispersion of strategic choices is symptomatic for the position of SD, and it is unclear what the party's next step will be. On the one hand, although the established parties in the parliament are still unwilling to openly cooperate with SD, the party has been somewhat (but definitely not fully) normalized and legitimized in the Swedish party context, which is a goal it has aspired for. On the other hand, support in public opinion is changing, and with the latest increase of refugees in Sweden SD is no longer the only party with a clearly restrictive approach towards immigration.<sup>[5]</sup> According to a recent survey<sup>[6]</sup>, some of the previous voters of SD have now returned to the established parties. Hence, there seems to be a difficulty of attaining a respectable approach while gaining support. The future of SD is thus dependent on both the strategic choices of the party itself, as well as the established parties' handling of the immigration issue.

### About the author

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### Notes

[1] Gissur Ó Erlingsson, Kåre Vernby and Richard Öhrvall, "The Singe-Issue Party Thesis and the Sweden Democrats," *Acta Politica* 49, no. 2 (2014): 196-216.

[2] Jens Rydgren and Patrick Ruth, "Voting for the Radical Right in Swedish Municipalities: Social Marginality and Ethnic Competition?" *Scandinavian Political Studies* 34, no. 3, pp. 202-225. See also Gissur Ó Erlingsson, Kåre Vernby and Richard Öhrvall, "The Singe-Issue Party Thesis and the Sweden Democrats," *Acta Politica* 49, no. 2 (2014): 196-216.

[3] Elisabeth Carter, *The Extreme Right in Western Europe. Success or Failure?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

[4] "Europe Deserves Better. Broken Promises – The Sweden Democrats first year in the European Parliament", OEIC, 2015, <http://oeiceurope.com/booklet-europe-deserves-better-sweden-democrats-in-the-eu-parliament/>

[5] Torbjörn Nilsson, "Vilse I samtiden," *Fokus* 10 (2016), <http://www.fokus.se/2016/03/vilse-i-samtiden/>

[6] Jens Kärrman, "Regeringens flyktingpolitik lockar SD-väljare," *Dagens Nyheter* (2016). <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/regeringens-flyktingpolitik-lockar-sd-valjare/>

3

**SPAIN**

# Political entrepreneurs on the populist wave: the rise of Podemos

By [Javier Martínez-Cantó](#).

Unlike the rest of Europe, with the exception of Portugal, Spain remains immune to the rise of populist radical right parties.<sup>[1]</sup> But since the 2014 European election Spain is experiencing its own populist phenomenon – one that has emerged from the left side of the political spectrum.<sup>[2]</sup> The birth and consolidation of Podemos in less than two years is one of the most remarkable political achievements in recent European politics, and it has shaken the whole Spanish political system.

## The intellectual and strategic backbone of Podemos

Early in 2014, a group of political and social scientists based at Madrid's Complutense University founded Podemos with the aim of competing in the upcoming European elections. Pablo Iglesias, Juan Carlos Monedero, Iñigo Errejón, Carolina Bescansa and Luis Alegre formed the party core at that time. Remarkably, Iglesias and Monedero have been prominent participants in political TV talk shows for a long time and their role must be understood as political entrepreneurs who see a niche in the political market that they seek to fill.

On the one hand the group was closely linked to the traditional Spanish communist party IU (Izquierda Unida – United Left), to whom they have been advisors in the past. In the first place they tried to modernize IU and run within it for the 2014 European election, but they were unable to move IU away from its traditional standings. Therefore they joined forces with the minor Trotskyist party Izquierda Anticapitalista (Anticapitalist Left, 0.13 per cent in 2009 EP elections). The alliance proved successful as the latter supplied a number of experienced party activists all around the country while the former provided political strategy and media access. The dependency of Podemos' early days on the leadership is further emphasised by the fact that Pablo Iglesias' face was used on ballot sheets instead of a common party logo.

## Populist rhetoric and a surprise result in the 2014 EP elections

To everybody's surprise, Podemos achieved eight per cent of the vote and five MEPs in the 2014 European Parliament elections. The pre-electoral poll, conducted a month before the election by the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research (CIS), had only predicted one MEP and just under two per cent of the vote. Prior to the election, the party's campaign was based mainly on social media; the party enjoyed limited presence in the mainstream media. If at all, it was gained by the previous participation of some of its leaders. The party manifesto contained traditional radical left policies like support for public banking, basic income or free trade restrictions in addition to new concepts like participatory public budgets or citizens' public debt audit.

Overall, the party's political message for the 2014 EP elections was populist in the sense that it was one of the "people" against the "corrupt elite" – something that is termed *la casta* (the caste) in Spanish.<sup>[3]</sup> According to Cordero and Montero <sup>[4]</sup>, it was mostly a lack of confidence in politicians and democracy as a general principle that motivated Podemos' voters during the European election. Even though Podemos was founded, in particular, to make its first appearance in the European election, the party does not have a strong anti- or pro-EU position. On EU affairs

the party does not take stronger positions than a general support of anti-austerity measures, as a significant share of the Spanish electorate does not challenge EU integration or membership. The party considers itself close to the Greek leftist party Syriza.

### **Policy moderation and widespread electoral support**

Since the 2014 EP elections, polls show that Podemos has steadily gained support. Less than a year after its foundation it became the largest party according to some polls, like one commissioned by the Spanish broadsheet *El País*. At the same time the party started a process of policy moderation, from radical-left policies to traditional social democracy, although without leaving aside its populist claims. Additionally, the party kept promoting means of social participation, especially referendums, which it also practices internally. Party members vote online on internal offices, candidates and coalition policies. Actually, and unlike other parties, party membership only requires online registration – no fees or sponsorship. Fernandez-Albertos [5] argues that in the process of this policy and procedural transformation of the party its core voters changed from highly mobilized anti-austerity protesters to people harmed by the crisis, either directly or by lack of opportunities.

From March to September 2015 the party ran in local and most of the country's regional elections. It achieved, on average, 13 per cent of the vote.[6] Especially for the local elections the party had a peculiar strategy: instead of running with their own candidates in local constituencies, the party promoted the so-called “popular unity candidatures”. These were ad-hoc candidatures formed by Podemos in combination with social movements, local grassroots organizations and other parties such as the Greens or IU. Each platform composition varied from city to city. Podemos has participated in the government of main cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia or Zaragoza. Podemos argued, that due to its early development as a party, they were unable to run in all municipalities by their own means. These successes were stepping-stones for the December 2015 national election. Podemos received close to 21 per cent of the votes, despite the fact that the party ran in pre-electoral coalitions with other forces in three regions. The party became the third biggest political force in Spain, only two percentage points behind the socialist party, PSOE. This marks the best result for a third party in Spanish democratic history.

