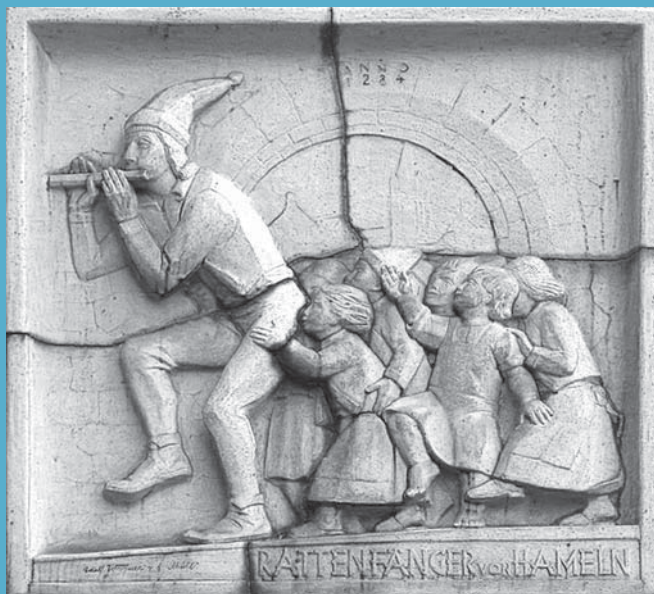


Populism, Populists, and the Crisis of Political Parties

A Comparison of Italy, Austria, and Germany 1990-2015

edited by

Günther Pallaver / Michael Gehler / Maurizio Cau



Società editrice il Mulino
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Preface

Hardly any other subject has had such a comparable meteoric career in political debates and academic discussion in European countries, the American continent, and beyond as the concept of populism. This boom is strongly connected to a deep uncertainty in and shock to the democratic systems, which, after the euphoric invocation of the “end of history” in the 1990s, has been linked to a crisis syndrome of various forms and shapes, spanning from the financial and refugee crisis to the crisis of the European Union as well as the all-encompassing globalization crisis. Within such heated debates, there is a need for cool-headed analysis and diagnosis. It is important to clearly differentiate between the polemic use and the scientific use of the concept, to study the politicians, movements, and practices subsumed under this concept in an interdisciplinary dialogue especially between political science and the humanities, and to create international comparisons. In this way, isolated phenomena can be placed into a comprehensive framework in order to identify typologies and similarities as well as in particular differences in the context and dynamics of development.

An interdisciplinary approach, historical depth, and international comparison—these central postulates of current research on populism formed the starting point for and a major focus of the international conference held at the Austrian Institute in Rome (ÖHI) in the autumn of 2015. Special thanks go to Michael Gehler for initiating this project as well as to Günther Pallaver for planning and organizing the conference together with Michael Gehler, the Istituto Storico Austriaco a Roma, the Istituto Storico Germanico di Roma, and the Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico in Trento of the Fondazione Bruno Kessler, which also accepted publish the proceedings.

Looking at Austria, Italy, and Germany has proven to be a fruitful and stimulating comparison due to their geographical proximity as well as their differences. These are due to the virulence and prominence of the populism phenomenon in the new millennium, which offers abundant material for analysis and raises a series of questions, and to their

different national and regional forms and developments of populism. The focus of the conference, the results of which are presented in this publication, once again confirmed the cooperation between the Istituto Storico Austriaco and the Istituto Storico Germanico, two institutions connected by a long and often interwoven history.

As the conference has furthermore shown, the city of Rome is especially suited as a starting point for interdisciplinary research since it is home to international institutes of the humanities with widely developed networks. We sincerely hope that this extraordinary potential for transnational research in the humanities will continue to be exploited in the future.

