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**Rising Populism:
The Fall of the European Union?**

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Introduction

The European integration project has been a contested process since it first began with the early stages of what would come to be known as the European Union (EU). The EU has weathered enlargements, the ending of the Cold War, and economic crises, but not without consequence to popular opinion of the EU. Opposition to further integration is rising, the Union has faced the first case of a member state withdrawal from the Union, and the EU has become increasingly politicized over the last thirty years (Brunet-Jailly, Hurrelmann, & Verdun, 2018; Christiansen, 2020, p. 17). But what were the factors behind these issues, and are they really a sign of things to come for the future of the EU? Behind all three issues, and a sentiment underlying the EU as a whole, is the narrative of populism.

Populism can be both a mindset and its corresponding way of ‘doing politics’. Populism as a mindset reflects the idea of the people against the elite, considering themselves the “only true representatives of the people” (Cadier & Lequesne, 2020, p. 3), while the elite, their political opponents, are self-serving above all and a threat to the people, and the institutions that support them are inherently corrupt (Cadier & Lequesne, 2020; Nijman & Werner, 2019). As a political practice, populism is reactionary and personalistic, engaging people in a mob-like, nationalistic mentality of ‘othering’ the threats (Nijman & Werner, 2019; Surel, 2011). It lacks a true ideology, but “thrives on anger, fear and anxiety present in modern society” (Nijman & Werner, 2019, p. 6) to adapt to the current threat, fueled by “the belief that democratic systems have not completely responded to the needs and desires of the ‘real people’ or the ‘silent majority’” (Longo, 2019, p. 184). Populism can be both left- and right-wing, but for the purpose of this paper, I will be concentrating on right-wing populism through the EU.

In this essay I will analyze if populism is rising, and if so, question what is fueling the rise, and if it is really a threat to the future of the EU. I will argue that the rhetoric of a democratic deficit and rising Euroscepticism is fueling the rise of right-wing populism, threatening EU institutions and stability. Firstly, I will discuss the past and present of populism in the EU and analyze if it is actually on the rise. I will continue by studying the factors leading to a potential spread of populism. Finally, I will analyze if rising populism would constitute a significant threat to the EU.

Populism

EU integration, from the early stages of enlargement of the EEC when smaller and relatively poor countries began the formal accession process after Denmark, Ireland and the UK joined in 1973 — which in itself furthered the divisive “wider but weaker” debate in literature (Brunet-Jailly et al., 2019, p. 393; Wallace, 1976), has been a top-down process, delegitimizing Europe’s political unity and sparking the spread of anti-EU populist movements (Longo, 2019, p. 182). As the integration process has continued, so has the rise of populism.

The “Austrian Crisis” (Surel, 2011, p. 1) is considered to be a prime example of a government under which right-wing populism developed and thrived (Heinisch, 2008, p. 40). Austria’s Freedom Party (FPÖ), under leader Jörg Haider, led an aggressively xenophobic and anti-EU campaign, and under Haider’s leadership the party grew from barely 5 percent voter support to 26.9 percent from 1986-1999, “time and again exceeding expectations and predictions regarding its growth potential” (Heinisch, 2008, p. 42). There was a boycott organized by other members in protest of a coalition formed between conservatives and the FPÖ in 2000 (Surel, 2011), but it was ultimately ineffective against the rise of populism, as the FPÖ went on to garner 15 percent of the vote in Austria’s 2006 election (Heinisch, 2008, p. 42).

The spread only accelerated in the 2010s, as fallout from the global financial crisis, sovereign debt crisis, and the peak of the refugee crisis combined to create a perfect storm for anti-European right-wing populism to flourish. Right-wing populism is characterized by opposition to immigration, welfare chauvinism — the notion that access to government welfare and assistance programs should be limited to natives of a country, and anti-elitism (Christiansen, 2020, p. 18), all of which reflected negative sentiments towards rising trends in Europe. The rise was only exacerbated by the peak of the migrant crisis in 2015: the increase in the population of immigrants has corresponded to an increase in voter support for right-wing populist parties (Podobnik, Jusup, Kovac, & Stanley, 2017, p. 2). The rising tension came to a head in the United Kingdom (UK).

