Populism in Europe: a primer

By Cas Mudde

Already in 2010, a good five years before a populist coalition government would be formed in Greece, then EU President Herman van Rompuy called populism “the greatest danger for Europe” (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 9 April 2010). Since then, many establishment voices have done the same, from German Chancellor Angela Merkel to the editors of the New York Times. What all warnings have in common is that they (1) come from people in power; (2) are vague on the exact meaning of populism; and (3) claim that populism is (omni)present in European politics.

Historically populism has been a marginal political phenomenon in Europe, unlike in the Americas (North and South). In recent years populist parties of left and right have gained electoral successes throughout Europe, although their effects on European politics have so far remained fairly limited.

What populism is (not)

Populism is a buzzword in the media around the world. There is virtually not a politician who has not been labeled populist at one time. In fact, accused would be a better term, as most people use populism is a Kampfbegriff to defame a political opponent. Few politicians self-identify as populist. Those who do usually first redefine the term in a way that is closer to the popular use of democracy than of populism.

In the public debate populism is mostly used to denounce a form of politics that uses (a combination of) demagogy, charismatic leadership, or a Stammtisch (pub) discourse. None of the three are accurate understandings of populism. While some populists might promise everything to everyone (i.e. demagogy) or speak a simple, even vulgar, language (i.e. Stammtisch discourse), many do not. More importantly, many non-populist populists also do this, particularly during election campaigns. Similarly, while some successful populists are charismatic leaders, some are not, and many successful non-populists are also considered charismatic.

Instead, populism is best defined as a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté general (general will) of the people. This means that populism is a particular view on how society is and should be structured, but it addresses only a limited part of the larger political agenda. For example, it says little about the ideal economic or political system that a (populist) state should have. Its essential features are: morality and monism.

The key point is that populism sees both groups as essentially homogeneous, i.e. without fundamental internal divisions, and considers the essence of the division between the two groups to be moral. Consequently, its main opposites are elitism and pluralism. Elitism sees the same major division, but considers the elite to be pure and the people as corrupt. Pluralism has a fundamentally different worldview than both elitism and populism, seeing society
as divided into several groups with different interests and favoring a politics based on consensus between these
groups.

Contrary to what defenders and opponents may claim, populism is neither the essence nor the negation of
democracy. To put it simply, populism is pro-democracy, but anti-liberal democracy. It supports popular sovereignty
and majority rule, but rejects pluralism and minority rights. In the European context, populism can be seen as an
illiberal democratic answer to problems created by an undemocratic liberalism. Criticizing the decade-old trend to
depoliticize controversial issues by placing them outside of the national democratic (i.e. electoral) realm, by
transferring them to supranational institutions like the European Union or to (neo-)liberal institutions like courts and
central banks, populists call for the re-politicization of issues like European integration, gay rights, or immigration.

A final point to note is that populism is neither right nor left; or, perhaps better, populism can be found on both the left
and the right. This is not exactly the same as saying that populism is like a “chameleon,” as it is not necessarily the
same populist actor who changes colors. Populism rarely exists in a pure form, in the sense that most populist
actors combine it with another ideology. This so-called host ideology, which tends to be very stable, is either left or
right. Generally, left populists will combine populism with some interpretation of socialism, while right populists will
combine it with some form of nationalism. Today populism is more on the left in Southern Europe and more on the
right in Northern Europe.

**Populism in Europe**

Although populism has a long history in Europe, it has always been a marginal political phenomenon. It emerged for
the first time in Russia in the late-19th century. The so-called Narodniki were a relatively small group of urban elites
who unsuccessfully tried to stir a peasant revolt. While unsuccessful in Russia, Nardoniki did have a strong
influence in Eastern Europe, where several agrarian populist parties existed in the early 20th century. Most of these
groups had little political influence in the largely authoritarian states of that period. And while both communism and
fascism used populist rhetoric, particularly during the movement stage, both ideologies and regimes were essentially
elitist.