Martin Baumeister

Deutsches Historisches Institut in Rom
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Österreichisches Historisches Institut in Rom
Istituto Storico Austriaco a Roma

Rome, November 2017

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Introduction

by *Günther Pallaver, Michael Gebler, and Maurizio Cau*

The last decades have witnessed a renaissance and a new boom in the concept of populism. What was decisive for this trend was the electoral success of various populist political parties and leaders. Scholars of history and social sciences have attempted to define, delineate, and categorize populism, which has resulted in different theoretical approaches and explanatory models. One approach understands populism as a “thin centered” ideology, i.e. one that is slim and unfinished. A second approach views populism as a strategic concept for political mobilization primarily concentrated on three strategic aspects: policy choices, political organization, and forms of mobilization. A third approach describes populism as a form of communication based on the dichotomy between the positively perceived collective and the negatively perceived elites.

In public discourse, populism has become a catch-all term often understood as an expression of the uneasiness which a part of society feels toward representative democracy. Whenever a part of the population feels unrepresented or excluded, the various reactions evoked by this are today vaguely called “populism”. There are different types of exclusion, too, such as the exclusion of civil and fundamental rights (e.g. the right for non-citizens to vote) or social exclusion (e.g. unemployment and poverty).

Within these processes of societal “exclusion”, which can be traced back to various causes, political parties play a pivotal role. Yet, as a constitutive element of representative democracy, they have been under pressure for many years. Taken as a whole, we can observe a functional loss of parties due to changing societal, social, political, and economic frameworks, as well as a loss of their political legitimization to some extent. In addition to growing vertical mobility (e.g. social mobility or access to higher education) and horizontal mobility (e.g. regional

Translation by Greta Pallaver

mobility), the socioeconomic foundations are eroding, a fact that is associated with an increasing loss of political loyalties.

Parties are confronted with the dramatic erosion of traditional bonds caused by changes in the social structures, the electorate, and the value system which, in turn, has intensified competition. Furthermore, parties are increasingly exposed to public criticism, higher political dissatisfaction, and fluctuating protest voters. Although parties are gaining more power in the political system, at the same time they are more and more losing their legitimacy. They are losing their patina, no longer representing dedication, passion for the *iusta causa*, commitment, and principles, but instead displaying the aging signs of a complex and seasoned organization complete with material and personal interests.

Political parties are organizations, which guarantee that the structure of political systems works. However, the organizational models of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of which political parties are a part, have undergone deep transformations. The changes are visible in the metamorphosis of companies and their organizational dynamic within standardized mass production based on the logic of “Fordism”. The classic political parties understood as embodiments of traditions and values, identities, class, a sense of belonging, and conflict regarding a social order that corresponded to the “Fordist” organizational model align with each other today more and more in their respective party programs. This is shown by the Manifesto Project Database, which has collected and codified all party programs from the post-war period until today. It can be demonstrated that since the 1960s, the polarization on the left-right axis has decreased by almost 40%. As a consequence of this alignment in contents, parties face the criticism of increasing uniformity and detachment from “the population”. The reproach of the “forgotten person” alleges that parties and their representatives no longer take responsibility either for the institutions’ performance and effectiveness or for the wellbeing of the population, thus accusing the privileged “caste” of neglecting the interests of the “real people”.

With the end of the East-West conflict and of the system competition between capitalism and communism in 1989/90, systems and structures of social security and the welfare state were gradually dismantled. The years that followed saw deregulation, neoliberalism, outsourcing, etc. and led to a shrinking public sector as a source of employment while

simultaneously witnessing a surge in precarious employment conditions. The privatization of education and research, of the health, communication, and administrative sectors—to name a few—, as well as the market logic and profitability dominating these areas led to disorientation, transformations, and insecurities of societies. The established parties and the governments that they formed could not find relevant answers to the various crises and increasingly lost political representation and legitimacy. The consequences were a growing proletariat made up of academics and service workers, an increasing socially endangered middle class, and a disillusioned lower class. New poverty strengthened the perceptions of a society of “downward mobility”.

In some countries this resulted, among other things, in the massive loss of trust by citizens in parties and political institutions. At this interface, we see the appearance of populist parties which, in their own heterogeneity, address the uneasiness of the excluded people, or their perceived exclusion.