### **Early elections and new strategies**

New elections were called in Spain due to the political blockage that has deterred the formation of a new government since the December election in 2015. But this time, Podemos was most likely to run in a broad pre-electoral coalition with IU, which received nearly one million votes in the December election. This cooperation may allow Podemos to surpass the Socialist Party and become the second biggest party in Spain. Although the party is experiencing its first organizational crisis, its electoral prospects remained good. This, in combination with their presence in local entities as well as in regional parliaments, secures the party's continuity in the short, and even medium, term. And even further electoral support is not beyond reach: the party could use citizens' possible future discontent to its benefit, especially if the next government turns out to be either a centre-right or a grand coalition.

### **About the author**

Javier Martínez-Cantó is doctoral fellow at the Bamberg Graduate School of Social Sciences in Germany. He is currently working on candidate selection, party leadership and party transformation in comparative perspective.

[1] Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 542–563.

[2] These parties are defined by their authoritarianism, pro-nativist policies and populist approach. Later Podemos suggested a more general interpretation of society. In their eyes, society was divided between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite". Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser argued that Spain provided ideal conditions for the appearance of a populist radical right-wing party. Before the economic crisis, growing political distrust and anti-immigration sentiments could be observed from the demand side. But the supply factors did not meet demand. The competing visions of central and peripheral visions of identity (Spanishness vs. regional identities) prevented the development of nativist policies. In addition, the mainstream conservative party PP (People's Party) continued to attract right-wing voters by appealing to Spanish identity. Usually populist radical right parties frame their discourse in "then (immigrants) vs. us". But in Spain political actors failed to clearly define the "us". Sonia Alonso and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser "Spain: No Country for the Populist Radical Right?," *South European Society and Politics* 20, no. 1 (2015): 21-45.

[3] In recent years Spain has been shaken by several corruption scandals in local entities, regional governments and national parties. The term "casta" is a catch-all concept referring to banking elites, corrupt politicians and extractive elites. As Rodon and Hierro explain, the term refers to "a privileged political class". Toni Rodon and Maria José Hierro "Podemos and Ciudadanos Shake up the Spanish Party System: The 2015 Local and Regional Elections," *South European Society and Politics* 21, no. 3 (March 2016): 339-357.

[4] Guillermo Cordero and José Ramón "Against Bipartyism, Towards Dealignment? The 2014 European Election in Spain," *South European Society and Politics* 20, no. 3 (2015): 357–379.

[5] Podemos' rise cannot be explained without the 15-M movement. This was a series of anti-austerity demonstrations that took place during May 2011. The movement politically mobilized a growing number of people. Most of them were hit by the crisis. Although the movement demonstrated that Spanish opinion and attitudes were changing due to the economic crisis, its political consequences were for a long time not visible. José Fernández-Albertos, *Los votantes de Podemos. Del partido de los indignados al partido de los excluidos*. (Madrid: Catarata, 2015).

[6] In Spain, all local elections take place on the same day. Regional elections took place in all regions of the country in this period, with the exception of Galicia and the Basque Country. For these, the next elections were scheduled for autumn 2016. At the time of writing, Podemos was supporting five socialist, or socialist and regionalist, governments and is part of the Balearic Islands' government. In total, they facilitated the end of seven conservative regional governments. Toni Rodon and Maria José Hierro "Podemos and Ciudadanos Shake up the Spanish Party System: The 2015 Local and Regional Elections," *South European Society and Politics* 21, no. 3 (March 2016): 339-357.

4

**HUNGARY**

# The success of the illiberal vision – Orbán's rise to power

By [Krisztian Simon](#).

Most populist parties start out as radicals, and – once they have managed to build up a solid voter base – they will gradually shift to somewhat more moderate positions, in order to appeal to wider audiences. This, however, does not apply to Hungary's populist governing party: Fidesz, the Alliance of Young Democrats, was set up as a democratic alternative to the communist youth movement KISZ, and ran as a liberal party on the first free Hungarian elections in 1990. At the time their main target audience were educated young people who were looking for a democratic alternative to state socialism. After a few years the party leadership realized that there are limits to growth as a moderate party – so today they promote “illiberalism,” and their popularity is based on fearmongering.

## The Fidesz evolution

Fidesz was founded in 1988 by 37 university and college students, mainly from the Eötvös Loránd University's legal faculty in Budapest – among them party-leader and current Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, János Áder, the current President of Hungary, and László Kövér, the president of the parliament. In 1989 Viktor Orbán rose to international prominence after a speech he gave at the reinternment of Imre Nagy, Hungary's former prime minister who led the 1956 revolt against the Soviets. In his speech Orbán spoke out for a peaceful revolution and demanded the immediate removal of Soviet troops from the country. In the same year, some members of the party participated in pro-democracy protests in Prague, where Tamás Deutsch – now a Fidesz MEP – was arrested. These events helped Fidesz brand itself as a party of freedom fighters, and become an important political player in the country's transition to democracy, including its participation in the so called National Roundtable Talks, a set of legalistic discussions between the old government and democratic political organizations about the shape of Hungary's new democracy.

In 1990 Fidesz had 22 members in the Hungarian parliament, and maintained very close ties with the liberal SZDSZ party (Alliance of Free Democrats). However, some of the liberal members left Fidesz already in 1993 (to join SZDSZ). In 1994, after SZDSZ went into a coalition with the successor of the communist party (MSZP – Hungarian Socialist Party), Orbán and his party – who barely made the five per cent threshold to secure a place in legislature – used this opportunity to team up with the conservatives (MDF – Hungarian Democratic Forum, who governed Hungary between 1990 and 1994). They repositioned themselves as the party of the propertied bourgeoisie: a national conservative party with interventionist economic policies and a very conservative stance on social issues. This turned out to be a successful tactic, as in 1998 Fidesz won the national election, and Orbán was given a chance to form a government – at the age of 35!