Post-war Europe saw very little populism until the 1990s. There was Poujadism in France in the late-1950s, the
Danish and Norwegian Progress Parties in the 1970s, and PASOK in the 1980s, but all these movements were
largely sui genesis rather than part of a broader populist moment. This changed with the rise of the populist radical
right in the late 1980s. Although the oldest parties of this group, like the National Front (FN) in France and the
Flemish Bloc (now Flemish Interest, VB) in Belgium, started out as elitist parties, they soon embraced a populist
platform with slogans like “We Say What You Think” and “The Voice of the People.” In recent years a new left
populism has also emerged in some countries, particularly in Southern Europe.

Table 1 lists the most important populist parties in Europe today – only the most successful party in each country is
included. The third column gives the electoral result in the most recent European election of May 2014, which vary
from 51.5 percent to 3.7 percent of the vote – note that countries without a successful populist party are excluded
(e.g. Luxembourg, Portugal or Slovenia). On average, populist parties gained some 12.5 percent of the vote in the
last European elections; not insignificant, but hardly a “political earthquake” as the international media claimed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Populist Party</th>
<th>%EP14</th>
<th>%Nat</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>%Total</th>
<th>%Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ)</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>+1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Flemish Interest (VB)</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>-5.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A better insight into the electoral and political relevance of populist parties is provided by the results in the most recent national elections. The fourth column gives the result of the most successful populist party in the country, the fifth column its ranking among all national parties, the sixth the total electoral support of all populist parties in the country, and the seventh column the change in the total national populist vote between the most recent and the previous national election. Here are the most important lessons to be drawn.

First, populist parties are electorally successful in most European countries. In roughly twenty European countries a populist party gains at least 10 percent of the national vote. Second, all populist parties together score an average of ca. 16.5% of the vote in national elections. This ranges from a staggering 65 percent in Hungary, shared between Fidesz and the Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik), to 5.6 percent in Belgium. Third, while the overall trend is up, most populist parties are electorally volatile. Few populist parties have been able to establish themselves as relatively stable political forces in their national party system. Fourth, there are huge cross-national and cross-
temporal differences within Europe. While some populist parties are brand-new (e.g. M5S and Podemos), others are several decades old (e.g. FN, FPÖ, The Left, SVP). Similarly, whereas some parties are on the up (e.g. DF, SYRIZA, UKIP), others are in a downfall (e.g. PP-DD and VB).

When we are focusing only on the (minority of) European countries where populism is a major political phenomenon, there are four important conclusions to draw. First, in five countries a populist party is the biggest political party – Greece, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, and Switzerland. Second, populist parties gained a majority of votes in three countries – Hungary, Italy, and Slovakia. However, in at least two of these countries the main populist parties are strongly opposed to collaboration. The situation in Hungary is most striking, as both its main governmental party (Fidesz) and its main opposition party (Jobbik) is populist. Third, populist parties are currently in the national government in seven countries – Finland, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Norway, Slovakia, and Switzerland. Greece is unique in that it has a populist coalition government of a left and a right populist party. Fourth, and final, in six countries a populist party is part of the established political parties – Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Switzerland. This is important to note, as populism is normally associated exclusively with challenger parties and deemed incapable of establishing itself in a political system. Yet, while populist parties have to be extra careful not to be considered part of ‘the elite’, populists like former Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi and current Hungarian premier Viktor Orbán have been successful at retaining their cleverly constructed ‘outsider’ status in power.

Why is populism successful (now)?

Given the immense academic interest in the phenomenon of populism one would assume that we have a good understanding of why populist parties are successful and, even more specific, under which circumstances they rise and decline. This is not the case. Most analyses of European populism focus almost exclusively on one type of populist parties, notably the populist radical right, and particularly its non-populist aspects. However, immigration has little explanatory power for populist parties in countries that have little immigration (like Hungary and Poland) or for populist parties that don’t oppose immigration (such as Podemos or SYRIZA). At the same time, the most popular theories are often too broad and vague. While crisis and globalization have some relationship to the rise of populism, globalization is related to everything and crisis is usually undefined and simply used whenever a populist party becomes successful (making the ‘theory’ tautological). The following four reasons are also quite broad, and to a certain extent vague, but indicate some important factors that address both the demand-side and supply-side of populist politics.