Populist parties of different types arose in Europe after 1945 in various waves, but mainly in the 1970s. The beginning was marked by the Swiss People’s Party (1971), followed by Front National (1972), the Danish People’s Party (1972), and the Norwegian Progress Party (1973) as well as Vlaams Bloc (1979) in Belgium. These were citizens’ protest parties, right-wing and anti-taxation parties. A second wave occurred at the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s. The Swedish Democrats were founded in 1988, the right-wing nationalist “Republicans” (1983) in Germany had some success, the Lega Nord in Italy (1989) became part of the government in the early 1990s.

The Union Treaty of Maastricht (1991/92) sped up the project of the European Single Market, the economic and monetary union, as well as competition, and spurred modernization. The deepening European integration elicited defense mechanisms, caused fears of social decline, and gave rise to national independence movements. The Anti-Federalist League opposing the Maastricht treaty was formed in 1991 in Great Britain and later developed into the United Kingdom Independence Party, the driving force behind the trend to Brexit consolidated with the 2016 referendum. In 1995, the populist party The Finns was founded. The banking, financial, and economic crises (2008/09) as well as the “refugee crisis” (2015/16) spurred a third wave of populist parties. The

movement Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West (PEGIDA) was formed in 2014 in Germany and grew rapidly until its decay in 2016/17. Older populist parties that had existed for some time, such as the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs in Austria, the Front National in France, the Partij voor der Vrijheid in the Netherlands, the Swiss People's Party, or the renamed Vlaamse Belang in Belgium profited from these far-reaching crises. At the same time, more than a dozen different new parties were founded. The Alternative für Deutschland, the Swedish Democrats, the newly named True Finns, or the extreme-right party Dawn of Direct Democracy in the Czech Republic profit from the "refugee crisis", while the Greek anti-EU party Syriza in turn profits from the international banking crisis and the prescribed German, or rather European, austerity policy. Parties that were partly critical of the EU and partly nationalistic were the 5 Star Movement in Italy and Podemos in Spain. These movements-turned-parties were united by an anti-elite stance, anti-establishment resentments, opposition toward the EU, and/or a specific nationalism. Such nationalism can be found mainly in Central and Eastern European countries such as in Hungary with Fidesz-KDNP and the anti-Semitic right-wing nationalist Jobbik, or in Poland with the national-conservative party Law and Justice (PiS).

This is only a roughly sketched picture of the frameworks within which discussions were held at the 2015 conference in Rome on "Populism, Populists, and the Crisis of Political Parties: A Comparison of Italy, Austria, and Germany 1990-2015". The selected countries lend themselves to comparison because all of them had populist parties/movements from early on, such as the Fronte dell'Uomo Qualunque (1944) in Italy. A common denominator that is missing in other countries is their Fascist or Nazi past and its connection to populist parties/movements in these countries: Fascism in Italy (1922-1943/45), "Austrofascism" in Austria (1934-1938), and National Socialism in Germany (1933-1945). The populism in the three countries shows an overlap with the Fascist and Nazi past. This applies to the Alternative für Deutschland and the FPÖ in relation to National Socialism (the latter party does not relate to "Austrofascism" with its Catholic character), but less to Italy, where the Fascist past is carried on in neofascist parties (Movimento Sociale Italiano/Alleanza Nazionale). Nevertheless, new populist parties like the Lega Nord, Forza Italia, or Movimento 5 Stelle also frequently display individual references to Fascist history, which includes downplaying the past.

Through the use of examples from Germany, Italy, and Austria, it is to be shown and discussed within the framework of this book to what extent a comparison of populist parties in Europe can also provide new knowledge in this context for redefining the term “populism”.

– In the first part “Historical Perspectives and Transformation Processes”, the articles analyze the role of populism within the political-historical context starting from the 1990s through 2015. After a general, broadly oriented introduction to the parallels and differences in the situations which have arisen over the course of history in these three countries within the European Union, further chapters are dedicated to the political methodology of populism as well as the question of how populism should be dealt with as a political phenomenon in Europe. Finally, the media landscapes as a very important surfboard for populist movements are analyzed, as are the breaks and continuities in the constitutional cultures.

– The second part of the book, “Political Actors Shaping the Populist Challenge”, is devoted to a comparison of the most important main players of political populism. The main focus here is above all else on Jörg Haider (Austria), Umberto Bossi, Silvio Berlusconi, and Gianfranco Fini (Italy), and Berndt Lucke (Germany), yet the “countermodel” to populism and its concepts are also studied through the example of Angela Merkel and Romano Prodi.