In Orbán's first term (1998-2002) his way of governing did not produce the same waves of international criticism as the second Orbán government did after 2010. Even though there were claims about the party being corrupt and "illiberal" already, at the time the party still had a liberal wing and there was a strong opposition in parliament to act as checks on the government.<sup>[1]</sup>

### **Same, same but different**

Over the years Orbán has paid much attention to giving his voters the impression that the core message of the party has not changed. He still poses as a freedom fighter who wants to protect his people, but with the years he has adapted his original topics to the changing political environment. The nationalism experts Cas Mudde and Erin K Jenne argue that Poland's Law and Justice Party and Fidesz are in this sense very similar, as both claim that their often criticized policies represent the realization of the unfulfilled promises of 1989, which were sabotaged by "the communists and dissidents who signed the pacted transitions."

When in 2002 Fidesz unexpectedly lost the election, the party's slogan became "the homeland cannot be in opposition." From now on Orbán and his party started to build their messages on demonizing the governing parties and the Hungarian left as enemies of the people. Once they made it back into power in 2010, they defined an additional set of enemies: international financial institutions (especially the IMF), the EU and the Western political elites who – according to Orbán – threaten the country's national sovereignty. And soon after came NGOs who Fidesz sees as foreign agents paid from abroad to disrupt Orbán's government. And finally, since 2015, asylum seekers who, according to the government's propaganda machine, are "economic migrants" who threaten Europe's culture and even survival.

### **Illiberalism on the rise**

According to the Hungarian political scientist József Bayer, Orbán has adopted practices from other populist parties as an opposition politician, including the person-centred strategic use of the media (and the creation of an own media empire)<sup>[2]</sup>, as well as the establishment of national consultation bodies. When in power, he also started to use the rhetoric of Eurosceptic movements, declaring, for example, that the mainstream political parties do not represent the real interests of the people. "In most European countries — I could honestly say 90 per cent of European countries — there is a gap between the opinion of the people and the policy pursued by the elite," Orbán said to Politico last year. But when it comes to governing, his declared influences can be found east of the EU. He has named a few of them in his widely criticized speech in 2014: China, Singapore, Russia and Turkey are the role models for the illiberal democracy he wants to build in Hungary, because in his opinion "[i]lliberal democracy can't remain globally competitive."

In this illiberal system, Orbán's government is defined as the representative of the nation, while Liberalism and liberal democracy are treated as the sources of everything that went wrong in society and the economy. Its ideology is a national collectivistic ideology that favours the national community over the individual, and favours interventions in the cultural, social and economic sphere.<sup>[3]</sup> In terms of policies, this illiberalism has meant – among others – that Orbán and his government are imposing a strong grip on the media and are exerting influence over the court system. His government also started building a fence at the southern border of the country to keep refugees out at a time when Germany's Angela Merkel was still advocating open borders for the people who fled the war in Syria. In the context of the EU, Fidesz's membership in the

European People's Party and its increased cooperation with the other three Visegrád countries (Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia) on the refugee issue have long protected the Orbán government from serious criticism and repercussions inside the EU.

### **Is being a populist worth it?**

At the time of writing, it all looked like Fidesz was to stay in power even after the general election in 2018. There are many reasons for their electoral success: first of all, when coming into power in 2010 the party set up a new electoral regime that disproportionately rewards the strongest party. Secondly, the party managed to successfully position itself in the centre of the political spectrum between the leftist opposition and Jobbik, a medium-sized far-right party, such that no viable coalition can threaten its dominant position. Moreover, according to analysts, Orbán has an ability “to keep the opposition divided and demobilised, and his fan base united and active” even at times when his support seems to dwindle. Furthermore, the party's spin doctors have shown plenty of experience in successfully convincing voters to choose Fidesz: before the 2014 elections it was a set of utility price cuts that brought the necessary support for Fidesz, while later it was the anti-refugee rhetoric that helped Orbán's party rebound vis-a-vis its extreme right-wing competitor Jobbik. Not to mention that the narrative about the need to protect the Christian nature of Europe has helped Orbán gain a great number of admirers in Europe, from within the German CSU (Christian Social Union in Bavaria) to members of the Austrian FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria) and Law and Justice in Poland.

### **About the author**

Krisztian Simon is a Doctoral Candidate at the Freie Universität Berlin and currently a visiting researcher at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. His research focuses on the media systems of hybrid regimes in Eastern and Central Europe. Krisztian also works as a journalist and has been reporting for a number of Hungarian, German and English-language publications.

### **Notes**

[1] Bálint Magyar, the former Minister of Education for Hungary, wrote the following about the first Orbán government (1998-2002): “Public funds were dispensed without parliamentary oversight and spent to build private enterprises; public property was transferred to private ownership; the men in power used blackmail to tap into private wealth, and attended to their clientèle from public coffers. Ten years ago, the institutions of liberal democracy were still in a position to constrain this octopus. The battle had not yet been decided; Hungary was not yet a dictatorship, but merely an Orange Republic.” “Autocracy in Action – Hungary under Orbán,” Bálint Magyar, 2012, <https://www.boell.de/en/navigation/europe-north-america-autocracy-in-action-hungary-under-orban-14625.html>

[2] When Fidesz lost the national election in 2002, Orbán realized that it needed a “complex and effective media portfolio.” Therefore businesspeople close to the party established Hír Television, and in September 2005, one of the richest entrepreneurs in Hungary, Gábor Széles started his own cable channel, Echo Television, and acquired the daily print Magyar Hírlap. This Liberal daily was transformed into a populist pro-Fidesz news product in only 6 months. More about Orbán's

media aspirations here: “How did the Orbán-Simicska Media Empire Function?,” Attila Batorfy, 2015, <http://mediaobservatory.net/investigative-journalism/how-did-viktor-orb%C3%A1n-lajos-simicska-media-empire-function>

[3] According to the Hungarian journalist Attila Batorfy, during the second Orbán government (2010-2014) the party owned five outdoor/billboard companies (Publimont, Mahir Cityposter, EuroAWK, Euro Publicity, A Plakát), a national and a Budapest-local commercial radio station (Class FM, Music FM), three daily papers (Metropol, Magyar Nemzet, Magyar Hírlap), two weekly papers (Heti Válasz, Demokrata), two television stations (Hír TV, Echo TV), plus the entire public media (M1, M2, Magyar Rádió, MTI News Service, Duna TV) as well as some allies (TV2, Helyi Téma, MNO, Pesti Srácok, etc.). Moreover, the two-thirds majority of Fidesz has helped make functioning impossible for some market competitors through an advertisement tax and its amendments. The Media Authority helped to clean the radio market up for a new radio station, called Class FM, and Fidesz party-members started to “systematically attack” private media companies (like Sanoma, Axel Springer’s Világgazdaság, Origo, Index, RTL Klub). More about this here: “How did the Orbán-Simicska Media Empire Function?,” Attila Batorfy, 2015, <http://mediaobservatory.net/investigative-journalism/how-did-viktor-orb%C3%A1n-lajos-simicska-media-empire-function>

5

**POLAND**

# Poland: a success story gone bad?

By [Honorata Mazepus](#) & [Agata Mazepus](#).

