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Populism's Perpetual Threat to the European Union

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Introduction

The European Union's (EU) overarching goal of the unification of Europe has often proven difficult to sustain, particularly amidst the rise of populist parties in Europe and their persistent Euroscepticism. Exact characterizations of populism are difficult to pin down. One text usefully defines it as: "A political ideology or style of discourse that interprets politics as a conflict between the people (defined as virtuous) and the political elite (defined as corrupt). In the EU context, Eurosceptic positions often – but not always – make use of populist arguments" (Verdun et al., 2023, p. 462). Although not all Eurosceptic critiques are populist, this paper will focus on the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism. Much of the rise of populist support has to do with pushback against the EU's attempts to balance regional interests and continental interests amidst rising inter-continental tensions—such as LGBTQ rights and immigration—and the tug-of-war between national identity and European identity. This essay argues that populist actors appeal to voter's emotions and fears of an invading "other." The appeal to base emotions, an ideal of traditional identity, and xenophobia create Euroscepticism and inspire EU disintegration. This argument will be reasoned through an analysis of the recent rise of populism in Europe, Brexit, European disintegration, and possible solutions to European populism.

The Rise of Populism

Populism is not a new phenomenon; the ideology comes and goes in waves from, for example, the fascism of the 1940s to the recent rise of populism in Poland, Italy, Greece, and Hungary, as well as traces of populist leadership styles in Boris Johnson's England and Donald Trump's United States. Populists claim to be anti-elite, against "the other," supporters of "the people." Populist parties and leaders often target a population's specific gripe whether it be an

anti-LGBT sentiment or fear-mongering surrounding immigrants. Populist party's motives vary depending on the audience they are trying to target, a case-by-case basis. Populism is considered a "thin" ideology because it is easily layered upon other ideologies (Zaiotti, 2023, lecture).

Balfour et al. explains: "Depending on the party, 'the other' can vary from capitalist elites, as was the case in the early days of Greece's Syriza, the 'Eurocrats,' as in the cases of M5S, Lega, the Rassemblement National or the UK Independence Party (UKIP), to immigrants, according to all far-right populist parties. The claim to represent the people has moral content" (2019, p. 5).

Populist parties rely on creating an "other" to fight. Yet, these parties' often reactionary approaches "for the people" produce short-term solutions to long-term issues. Short-sighted, reactionary responses can be especially problematic during serious crises that need long term responses, such as the debt crisis and the 9/11 attack.

MacRae explains how in 2012, after the sovereign debt crisis, support for right-wing populist movements soared across the EU: "[R]ight-wing governments came into power, seeking to re-establish the primacy of the member states over the EU and to reaffirm national sovereignty" (2023, p. 364). She uses examples such as Poland's anti-LGBT zones and Hungary's rejection of liberal democracy. MacRae writes:

[Orbán's] success draws on racist and exclusionary language to reinforce a homo-nationalist understanding of who belongs – and who is excluded – from the state. In a direct rejection of the EU's position on social inclusion, more than 100 communities in Poland have declared themselves to be LGBT-free zones. (2023, p. 364)

Scholars have hypothesized different reasons to explain the rise of populism in Europe. Wodak points to the American tragedy of 9/11 as the starting point for European populism which encouraged "far-right parties tough on issues like law and order" in combination with the subsequent

financial crisis that sparked economic anxieties (Harris, 2018, para. 11). Populist parties tend to get more support during eras of economic hardship. “[P]opulist revolt in the West reveals only too clearly, those who feel they have lost rather than won as their once cherished national economies have become more and more open to the outside world have become increasingly vocal, and vocal in a negative way” (Cox, 2017, p. 17).

This wave of populism has not been a singularly European phenomenon. Amidst a rapidly globalizing world, the latest wave of populism appears to have taken an international form, whereas the ideology used to remain in the national arena (Cox, 2017, p. 10). We saw a simultaneous populist rise in American in 2016 with Donald Trump’s undeniably populist presidential campaign and successive election. Trumpism added fuel to the European fire. Other scholars such as Ongaro et al. believe immigration (in combination with previously discussed factors) is the leading continental tension that led to EU disintegration: “The refugee crisis in 2015 enhanced the Euroscepticism—meaning a political stance unfavourable to European integration—both of the populist parties on the far right in Northern Europe, often opposition parties, and of the more established conservative centre-right parties in Eastern Europe, often parties holding executive office” (2022, p. 95). Many scholars focus on immigration as a significant factor in the rise of populism in Europe. Freedom to move between EU member states means immigrants are not contained to the member states that let them into Europe. This causes tensions as most member states want to approach immigration and the refugee crisis at the national level, not as a union. Schmidtke explains: “The populist backlash against refugees has sparked a re-nationalization and a great degree of skepticism with respect to the very project of European integration” (2023, p. 182). As divisions grow between the right and left, the days of consistent EU support are over. “In the past, it mattered little if the EU elections were carried by

the left or the right: the result was the same. The parliament was always the keeper of the federalist flame. But the political upheavals Europe has witnessed in the past two years, including Brexit and Trump's victory in the US presidential election in 2016, have upset the center right liberal orthodoxy in the EU" (Amarasinghe and Jayawardne, 2019, para. 6).