– In the concluding third part, “European Political Parties, Their Response to the Populist Challenge, and Their Treatment of Populism”, there is an analysis of how populism is dealt within each of the three nations by the most important political movements—the Christian Democrats, the Social Democrats, the Liberals, and the Greens.

From this comparison of the three countries, the book arrives at findings concerning the historical genesis of populist movements and their chances for success, but also concerning how populism in Europe politically compensates, how it can be counteracted, and how and to what extent populist movements can be politically integrated and made “positively” usable.

Some of the contributions in this volume reflect the status of the year 2015, when the conference about populism took place in Rome. Some of the contributions in this volume reflect the status of the year 2015, when the conference about populism took place in Rome. In the

meantime, in all three countries analyzed here, the right-wing populist parties were able to expand their voters and they have in part had a change of leadership. This holds true for the Alternative für Deutschland (German federal election 2017), to the Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (legislative election 2017), which forms the government together with the Austrian People's Party since December 2017; it further applies to the center-right coalition in Italy, mainly the parties Forza Italia, Lega Nord, Fratelli d'Italia, but also the 5 Star Movement (parliamentary elections 2018).

We would like to thank the many people who have contributed to this publication: institute director Martin Baumeister of the German Historical Institute in Rome; Andreas Gottsmann, director of the Austrian Historical Institute in Rome; directors Christoph Cornelißen and Paolo Pombeni of the Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico in Trento; the Institute for Modern and Contemporary Historical Research Vienna; the Institute of History at the University of Hildesheim; and the Department of Political Science at the University of Innsbruck. We would like to thank the translators Philipp Adorf, Philip Isenberg, Greta Pallaver, and Gavin Taylor and last but not least Chiara Zaroni Zorzi, editor-in-chief, and Friederike Oursin, from the editorial office of the Fondazione Bruno Kessler. Finally, we would like to thank our subsidy providers without whom this book could not have been published.

I. Historical Perspectives and Transformation Process

Different Paths toward Europe?

Germany, Italy, and Austria 1945-2009

by *Michael Gebler*

1. *Preliminary remarks*

The political development of Austria, Germany, and Italy after World War II and their relationship to each other is incomprehensible without knowledge of the nineteenth century, particularly if commonalities and differences are to be brought out. Particularly for the years from 1859 to 1938, the “Austria” factor played a role in German-Italian relations¹.

2. *Phases of development*

Six phases before 1945 may be characterized with highlights.

- a. Europe against the background of the principle of the nation-state:
Italy and Prussia as adversaries of the Hapsburg Monarchy (1859-1871)

The year 1866 saw both Italy and Prussia as victors—both found themselves in a state of war with the Hapsburg monarchy. The concept of the enemy coalesced: on one side, the alleged “prison of peoples”; on the other, the less popular “hegemony” in the German Confederation (Deutscher Bund).

Translation by Philip Isenberg

¹ R. LILL, *Geschichte Italiens in der Neuzeit*; J. PETERSEN, *Italien als Republik 1946-1987*, Stuttgart 1989; D. MÜNCH, *Einführung in die politische Geschichte Italiens*; N. TRANFAGLIA, *La Prima Guerra Mondiale e il fascismo*; S. ROMANO, *Guida alla politica estera italiana*; G.E. RUSCONI, *Deutschland – Italien. Italien – Deutschland*; R. CRISTIN (eds), *Vie parallele/ Parallele Wege*; F. HAUSMANN, *Kleine Geschichte Italiens*; A. DI MICHELE, *Storia dell'Italia repubblicana*; M. CLARK, *Modern Italy*; H. WOLLER, *Geschichte Italiens*; M. GEHLER, *Deutschland*; R. STEININGER - M. GEHLER, *Österreich im 20. Jahrhundert*, vol. 2.