First, large parts of the European electorates believe that important issues are not (adequately) addressed by the political elites. This relates to issues like European integration and immigration, as well as socio-economic issues like unemployment and welfare state reform, particularly in light of the current economic crisis. While it seems fair to argue that political elites have indeed been less forthcoming and successful in addressing important issues, and to a larger extent than in previous periods (i.e. before the 1990s), what is more important to note is that large parts of the European populations have come to perceive this as a major problem. This has created widespread political dissatisfaction, which is a fertile breeding ground for populist parties, but also for other anti-establishment parties, such as Ciudadanos (Citizens) in Spain.

Second, national political elites are increasingly perceived as being “all the same.” Again, the perception is more important than the reality, although the two are not unrelated. While commentators have decried the so-called “end of ideology” since the late 1960s, there is little doubt that the situation today is much more extreme. Responding to the structural transformation of European societies as a consequence of the “post-industrial revolution,” including the decline of the working class and secularization, the main established parties have moderated their ideologies and converged strongly on both socio-cultural and socio-economic issues. The emergence of the “neue Mitte” (new center) and “Third Way” on the center-left, which by and large transformed social democratic parties into center-right parties targeting the same voters as the Christian democratic and conservative-liberal parties, alienated a large part of the remaining working class and left more ideological voters of both left and right without a political voice.

Third, more and more people see the national politically elites as essentially “powerless”. Again, perception and
reality are closely linked, even if many people will necessarily be accurately informed. In the past decades European elites have engaged in one of the most amazing transfers of power from the national to the supranational. Rarely have politicians so happily marginalized themselves. Of particular importance was the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which has taken many important issues out of the national democratic realm and transferred them to the much less democratic EU sphere. This was, of course, most notably the case for the countries that joined the Eurozone, which no longer control their own currency or monetary policy. At the same time, the process of "cognitive mobilization" has made the European people better educated and more independent, and consequently more critical and less deferential toward the political elites. Getting mixed messages from the political elites, who claim to be powerless in the case of unpopular policies ("the results of the EU/globalization/US") but in full control in the case of popular policies ("my successful economic policies"), European populations feel confident to judge their politicians to be incompetent or even deceitful.

Fourth, the media structure has become much more favorable to political challengers. Until at least the 1980s the established parties controlled most of the important media in Europe, be it party-owned newspapers or state radio and television controlled by parties-appointed boards. While active censorship was rare, most journalists self-censored stories that challenged the interests and values of the political mainstream. Consequently, critique of immigration or European integration was long marginalized, while major corruption, particularly involving elites from several established parties, was left uncovered. This is no longer possible in a world dominated by party-independent, private media and an uncontrollable Internet. Not only do all stories and voices find an outlet, populist stories and voices are particularly attractive to a media dominated by an economic logic. After all, scandals and controversy sell!

Finally, while the previous four factors have created a fertile breeding ground and favorable ‘discursive opportunity structure’ for populists, the success of populist parties like the FN or SYRIZA is also related to the fact that populist actors have become much more “attractive” to voters (and media). Almost all successful populist parties have skillful people at the top, including media-savvy leaders like Beppe Grillo (M5S), Pablo Iglesias (Podemos), or Geert Wilders (PVV). They can not only hold their own in political debates with leaders of established parties, but they are often much more adept at exploiting the huge potential of new resources, such as social media. For example, for years Wilders dominated the Dutch political debate purely through Twitter. Just one well-constructed tweet would be picked up by journalists, who would then force established politicians to respond, and thereby helped Wilders set the political agenda and frame the political debate.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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