Populism drives a wedge into the European project, promoting disintegration and deepening divisions. Fear of losing national identity causes people to build walls and target the usual threats: immigrants, LGBTQ, paranoid ideas of a big brother state. Leaders like Orbán manipulate frightened populations by throwing massive amounts of money at them and restructuring the political system to gain more power. The strategies and mentality are short sighted and unsettle both the member state and the larger EU project. Brexit is an example of this short-sighted inward turn.

Brexit

Boris Johnson used many populist techniques to drive Britain away from the federation: evoking tradition and a paranoid image of EU bureaucracy, massive campaigns of disinformation, exploiting the gap between ordinary voters' knowledge and complex economic issues, drawing on fears of immigration, and using referendums. Brexit exemplifies the power of populism and the destruction uneducated fear-driven voting causes. As the country who made the ultimate move against the EU, Britain is important case to study. In June of 2016, a referendum was held to determine whether the citizens of the United Kingdom wanted to leave the EU. Fifty-one percent of voters chose to leave; thus, Britain left the EU (Scuire, 2017, p. 114). Some saw the Brexit vote as the "first major step in European disintegration" (Kundnani, 2017, p. 3). Brexit reflects the populist ideal of maintaining national identity that lingers throughout EU member states. Schmidtke writes: "As Brexit and the resurgence of populist-nationalist politics have

exemplified, there is an increasing domestic pressure to ‘take back control’ and to challenge the policy prerogative of the EU, in particular in governing migration” (2023, p. 183).

Brexit demonstrates how populists target uneducated voters. Overall, older, less-educated voters were more likely to be “leavers” within the Brexit vote. 65% of voters with a university degree voted to stay (Sampson, 2017, p. 176). But the question is deeper than whether or not a voter has a university degree. The structure of modern politics does not allow voters’ access to the highly specialized information that surrounds a topic as tedious as Brexit. Thus, the average voter is susceptible to being worked up over hot-button issues or falling victim to misinformation. Jones argues that referendums are often a mechanism to halt social progress when used for large-scale issues. Jones explained in terms of the Brexit vote, the general public was undoubtedly uneducated; he reasoned that we have political representatives for a reason (2023, tutorial). Yet, when leaders claim to “tell it like it is” voters feel like they are getting the whole picture. Lacatus and Meibaur explain Johnson’s successful populist rhetoric:

He commits to “getting Brexit done” and “taking back control” from the European Union (EU). He does not present the promised potential “Brexit deal” as a set of complex and well-defined policies resulting from a rigorous negotiation process with the EU. Rather, Brexit is a problem to be fixed swiftly so government can start focusing on issues closer to the voters’ hearts: increased investment in education, healthcare, police and the economy. (2022, p. 446)

Johnson's appeal to autonomy and a quick fix to, for example, health care turned out to be based on lies. Not only was that a short-sighted rhetoric, the fear of immigrants overrunning the country turned out to be a myth. Malik writes: “[T]he studies have not found any significant

negative impact of immigration on the wages or average employment for the UK natives but there is some evidence that immigration has reduced wages for unskilled and lower-paid workers” (2018, p. 95). Many voters simply did not have all the information needed to vote on such a substantial matter. Even the Parliament of the United Kingdom recognizes this: “As the House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution concluded, ‘[W]e regret the ad hoc manner in which referendums have been used, often as a tactical device, by the government of the day’” (Issacharoff, 2018, pp. 517-518). Lack of reliable information for voters remains a power of populist parties.

The Aftermath

The overwhelming regret surrounding Brexit—sometimes referred to as “Bregret”—demonstrates the danger of the populist agenda. Fifty-five percent of Britons say that leaving was a mistake and fifty-nine percent say they would rejoin (Freeland, 2023, para. 4). Many of the main concerns of leavers were not even met. Legal migration, a key concern, has nearly doubled since 2016, going from 333,000 legal migrants to 606,000 (Freeland, 2023, para. 3).