Poland has been considered an exemplary case of regime change in the third wave of democratisation. Poland's democratic reforms and development of market economy in the last 25 years were evaluated as one of the top five transitions in the world. How is it possible that, since the victory of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS, Law and Justice) in the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections, the news about Poland have changed so drastically? Recently the topics associated with Poland include the crisis of the Constitutional Court, the controversy over restrictions of abortion laws, the turmoil over cutting trees in the primeval woodlands of Białowieża Forest, and the purges in the state-owned-companies and public media.

## The beginning of “us versus them”

PiS, the winner of the 2015 national election, is not a newcomer to Polish politics. The party currently chaired by Jarosław Kaczyński has its roots in Solidarity, a political movement unique to Central and Eastern Europe. As a representative of independent trade unions, Solidarity emerged in opposition to the communist regime in the 1980s. The representatives of the movement played a crucial role in the Polish transition to democracy, which started with the Round Table talks between them and the regime powers. Two sides of political conflict emerged from these negotiations: the old regime bloc and the Solidarity-based bloc.<sup>[1]</sup> As a consequence, the most influential parties of the past twenty years are either rooted in Solidarity – PiS and Platforma Obywatelska (PO, Civic Platform) – or post-communist milieus – Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej (SLD, Democratic Left Alliance) and Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (PSL, Polish People's Party). In Poland, this axis from Solidarity to “non-Solidarity” substitutes the traditional Western left-right cleavage.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Why is it difficult to talk about the left and right in Poland?

In many countries in Europe the industrial revolution led to an organisation of party competition around the left-right axis centred on economic issues. In the Czech Republic, for example, where a high level of industrialisation occurred, party competition was one-dimensional along the economic left-right divide for a long time <sup>[3]</sup> and the Communist Party had a strong backing in the society. The Polish case is different: an extremely low level of industrialisation in the 1920s meant that the classical cleavage of workers against owners did not play an important role in party development. For this reason, the Communist Party in Poland was very weak <sup>[4]</sup> and the Soviets had to impose communism on the Polish society after the WWII.

Today, the political left-right competition in Poland is based on an “axis of values” – the struggle of “symbolic left and symbolic right”. The left in Poland is taken up by the post-communist parties (still associated with the communist regime); the right, on the other hand, is tied to religious and traditionalist anti-communist groups (which include both PiS and its competitor PO).

## Shifts in political supply and demand

Recently, however, there has been a change: increasingly not only parties and voters challenge the interpretation of the “right-left conflict”, also the unity of the anti-communist coalition is under pressure. Since the mid-2000s, Polish politics is dominated by the cleavage between the “secular liberal cosmopolitans” and “religious authoritarian nationalists”,<sup>[5]</sup> similar to what political scientists call the GAL (green/ alternative/ libertarian) and TAN (traditional/ authoritarian/ nationalist) dimension of the political spectrum.<sup>[6]</sup> This shift is facilitated by the establishment of several new parties, such as Ruch Palikota (now Twój Ruch) and Razem. These did not emerge from either old communist elites or Solidarity and represent a cultural alternative to the Catholic-conservative ideas of both PO (Civic Platform) and PiS (Law and Justice). One of these new secular and progressive parties, .Nowoczesna (.Modern), got into the parliament in 2015 election with 7.6 per cent of the vote. On the opposite side, a new patriotic anti-establishment player, Kukiz'15, got 8.8 per cent of the vote, winning most support among the youngest voters (18-29).

The second major shift is fuelled by an internal conflict within the anti-communist camp. Initially the programmes of PO and PiS did not differ radically. Throughout the last three parliamentary terms, however, PO established itself as a pro-European, modernising, and less conservative (some refer to it as “permissive”) party, and PiS as the defender of sovereignty with patriotic, nationalistic, and Catholic views. And although this seems to fit into the pattern of the GAL vs TAN distinction, the recent conflict has one additional divisive line – the evaluation of the transition process and its effects.

PiS's current line of attack on PO and other traditional political forces is to discredit the semi-free elections of 4 June 1989, the hero of Solidarity, Lech Wałęsa, the negotiated transition in general, and the integration of Poland into the EU. To what extent this division constitutes a base for a new coalition or just a new way to signal belonging to the old one is not yet clear.

## Why PiS now?

PiS won the parliamentary election in 2005 and ruled until 2007, when the Parliament was dissolved due to corruption scandals of the junior partners in the PiS government. PO, chaired by Donald Tusk, triumphed in the early elections and has been ruling as a major coalition partner between 2007 and 2015. In this period, the most important economic indicators were all showing positive trends (increasing GDP per capita and decreasing unemployment), and Poland was the only country in the EU that resisted recession caused by the economic crisis of 2008. On the basis of these results, PO's victory in the 2015 election seemed like a logical prediction. So what went wrong?

Political analysts name several factors that stand behind the overwhelming victory of PiS in 2015. PiS ran a skilful electoral campaign that removed the less popular chairman of the party from the frontline and introduced new faces as electoral candidates (Andrzej Duda and Beata Szydło).<sup>[7]</sup> Also, the party created a climate of distrust and suspicion with exaggerated tape scandals involving politicians of its main competitor PO and with conspiracy theories about the presidential plane crash in Smoleńsk in 2010. In addition, PiS used the rhetoric spreading fear of ‘islamisation’ of Polish society, linking it to the EU's refugee policies. Finally, the party might have attracted voters by its promise of a monthly 500 złoty benefit for each child.

