

EVENT REPORT

Populism Workshop 31 January 2018

All Circus, No Bread

As Péter Krekó wrote in his first [blog post](#) in 2017 'Eurosceptic populists in Europe, an isolationist US president that regards Europe as a rival, and Vladimir Putin's Russia are together forming a powerful coalition to bring Europe down.' So far the worst-case scenario has not happened. Yet with elections to come in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy and Sweden, we will see whether the populist train which was hold up last year in the Dutch and French elections, has really been brought to a halt. As has recently been shown in the Austrian election, but also in Germany before, that doesn't seem to be the case at all. So what if Central Eastern Europe continues to backslide and polarise, Italy will plunge into chaos and even the often highly praised Swedish democracy is eroded by hateful populism? Will the EU be strong enough to cope with new populist setbacks? What can be done by the European Union, by the Member States and what can we do ourselves to stop the populist tide?

On the 31 January, some thirty young people took part in a populism workshop with expert Péter Krekó and moderator Ciara Campbell.¹ The debate focussed on what populism is, its causes and what can be done about it.

A definition of populism

Populism is an essential part of the political process, an opening statement that may sound surprising. But what exactly *is* populism? There are three parts to populism: claiming to be the voice of the people, anti-elitism and having a black-and-white view. There are two main different types of populism: right-wing and left-wing. Right-wing populism is nation-centric and opposes refugees and immigrants. Left-wing populism is class-centric and opposes bankers and multinational companies.

The causes of populism

What about globalisation as a cause of populism? Whereas right-wing populists see globalisation as a threat to national sovereignty and fear that national language and culture could disappear, left-wing populists see globalisation as a project that benefits rich elites and creates massive wealth inequalities. One very rare exception is liberal populism, for example, Macron's.

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Moderator: Ciara Campbell (1998), Northern Ireland – United Kingdom, is currently studying BA Politics at Queen's University, Belfast. She volunteers within her local community as a youth work leader and is a member of the pro-European party Alliance. She was a participant of the 2017 capacity building 'Why we're stuck and how we want to get out of this' Capacity Building for the Post-Brexit Generation', gave a presentation on 'How to fight against illiberalism and defend European values' which will be posted on our website soon and she played a key role in drawing up the '[Manifesto for a better EU](#)'.

Socio-economic conditions are often assumed to be a cause of populism. However, right-wing populism is not caused by economic anxiety. Instead of caring about the bread, right-wing populism is more about the circus: what identity you have, rather than how much money. The cause of populism is fear. Right-wing populists are motivated by their fear of migration and terrorism linked to a strong distrust in democratic political institutions.

However, voters of different economic circumstances can be targeted differently. Wise right-wing populists can target the economic losers and winners of society at the same time. Losers can be targeted as the 'parasites who steal your social benefits and money' meanwhile winners can be targeted as 'the state is spending all its money on rich immigrants'. There is an idea of national identity behind this. Someone who supports populism is part of the nation and the rest are traitors who must be kicked out.

What about age? There is no one size all fit when it comes to the demographics of populists and those who vote for them. For right-wing populism, there is higher support among the older generations – for example, in the cases of Trump, Brexit and Geert Wilders. Populism has always been a part of the political process and is not a new phenomenon. It is an ideology of nostalgia. European populists want to return to the Golden Age of Europe – white, Christian, with traditional values. It never existed, but that does not stop them from believing it did and wanting it. Populism can use new tactics – for example, the use of Twitter by Donald Trump – but that does not mean it is new. On the flip side, this means that young anti-populists have more energy to resist populism because they have no nostalgia for the old days.

What about the case of Portugal? Portugal has a high level of anti-establishment emotion, but a low level of right wing populism. Portugal seems to be a special case: after 40 years of right-wing dictatorship, Portuguese are proud of being tolerant and inclusive. Diversity is part of the Portuguese identity and so there is less fear around migration than can be seen in other countries.

What about the role of Russia? There has been Russian interference in European (and elsewhere) elections. As to how effective it has been, no one can say or truly know. Russia wants to send a message that they are behind everything, because it increases their power. However, they cannot interfere in everything – for example, Macron won the French election instead of Le Pen.

After Crimea, Russia has had problems gaining access to mainstream political actors. Therefore, the Russians have extended their ties with populist right-wing and left-wing parties in Europe. This is for two reasons: they are tools to weaken the EU, and the fringe today is the mainstream tomorrow. Russian politicians believe that the EU is a 'puppet' of the United States of America and is not autonomous of its own accord. They believe Eurosceptic politicians will take over the EU and cause it to collapse.

What can be done about populism?

Populism is a natural part of the political process and can never entirely 'disappear' or 'be defeated'. Populists usually have democratic legitimacy because they are voted into government, never mind on how slim grounds. It is in government where populism becomes self-defeating. Opposition is far easier and simple than having to make decisions in government. Populists are forced to prove themselves to their voters, but often they cannot live up to their promises. Over time they are shown for who they really are: more spectacle than substance, and their power begins to crumble.

However, this is not always the case. Once populists are in power, they can channel the anti-elitism onto the international stage. For example, the popularity of a populist government can be maintained by pretending they are oppressed by the evil Brussels elite and that 'The People' must fight back against that.

It is difficult for populists to play the anti-establishment card when they are long-serving politicians. In the French case, Macron was a new player; meanwhile Le Pen was the 'official' populist who everyone already knew. New political faces are needed. The longer populist politicians are part of the political process, the lesser the chances that they can bring a surprise or a new appeal to the table.

Populist governments cannot take their anti-establishment rhetoric too far. They do not actually want the EU to collapse, but they still advocate conspiracy theories such as that the EU is deliberately undermining national sovereignty by letting in refugees. When it comes to Europe, populists claim to be its defenders. The issue is that their conception of what Europe is and what it should be is completely different to the mainstream perception.

The EU is not going to break up. There have been many changes in Europe in the past few decades, but in spite of that the percentage of populists is low. Brexit is the only case where populists have made a genuine threat to the EU. Brexit has shown that it is extremely difficult to ascertain the practical reality of separating from the EU. European integration is not easy to divert, never mind destroy. Populists know that if the EU breaks up, they will be the first victims.

Occasionally mainstream parties attempt to take votes away from right-wing populist parties by adopting their policy. This is never a good idea, for a variety of reasons. One is that mainstream parties legitimise radical views and shift the Overton window. Another is that it doesn't work. If you are part of the establishment, you cannot be the anti-establishment. Mainstream parties are the copy, not the original and, by being unauthentic, fall further into the populists' trap.

What should anti-populists do?

1. Accept that populism is part of the democratic conservation and will not disappear
2. Not stigmatise populists by labelling them fascists or Nazis when they are not, as this only increases their victim identity and black-and-white worldview
3. Realise that populists know that retaining power means playing by some of the rules and become limited when they are in government
4. There is a need for new tactics of arguing against populism, as old-school anti-fascism will not work against it

It is possible to be far-right without being populist. For example, there are hardcore Neo-Nazis who want power but do not have the support of the masses. Nor do they look for support of the masses; instead they discredit democracy and advocate violent measures. Populists look for democratic legitimacy. To call populists neo-Nazis only stigmatises them.

There is no magic wand that can be waved to destroy populism. In a pluralistic democratic system, ideas that are disliked must be tolerated, including populism. Populism will not 'be over' if inequalities are abolished or direct democracy installed. An inherent contradiction of democracy is that people hate the institutions whose representatives they themselves voted for. Populism is part of that.

One solution is better leadership. Europe needs a long-term vision. Politicians try to follow public opinion polls, but true leaders know that they have to be unpopular at times to ultimately achieve a popular result.