On a positive note, although some political theorists and international relations scholars predicted that Brexit might create a domino effect of Eurosceptic member states holding referendums, EU support actually grew in some member states—such as France, Germany, Spain, and Sweden—as they witnessed the disastrous aftermath in the United Kingdom (Malik, 2018, pp. 98-100). The uproar caused by the 2016 Brexit referendum and the successive negotiations provided a reality check for many anti-EU populist parties and movements. Balfour et al. provide examples: “Parties such as the “Rassemblement National, Lega, and M5S abandoned their anti-EU positions and commitments to hold a referendum on EU or eurozone membership” (2019, p. 6).

Still, populism and an anti-EU sentiment persists. Bickerton argues that the populism within the United Kingdom and subsequent separation from the EU represents growing division within the continent, mainstreaming Euroscepticism (2018, p. 133). In 2018 he wrote: “Though it is unlikely that other countries will follow suit in the near future, Brexit nevertheless expresses some fundamental tensions present within the project of ‘ever closer union’” (p. 137). The EU must continue to be wary of tensions surrounding topics that appear threatening to national identity such as immigration.

European Union Disintegration

Although Brexit did not result in the disintegration of the entire EU, populist Eurosceptic parties that preach an anti-establishment sentiment and focus on national identity remain prominent within Europe. EU disintegration is the separation, the breaking away, of member states from the Union. In a continent as culturally diverse as Europe, the possibility of disintegration should not come as a shock: “This heterogeneity makes the national interests of European countries incredibly difficult to reconcile” (Scuira, 2017, p. 117). Regional differences are difficult to reconcile at the continental level. Populism tries to push cultural differences and divisions as far as they will go. This interjection by populist parties affects a plethora of controversial subjects within the European Parliament from climate change to trade. They find a division and make it wider. (Balfour, et al., 2019, p. 1). “Driving wedges into mainstream parties has been one of the most successful goals of populist parties at national level and in the European Parliament” (Balfour, et al., p. 1). Balfour et al. explains that the rise of populism challenges the inherent system and goals of the EU: “Populism does not suit the EU, which is a long-term planner and a consensus-builder, and relies heavily on technocratic expertise—things that are anathema to populists. So the rise of populism, especially of the far-

right and nationalist variety, does pose a fundamental challenge to the very nature of the EU” (2019, p. 19). Populism does not consider sustainability and criticizes “elitism,” often putting down the highly educated individuals within the EU.

Foster explains how the European identity has recently been strained by polycrisis (the many conflicting catastrophes), for example, the war in Ukraine, COVID-19 pandemic, and the refugee crisis). The high number of recent catastrophes within the Union has furthered EU disintegration (2023, lecture). Foster deems Europe in the state of an identity crisis, a crisis that gives more support to populist parties (2023, lecture).

What Can the European Union Do?

Research on EU disintegration constantly points back to one simple, relatively vague, solution: flexibility. Scholars consistently reiterate the need for the Union to increase their flexibility to accommodate divergent regional requests. Sampson argues that democracy is on the line if tensions are not alleviated: “For Europe to remain democratic, either the people of Europe must develop a collective identity in place of their separate national identities or the supranational powers of the EU must be reduced. Otherwise, the tensions evident in the Brexit vote will recur in other countries and the EU may lose more members” (2017, p. 180). Along with wanting Brussels to show more flexibility for European’s concerns, Malik asserts that the EU’s focus should be on acknowledging cultural differentiation without sacrificing the European project. He believes this can be achieved through healthy and overt debate over specific sovereignty policies, combating populism by creating more access to higher education, and implementing economic shock absorbing policies (2018, pp. 107-108). Biscop explains an approach for foreign policy: “Specifically, unanimous decision-making on foreign policy (CFSP, not defence or CSDP) should be abandoned in favour of decisions by qualified majority voting.

Individual member states will then no longer be able to weaken European diplomacy for their narrow short-term benefit, but to the long-term detriment of all” (2018, p. 4). Importantly, none of the scholar’s approaches advocate for fast-track solutions. For the EU to maintain a unified front, it must prioritize flexibility when addressing regional tensions.

Conclusion

The challenge of unifying a continent as diverse and complex as Europe has proven to be a difficult feat. Populists appeal to emotional voters on the grounds of excluding the “other” to maintain a national identity. An analysis of the rise of populism in Europe demonstrates that as regional divisions increase, so does populist support, and as populist party support increases, so do regional tensions. Further, as exemplified by Brexit and the “Bregret” that subsequently landed in Britain, populist initiatives tend to have short-term points of view that result in negative consequences, taking advantage of uneducated voters through mechanisms such as referendums. A study of how the EU could lower Euroscepticism and populist support emphasizes the need for flexibility when addressing regional grievances. Exactly how the EU should implement more flexibility into their decision-making process is an important question that requires further discussion. The essay invokes broader implications about the EU’s ability to deal with crisis such as climate change. The rise of populism has posed a threat to the EU, but even after Brexit, the collapse and disintegration of the entire Union is not imminent.

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