Yet, there is a more straightforward explanation of the PiS victory than populist appeals to whatever people want to hear. First of all, only 51 per cent of Poles voted in the 2015 parliamentary election. If only half of the people with the right to vote expressed their preferences in elections, it is very tricky to make statements about larger social processes on the basis of their results. Moreover, because of the threshold of five per cent for parties and eight per cent for coalitions, 16 per cent of votes cast for the smaller and new parties did not count towards the final distribution of seats in parliament. Many of these “wasted” votes were cast for parties emphasising issues that were neglected by PO, such as civil partnerships, LGBT rights, environment protection, and improvement of health care and education. Both the negligence of almost half of the Polish electorate and the electoral system worked in favour of PiS in this electoral round.

### **What’s on the horizon?**

Some of the controversial policies of PiS faced regular mass protest. The danger is that the protests continue to find supporters mainly in large cities among the middle-class, highly educated parts of the population, while PiS will use the next years in power to polarize Polish society. PiS tries to strengthen loyalty among its coalition partners with the rhetoric of division between good sort against “worst sort of Poles”, and with providing access to state rents and benefits.

With national and international observers worried about the rise of populism in Europe and the state of democracy in Poland, two final points are of general importance. First, populism led to a further decline of the importance of party programmes in elections (especially along the left-right or any political scale for that matter). Moreover, it became a standard, rather than the exception, to mobilise people by appealing to whatever seems to be in demand at a given moment (be it the already mentioned TAN values or child benefits). Second, as the example of Poland shows, democratic elections have the power to legitimise non-democratic governments. Better systemic checks and balances might prevent this kind of governments from turning a democracy into an autocracy. If the political system cannot be changed within one parliamentary term, then voters can always punish the rulers for their behaviour in the next election.

### **About the authors**

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## Notes

[1] Waldemar Wojtasik, *Lewica i prawica w Polsce: aspekty ekonomiczno-społeczne*, (Oficyna Wydawnicza "Humanitas" - Wyższa Szkoła Zarządzania i Marketingu w Sosnowcu, 2011).

[2] Aleks Szczerbiak, "Old and New Divisions in Polish Politics: Polish Parties' Electoral Strategies and Bases of Support," *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, no. 5 (2003): 729-746, 735.

[3] See, for example: Zdenka Mansfeldová, "The Czech Republic," in *The Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe*, ed. Sten Berglund (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2013): 217-254: 225.

[4] Robert Rohrschneider and Stephen Whitefield, "Understanding Cleavages in Party Systems Issue Position and Issue Salience in 13 Post-communist Democracies," *Comparative Political Studies* 42, no. 2 (2009): 280-313.

[5] Tomas Zarycki, "The Electoral Geography of Poland: Between Stable Spatial Structures and their Changing Interpretations," *Erdkunde* 69, no. 2 (2015): 107-124, 114.

[6] Gary Marks, Liesbet Hooghe, Moria Nelson and Erica Edwards, "Party Competition and European Integration in the East and West: Different Structure, Same Causality," *Comparative Political Studies*, 39, no.2 (2006): 155– 175.

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6

**GERMANY**

# The 'illusionary giant' of German politics: the AfD

*Four reasons why the AfD's polling might collapse over the next year*

By [Timo Lochocki](#).

The right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) seems unstoppable. In September 2016 they won almost 21 per cent at the regional elections in rural Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and 14 per cent in Berlin. In September 2016 polls found that, in the case of elections for the Bundestag, 15.5 per cent of German voters would vote AfD. Never before had the party reached higher support rates. It seems Germany is finally falling prey to the political fragmentation and departing instability known from other Western European democracies. Commentaries call for preparing for the AfD remaining a strong force in German politics to reckon with.

However, the AfD might turn out as 'Scheinriese', as an 'illusionary giant'. The German novelist Michael Ende coined the term referring to a man that looks gigantic from afar, but becomes smaller and smaller the closer you move towards him. Moving closer to the AfD, scrutinizing the roots of its success shows striking vulnerabilities that might substantially decrease its popular support in the future.

Right-wing populist parties as the AfD rely on the winning formula 'for the nation, against the establishment'. They portray themselves as only political force defending the endangered cultural core of the nation (1), which voters consider as key political issue (2). Defending the nation is not only necessary against external threats (e.g. migrants or the EU), but especially against the national political elites that only work for securing the status quo (3). Offering an alternative to these unbearable conditions, right-wing populists portray themselves as only credible conservative force in the democratic spectrum (4).

The AfD might lose all these four 'selling points' in the future.

## **Reason one: Really the only ones to defend the nation?**

The party's public support increased massively from three to 12 per cent from October 2015 to January 2016 as the Grand Coalition (Conservative CDU, its Bavarian sister party CSU and the Social-Democrats SPD) begun fiercely to argue about how to reduce the numbers of incoming refugees. In the winter of 2015/2016, up to 210.000 refugees reached Germany every month. The CSU called for more conservative policies (e.g. closing down national borders) than the CDU and the SPD were willing to accept. This gave the impression to German voters that a more 'orderly, more conservative' approach was available, but the established parties refused to adhere to it. This legitimized the AfD's conservative migration policy and boosted the assumption that the established elites would not protect the nation.

However, refugee numbers have dropped dramatically to a few thousands a month since January 2016, while German integration and migration laws has taken a substantive conservative turn since. But German voters still do not trust the governing parties on the matter. German voters however would trust established parties if they clearly communicated conservative positions in mutual agreement. This was visible previously when the CDU/CSU and the SPD forged a conservative compromise in mutual agreement to drop Greece off the Eurozone if the country would not meet German demands. In consequence, the AfD's support – which up to then mainly relied on anti-Euro and anti-EU sentiments – dropped from ten to three per cent in the first half of 2015. The newly rise of AfD is thus the unintended consequence of a lack of a coherent, conservative political messaging by the Grand Coalition. Comparative research across Western Europe shows that this is not merely a German phenomenon.