In 2014, the UK's right-wing populist party, the UK Independence Party (UKIP) captured 24 out of Britain's 73 seats in the European Parliament election with 26.77 percent of the vote, the most of any UK party (Malik, 2018, p. 93; Europa, n.d.). UKIP and other Eurosceptic Parliament members pressured Prime Minister David Cameron to hold a referendum on EU membership, and on June 23, 2016, 17.4 million voted to leave the EU while 16.1 million voted to remain (Malik, 2018, p. 93), coming in at 51.9 percent versus 48.1. Right-wing populist campaigning succeeded to turn citizen's opinion against the EU, leading to the UK's withdrawal as Brexit (Christiansen, 2020, p. 19; Podobnik et al., 2017, p. 2). The narrative behind Brexit portrayed the EU as an "undemocratic 'superstate' that takes away power from the member states' democracy" (Brunet-Jailly et al., 2019, p. 204), a populist rhetoric focused on a mentality of the people versus the elite.

Brexit and the FPÖ's rise might be the two most often cited sources in the literature, but they are far from the only populist anti-EU right-wing parties gaining traction: the Danish

People's Party, Greet Wilder's far-right Freedom Party in the Netherlands, the Finns Party, Germany's AfD and the Sweden Democrats have all seen considerable increases in support in national elections (Malik, 2018, p. 99). France's Front National is another, calling the EU "The Europe of Brussels, a hydra of many heads" (Surel, 2011, p. 3) and going on to call for "a rejection of European citizenship, a refusal to cooperate within certain agencies on security and immigration issues, and the suggested renegotiation of the European treaties to make them more compatible with sovereign states" (Surel, 2011, p. 4), all of which are classic populist moves. Populist political leaders have fed off growing dissatisfaction and frustration with the complex and seemingly-convoluted decision-making process, successfully turning public support against the 'elites' and the established institutions of the EU (Christiansen, 2020, p. 18), and the both the populist ideology and way of "doing politics" is undoubtedly on the rise.

Contributing factors

But where did that disillusion with the EU come from? There are two overarching and connected explanations: the narrative of a democratic deficit and Euroscepticism. They feed off each other; for the Eurosceptics, the EU's alleged democratic deficit has "become a rallying cry" (Brunet-Jailly et al., 2019, p. 440), and both further the spread of populism. In order to understand the rise, we need to understand what contributes to it, and how.

It is not so much a question of *is* there a democratic deficit within the EU, the existence of such a deficit is undeniable and well-established in the literature and public sphere (Longo, 2019; DeBardelen & Pammett, 2009), but a question of how prevalent an issue it is for the EU as we know it. As the EU is at its most expansive, but also its most turbulent, with the reckoning of Brexit, "the tolerance of a not-completely democratic Europe is at its lowest" (Longo, 2019, p.182). The notion of the democratic deficit argues that the EU governance lacks "meaningful

mechanisms of participation and accountability” (Brunet-Jailly et al., 2019, p. 440), with weak representation compared to the many supranational institutions placing rules on member states, delegitimizing EU institutions and norms (Longo, 2019; Surel, 2011).

The notion of a democratic deficit throughout the EU leaves citizens feeling like their voices aren't being heard at the European people level. It's a common sentiment, the feeling of one vote not being able to change anything. But this leads to people treating EU elections, specifically the elections for the European Parliament, as second-order national elections with low voter turnout and primary concern over domestic politics (DeBardelen & Pammett, 2009; Brunet-Jailly et al., 2019). “The second-order character of EP elections weakens the representative connection between Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and their voters” (Brunet-Jailly et al., 2019, p. 444), which in turn weakens the connection voters feel to the EU as an institution and as part of their identity, leading to a sense that their voices and concerns are not being heard, and the cycle begins again, and the democratic deficit widens.

Euroscepticism refers to opposition to European integration and its effects by parties, movements, and attitudes, from both left and right political ideologies. Eurosceptics argue that European integration has “undermined” member states' national sovereignty and democracy, eclipsing their individual identities, institutions, and systems (Brunet-Jailly et al., 2019, p. 453; Longo, 2019; Surel, 2011). Growing Euroscepticism has gone “hand in hand with a wider phenomenon of populism and anti-system politics”, with the member states playing the part of the people and the EU as the elites to fight back against (Christiansen, 2020, p. 18).