However, in 2016 a conservative compromise between the CDU, CSU and the SPD seemed to be in the making that could hurt the AfD, similar to the one on Greece. The devastating electoral results for the CDU in Berlin (17.6 percent, losing 5.7 percent) and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (19 percent, losing four percent) seemed to have led the CDU to reach out to its far more conservative sister party CSU. Chancellor Angela Merkel's relativizing statements about her refugee policies were a signal to her political allies that she accepted the call to focus more on conservative messaging. Given the lack of clear liberal and multicultural messaging on part of the SPD, the coalition party seemed inclined to join this concerted conservative political messaging on migration matters. With effective conservative messaging from both coalition parties, the prime selling point of the AfD – being the sole defender of the German nation – would be very difficult to uphold.

### **Reason Two: Issues beyond refugees and immigration**

The second ingredient of the AfD's winning formula is the importance German voters ascribe to immigration and refugee issues. Despite the massive drop in asylum figures, Politbarometer surveys indicated that, in 2016, still 70 per cent of German voters deemed migration matters the most pressing political problem. These high salience figures had their origin in, for one, the mixed messaging of the government parties that gave voters the impression that the problem was still unsolved; for the other, they originated from the fact that German parties had failed put forward other political issues to discuss.

There was potential to change this. In the lead up to Germany's federal election in autumn 2017, Infratest polls showed that seven per cent of German voters deemed the AfD competent in migration and security matters; however, on all other issues German voters ascribed no issue competence to the AfD whatsoever. In stark contrast, the governing partners achieved remarkable competence values on budgetary issues (53 per cent trust the CDU/CSU, 15 per cent the SPD and only two per cent the AfD), creating jobs (40 per cent trust the CDU/CSU, 26 per cent the SPD and only two per cent the AfD) and fighting social justice (16 per cent trust the CDU/CSU, 33 per cent the SPD and only four per cent the AfD). In the light of these numbers, the Grand Coalition parties should have focused their electoral campaigns on economic fissures.

Such a political conflict, in turn, would have increased the salience of budgetary issues, employment questions and welfare state reform. In these areas the AfD can only loose. Consequently, the AfD's second advantage – the high salience German voters ascribe to migration matters and the low importance of economic issues – might get slimmer in the future.

Such a polarization over economic issues would have also lowered the appeal of the anti-establishment sentiment the AfD thrives on. In contrast to conflicts over migration policies, voters appreciate arguments over economic matters as they consider this a struggle for innovative solutions. Accusing the Grand Coalition of offering 'no real alternative' to German voters would have lost clout.

### **Reason Three: Alternatives to the status quo**

In the 2017 federal election, German voters not only had the chance to choose different economic programmes, but also a different chancellor: Angela Merkel was considered untouchable as the SPD and its candidate were polling about ten percentage points behind the CDU/CSU. The option of choice for the SPD – a coalition with the Greens – was only attracting between 32 and 35 per cent of voter support.

But after the formation of various coalitions between the SPD, the Greens and the Left on the regional level, more and more voices in political Berlin consider such a three-way coalition an option on the federal level, too. Including the Left, red-red-green could win a majority of seats. In fact, in 2016 it already held enough seats in the Bundestag for a stable government coalition, but the SPD still felt bound to the CDU/CSU and remains wary about the Left's foreign policies.

However, Thomas Oppermann, the SPD whip in the Bundestag and as such a key figure for possible coalition talks, considered these challenges remediable until the federal elections. If the SPD is serious about this, German voters might get the feeling they can again choose between an SPD- or a CDU/CSU-led government.

A palpable political alternative would then be in sight without need for the AfD. The AfD would then lose its third selling point – portraying established parties as only preserving the status quo and the AfD as being the only credible alternative.

### **Reason Four: Balancing act between radical opinion and extremism**

Finally, the AfD might spoil its most important asset – distancing itself from radical elements to fare as conservative party within the democratic spectrum. The AfD is rich of extraordinary figures that dance on the razor blade to political extremism. Beatrix von Storch – key AfD politician in the Berlin branch and member of the European Parliament – proposed to prevent border crossings at gunpoint, Bjoern Hoecke – head of the regional chapter of the AfD Thuringia – took positions that drew accusations he was being anti-democratic and neo-fascist.

At the party convention in April 2016, party leadership had to manoeuvre very carefully to not let the far right sentiments within its rank and file become part of the party platform. However, the party still took a clear-cut anti-Islam line that seems to be at odds with the German constitution, which forbids discrimination by religion. In June 2016, AfD vice chairman Alexander Gauland gave an interview to the conservative newspaper of record Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in which he said that "Germans like Jerome Boateng as a footballer, but do not want him as a neighbour". Germany's conservative media fiercely rejected this attack on a member of a central symbol of German national pride – the football team that won the World Cup in 2014. The more mainstream conservative voter strata might grow weary of these kind of extreme comments and turn away from the AfD.

This all the more as the extremist statements all stem from the AfD branch that toppled Frauke Petry as party leader. It was likely that these internal conflicts would break out in the open once the AfD drops in public support after the Grand Coalition has altered its political messaging to cater to AfD voters. Such an internal conflict alone would damage the AfD's reputation. All the more, as the more extremist branch in the AfD – around Alexander Gauland and Bjoern Hoecke – would be likely to win such a revolt as they hold key positions and majorities within the AfD. Consequently, the AfD might as well lose its fourth asset in the coming months – portraying itself as democratic actor freed of radical elements.

In 2016, the AfD polled at around 13 per cent with most federal polls and appeared as political force to reckon with in the next federal election. However, without a massive new surge in migrants and refugees, the party appears extremely vulnerable to political messaging of the Grand Coalition.

There was a time when exactly such messaging seemed to form in Berlin – namely the forging of a conservative migration compromise between CDU, CSU and SPD; a focus of their electoral campaigns on economic fissures; and the SPD opening up for a red-red-green coalition. If these three narratives are conveyed vividly to German voters, the AfD's appeal to German voters will go down substantially and the party is bound to internal turmoil the more extremist elements in the party are likely to win. At least then the party might resemble the fantastic figure known from Michael Ende: an illusory giant.

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7

**NETHERLANDS**

# The Dutch Freedom Party: a one-man show

By [Charlotte de Roon](#).

For a while now, Dutch politics is being rocked by a new party on the scene: the Party for Freedom (Dutch: Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV). We can also call it the political party of Geert Wilders, one of the most visible Dutch politicians – nationally and internationally. The PVV draws a lot of attention with its controversial statements. But amidst all the attention, there is a remarkable aspect to the party that should also draw attention if not immediate concern: its lack of internal organization. The question is to what extent the party organization of the PVV corresponds to our contemporary democratic views and ideas of political party organisations.

## About the Dutch Freedom Party

First, some facts on the PVV. The party was founded in 2005 by its political leader Geert Wilders, a 53-year-old mostly known for his blond hairdo and fierce statements on inflammatory themes such as the Islam and the European Union. He is often placed in the same category as Marine Le Pen in France, Frauke Petry in Germany, and Nigel Farage in the UK. Wilders has a long experience in the Dutch House of Representatives: in 1998 he first became a member of parliament (MP) for the conservative-liberal People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie – VVD). In the national elections of 2010, the PVV increased its base from 5.9 per cent to 15.5 per cent, although in 2012 this decreased to 10 per cent. The party had fifteen seats in the House of Representatives in 2016. Polls for elections in March 2017 looked promising for the PVV, as it could become one of the country's biggest parties.

Scholars seem to agree that the PVV is the most important populist party in the Netherlands, as it combines anti-elitist positions “with a vehement anti-immigrant (anti-Islam) and law and order discourse, which places [the PVV] solidly within the category of the populist radical right” [\[1\]](#). Its sympathizers are a diverse group, although mostly low-skilled and living in the suburbs or the south of the Netherlands.

## A one-member party

‘So what?’ you may ask, since the PVV is not the first populist party in the Netherlands nor the first party with an anti-Islamic or anti-EU rhetoric. Well, this is the interesting part: the PVV only has one official member, Geert Wilders. There is no room for official members or conventions, nor are there local chapters or organizations. Sympathizers can only contribute financially. Wilders is the only one who has a formal say in the creation of the party programme, candidate list, coalition negotiations, and any other party affairs. In 2010, Hero Brinkman, a MP for the PVV since 2006, campaigned to turn the PVV into a party with formal members, an annual conference and a youth wing. But he did not succeed. Two years later, Brinkman decided to quit the PVV, mainly because of the democratic deficit within the organization. This episode made clear that Wilders refuses to democratize his party, leading to heavy criticism. The PVV is a ‘one-man show’. Accordingly, Wilders is depicted as a dictatorial ruler of his own personal realm, controlling and dominating his fellow members of parliament.

## **What does this mean for democracy?**

Paradoxically, while the PVV is operating in a democratic constitutional state and advocates democratic legitimacy in national and EU institutions, the party itself is undemocratic in its internal structures. Its closed party organization prevents any form of democratic accountability, responsiveness and legitimacy towards its constituency and society as a whole. The importance of party members [2] rests, among others, on their contribution to the political legitimacy of the political party and the accountability of the party leaders and government. Internal democratic structures, in turn, make sure that these members have the opportunity to express their opinion in decision-making processes. Moreover, these structures may foster political skills and democratic values and strengthen the linkage between politics and society. In order to protect basic democratic values and procedures, some democracies establish a legislative mechanism to ban party models like that of the PVV. For instance, in Germany the party law (Parteiengesetz) requires, among others, a democratic structure and a minimum number of members [3]. This principle underlines that democracies and political parties are interdependent in such a way, that parties need to adhere to internal and external democratic practices and procedures.

## **No youth wing, no youth participation**

In closing, let's zoom in on a specific organizational characteristic Geert Wilders refuses to adopt for the PVV: a party youth wing. Wilders' main argument for not having a party youth wing is that it would possibly attract radical youth. On the one hand, Wilders might have a point with this argument: youth wings are well-known for their function as 'necessary irritant' or 'grindstone' of the mother party. But, on the other hand, political parties also have a democratic duty in offering young people the possibility to educate and socialize themselves in politics. Especially in the case of young people, we know that there are certain challenges in engaging them in formal politics. Party youth wings can act as important political intermediaries and schools of democracy for the young. It is a pre-eminent place where young people can be exposed to heterogeneous points of view and can be motivated to deal with social issues and take a stand. This way, radical views might be tempered. Moreover, for the party itself a party youth wing can be a way to ensure continuity. This might be of particular importance for the PVV, which is highly dependent on its leader, thus risking a collapse as soon as this leader disappears. Although, as long as the PVV does not adhere to any democratic practices, a legitimate question is how bad that would be.

## **About the author**

Charlotte de Roon is currently working at Leiden University as the chair of the University Council. She combines this job with a PhD project, in which she is interested in the political participation of young people and the democratic contributions of political intermediaries such as party youth wings. She holds an MSc degree in Social Psychology as well as in Public Administration.

## **Notes**

[1] Agnes Akkerman, Cas Mudde, and Andrej Zaslove, "How Populist Are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters," *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no. 9 (2014): 1324-1353.

[2] Although this is a much-discussed topic.

[3] Nicole Berbuir, Marcel Lewandowsky and Jasmin Siri, "The AfD and its Sympathisers: Finally a Right-Wing Populist Movement in Germany?" *German Politics* 24, no. 2 (2015): 154-178.

**CONCLUSION**

# Populist parties in Europe, where to next?

By [Christine Hübner](#).

Our road trip of populist parties has taken us across Europe from Spain's Podemos in the southwest through the Netherlands and Germany in the centre and all the way up north to the Sweden Democrats and even to Syriza in Greece on Europe's most south-eastern border. What have we learnt en route and where does this journey leave us?

Taken together, the chapters in this volume teach us that stories of populism are more complex than they seem. We identified parallels between the continent's various populist parties, but we found a lot more differences. Populism is neither a coherent ideology nor a pathology that can be fixed at the use of a common cure. Rather, Europe's populist parties seem to be here to stay. Many have stabilized their vote shares and have gained foothold in local, regional and national parliaments. The rise of populist parties does not necessarily mean the end of democracy in Europe. At least today, a few years into the wave of populist rhetoric, European democracies are still alive and kicking. While some see clear signs of decay, we argue that populism's recent success indicates a change in our expectations of democratic decision making. What we really mean when we speak of "the rule of the people" is constantly negotiated. The direction that European democracy is heading to is open, not the least because of populism.