The Schengen system is one example of a mechanism that has fueled Eurosceptic ideas of the EU as a threat to national integrity. The Schengen system, which enables passport-free movement of EU citizens between most EU member states, and a few non-EU member states,

has been blamed for exacerbating the migration crisis (Brunet-Jailly et al., 2019; Malik, 2018, p. 99). The Schengen system removed internal border controls between states, allowing the unchecked movement of people between states, with the ability to reimplement internal border controls in crises, but it did not provide a corresponding mechanism to deal with the overwhelming influx of migrants coming to the Schengen states' external borders in 2015 (Malik, 2018, p. 99). As the member states had given control of their borders to the EU, they were unable to implement new controls for themselves, furthering the narrative of member states needing to take back control of their national borders and anti-immigration sentiments, and in turn, fueling the populist movement across Europe (Malik, 2018).

Even prior to Brexit, the UK has a long history of deep-rooted Euroscepticism and reluctance towards integration. It has been slow to join European institutions, such as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), which Roy Jenkins (1994, p. 7) argues “guarantees that we never play an effective role in shaping the institutions which we subsequently join.” This is a symptom of Euroscepticism going on to further the democratic deficit, which in turns fuels the populist sentiment through the UK, and the EU at large, creating a dangerous cycle.

But is it a threat?

The rise of populism, fueled by Euroscepticism and the democratic deficit, isn't so much a threat to the EU as a governing supranational body, but as a threat to the normative idea and institutions of the EU. The populist threat to the European Union is not a potential break-up of the Union, nor the obstruction it poses to decision-making, although such a challenge is there, “but rather the normative erosion that populism has brought into the EU” (Christiansen, 2020, p. 19). This is especially dangerous considering the EU's role as a “normative power” (Cadier & Lequesne,

2020, p. 5). Populism is not currently widespread or established enough to bring down institutions like the European Court of Justice or the European Parliament, but populist parties and governments threaten to undermine structural power and the values of the EU, including the norms and principles upon which the EU was founded (Cadier & Lequesne, 2020), and its abilities to impart those norms onto member states through its powers of governance, which shakes citizen's faith in the EU as a whole.

One of the founding institutional norms of the EU was liberal democracy, which is threatened by populism, especially from a Eurosceptical angle. To foster a Union built on stability and cooperation, the EU has traditionally relied on exporting the norms, standards and principles of democratic governance to guide the political, economic, legal, and social structures within its member states (Cadier & Lequesne, 2020, p. 5). By questioning these norms of democratic governance and aligning with actors and promoting new norms that challenge the dominant international liberal democratic order, populist governments undermine the EU's ability to govern by exporting norms of tolerance and cooperation, ultimately damaging the unity behind the European Union and the EU's long-term resilience to conflict (Cadier & Lequesne, 2020). Eurosceptic arguments and proponents of the danger of the democratic deficit fuel populist governments, which in turns leads to the furthering of "illiberal policies and democratic backsliding" (Cadier & Lequesne, 2020, p. 5). "Populism resulting in democratic backsliding in multiple member states constitutes a fundamental problem for the EU as a whole," (Christiansen, 2020, p. 19), because the EU has limited ability to protect liberal democratic norms within member states, despite the populist narrative claiming the EU has too much control over member states. "Populist parties, espousing hostile views vis-à-vis the EU, have made inroads in most member states, and their discourses and electoral successes have impacted on mainstream

politics, creating an increasingly hostile environment for EU decision-making” (Christiansen, 2020, p. 19), as is seen in the aftermath of Haider and the FPÖ in Austria, where populism was introduced to the mainstream public discourse and groundwork for a “culturally conservative and extreme nativist agenda” (Heinisch, 2008, p. 54) was laid, creating a lasting element in the political landscapes of member states. The rise of populist parties through the EU “has disturbed previously established hegemonies, causing realignments and, hence, changed the rules of the political game of the continent” (Malik, 2018, p. 99) and the “new politics of resentment” (Heinisch, 2008, p. 52) will remain a part of politics in many member states.

By undermining norms of liberal democratic governance through the narrative of pushing back the elite and hateful rhetoric, populist actors and governments weaken the EU’s legitimacy to govern as an institution and to uphold those norms throughout Europe. By “relying on a divisive political rhetoric and scapegoating,” (Cadier & Lequesne, 2020, p. 8) populist governments actively push against the EU’s integration efforts.

The challenge for the EU now, with the deepening democratic deficit, Euroscepticism on the rise, and populism contradicting the very basis of EU democratic governance, is to convince citizens and member state governments that the EU is still the key to economic and social growth, despite populist narratives challenging its credibility and authority. The rise of populism goes around the foundations of the EU’s founding principles and threatens the future of the EU.

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