## **Stories on populism are more complex than they seem**

At the beginning of this volume, we set out to find a common denominator and an explanation for the recent rise of populist parties across Europe. Yet, throughout the various case studies we found mostly differences. For one, populist parties have appeared on the left and on the right of the political spectrum. Some have had long legacies based on existing political parties or social movements, such as Fidesz in Hungary or Syriza in Greece. Others – Podemos in Spain for example – were newly established by political entrepreneurs. What is more: populist parties are based on a variety of organisational structures. These range from a simple one-man show to complex multi-party power constructs. Some thrive thanks to charismatic leaders – think of Syriza's Alexis Tsipras or the Dutch PVV's Geert Wilders – and others thrive despite their constant leadership struggles, Germany's AfD, for example.

Throughout this volume we find mostly differences, even though we miss a number of countries that it would have been equally important to report from. Slovakia, Italy, Denmark, France, Austria, and Finland, for example, have each seen their own variations of populist parties, some of them even both at the right and the left of the political spectrum. It is likely that reporting from each of these countries would have only added more differences to our list. Taken together, stories about populism are a lot more complex than they seem. We have come across enough differences between populist parties to conclude that there is not one common denominator that explains populism's recent success in Europe.

## Populism as a political method, not an ideology

What these differences illustrate is that populism is not an ideology in and of itself. It lacks the single most important feature that ideologies share: coherence. The examples our authors investigate in this volume show that there is not one form of populism. Rather, there are many populisms. The number of failed attempts to establish a pan-European populist alliance also strikingly illustrates this. We can go on to debate whether to go with Cas Mudde and think of populism as a ‘thin ideology’ – one that addresses only single political issues and changes face like a chameleon with regard to others [1] – or as not an ideology at all, but as a political strategy or discursive frame [2]. In the end, what we decide to call populism comes down to what kind of jargon we prefer.

What is undebatable is that we intuitively label some things as ‘populist’ and others not. What then characterises populism? The case studies in this volume demonstrate that populism is a political method. It is not the contents that define it, but the way they are articulated and employed. Or in the words of Ernesto Laclau:

*“A movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual content identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular logic of articulation of those contents – whatever those contents are.”* (2005, p. 33) [3]

Our experts have shown that populist strategy always features a rhetoric that pits the people – the “populus” – against (often corrupt) political elites and other established actors. The populist parties we surveyed have positioned themselves as true representatives of the people; they strive to be perceived as a viable alternative to the existing status quo, often the dominant mainstream parties. The typical populist narrative appeals to emotions, often by focusing on a single and highly emotive issue: for example, austerity, immigration, or European integration. The parties we surveyed did not become successful by offering a coherent narrative on how to address a number of interlinked societal issues, but by leaving pertinent questions deliberately unanswered. In other words: they mobilise voters by appealing to whatever seems to be in demand at a given moment.

In addition to demand, supply also plays a big role in the populist narrative. We have seen that the success of populist parties hinges on skilful campaigning, charismatic leaders and gaps in the political agenda that are left unaddressed by mainstream actors. The populist strategy is highly opportunistic. We could say that populists are those who are good at supplying whatever voters want to hear. The strategy of the populist is to be better at understanding supply and demand than other political actors do.

## Populism is not a pathology

Just like it is not an ideology, populism is also not a pathology of our times. The view that the success of populist parties is an anomaly of a crisis-ridden society is purported all too often. It comes about when populism is mentioned in one breath with decreasing trust in democratic institutions, voter alienation, declining party membership, and a general lack of civic engagement. It is tempting to tell this kind of story of populism, because it makes it easy to stereotype populists as evil opportunists and coin an increasingly negative understanding of populism. It also suggests that we can cure populism, if only we found the remedy that brings voters of populist parties –

poor souls who have been viciously misled by populist power seekers – back in line with the mainstream consensus.[\[4\]](#)

We have come to see throughout this volume that populism is not a pathology. It is not a new phenomenon; as a political strategy populism has been around for a long time. Think back to the stories of Syriza or Fidesz: in many of the cases we surveyed, the use of a populist narrative has had a long legacy. We have also seen that populist parties are becoming established actors in Europe's political landscape. They are not an anomaly or a temporary phenomenon; they are here to stay.

### **The direction might be open, but populism is here to stay**

Many have compared the recent success of the populist logic to the developments of the early 1930s – the last time Europe experienced a wipe out of democracy.[\[5\]](#) Are today's populist parties a threat to democracy? We could just as well compare today's version of the populist rhetoric to that of the late nineteenth century, when the first organised political parties sought to widen their voter base by appealing to previously not enfranchised citizens with the promise of representing them vis-à-vis the established elites. Is populism's recent success a beacon of a new era of widening participation and deliberative democracy?

Both comparisons are inaccurate. Populists operate in very different circumstances today. We live in widely enfranchised societies, and those, who really lack enfranchisement – immigrants, children and young people, for example – are not commonly the ones voting for populist parties. We also have a lot more information on political issues at hand nowadays. And statistics show that, in terms of sheer numbers, we take a lot more democratic decisions today than in either the 1890s or 1930s.[\[6\]](#)

The increasing use of a populist rhetoric does not necessarily mean the end of democracy in Europe. Rather, we might argue that what we really mean when we speak of “democracy” is changing. The rise of populism in Europe does not necessarily need to be a bad thing. It can be viewed as an expression of a change in what we mean by and expect of democracy, at least among a part of the citizenry. We could argue that, by definition, the meaning of “democracy” is a moving target, because it is constantly negotiated. In a true democracy, it is always debatable what we mean when we speak of “the rule of the people”. This leaves us with two questions, which we have to address when speaking about populism: Who are “we”? And what does democracy mean to us? The direction that European democracy is heading to is open, not the least because of populism.

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## Notes

[1] Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 542–563.

[2] Paris Aslanidis, "Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective," *Political Studies* 64, no. 1 (2015): 88-104.

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[4] Cas Mudde, "The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy," *Eurozine* (31. August 2010), <https://www.eurozine.com/the-populist-radical-right-a-pathological-normalcy/>

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[6] Filip Kostelka and André Blais, "The Chicken and Egg Question: Satisfaction with Democracy and Voter Turnout," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 51, no. 2 (2018): 370-376.



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# Further Reading

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d|part is a non-profit, independent and non-partisan think tank. Our aim is to research and support different forms of political participation. Our research projects build a foundation for empirically sound statements about the state of political participation in Germany and Europe. We contribute to the public discussion of political participation as an important component of a democratic civic society.