- b. Far from a unified central Europe: Divergence in the fragile Triple Alliance (1882-1915) and adversaries in the World War I (1915-1918)

In 1882, the Kingdom of Italy joined with Austria-Hungary and the German Reich to form the Triple Alliance², which was fragile because Italy did not feel itself to be equal. Its change in alliances in 1915 was perceived as a “Latin breach of faith” and a “disgraceful betrayal”³.

- c. The continued disintegration of Europe: Common revisionism in Germany, Italy, and Austria (1919/20-1931/32)

The Treaties of Saint Germain-en-Laye and Versailles in 1919 generated aggressive, antidemocratic revisionism in Austria and in the German Reich. Italy was also dissatisfied with the postwar order: the Italian victory with little territorial growth had allegedly been “mutilated” by the Allies. Austria, on the other hand, had to swallow massive losses of territory.

- d. The weakening of the center of Europe through internal crisis regimes: Italy as the first Fascist dictatorship—Austria and Germany follow later (1922-1933/34)

In all three societies, there was anti-Marxism, civil war, a militarization of the societies through militias, and a strong left-wing opposition. While Fascism achieved power with Benito Mussolini in 1922 in Italy, this was only possible for Adolf Hitler eleven years later. Also in 1933, Austria experienced “parliament shutting itself down” under Engelbert Dollfuß⁴.

² F. FELLNER, *Der Dreibund. Europäische Diplomatie vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg*; H. AFFLERBACH, *Der Dreibund*.

³ O. ÜBEREGGER - N. LABANCA (eds), *Krieg in den Alpen*; O. ÜBEREGGER - H.J.W. KUPRIAN (eds), *Der Erste Weltkrieg im Alpenraum*.

⁴ E. NOLTE, *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche*; St. BREUER, *Nationalismus und Faschismus*; A. BAUERKÄMPER, *Der Faschismus in Europa*; W. SCHIEDER, *Faschistische Diktaturen*.

e. Active in the self-destruction of Europe: Together into World War II (1935-1943)

Starting from the mid-1930s, Italy pursued a policy of recolonization and imperialism in Ethiopia (1935/36)⁵. Germany and Italy pulled together in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and supported the nationalist military around General Francisco Franco. In 1936, the “Rome-Berlin Axis” was formed, which led to the unleashing of a foreign policy with totalitarian ideology, a dismantling of international solidarity, and the collapse of the European system of states. Just like Hitler (1933-1935), Mussolini (1935-1937) also withdrew from the League of Nations. A “brutal friendship” developed. The Anschluss annexing Austria to the German Reich was tolerated by the Duce who, in so doing, received the assurance from Hitler of the Brenner Pass being an “eternal border” between Austria and Italy⁶. Both began too late to discover the idea of Europe for the attainment of their war goals in order to get the dominated peoples on their side⁷.

f. Italy’s change of alliances, the path of the German Reich, and the “Ostmark” in decline (1943-1945)

After Mussolini fell and was arrested, Hitler had him rescued. From the North as far down as Rome, Italy was occupied by German forces, and a Fascist regime was set up by the grace of Hitler in Salò on Lake Garda⁸. The deployment of partisans against the German occupation regime and their participation in the severing of Italy from the Fascist regime and its German alliance partner are not disputed, particularly since it concerns less a battle for national liberation than a civil war that was ideologically motivated by both sides⁹. Italian society vacillated between

⁵ A. MATTIOLI, *Entgrenzte Kriegsgewalt*; G. BROGINI KÜNZI, *Italien und der Abessinienkrieg*; L. KLINKHAMMER - A. OSTI GUERAZZI - T. SCHLEMMER (eds), *Die “Achse” im Krieg*.

⁶ F.W. DEAKIN, *The Brutal Friendship*; M. GEHLER, “... wie äußerst empfindlich die vor den Toren Italiens geschaffene Lage ist”.

⁷ H.W. NEULEN, *Europa und das 3. Reich*.

⁸ L. KLINKHAMMER, *Zwischen Bündnis und Besatzung*.

⁹ J. HOLLAND, *Italy’s Sorrow*.

adaptation, collaboration, and resistance¹⁰. That is why the dismissal of the Duce by the King of Italy and his murder by partisans took place. The assassination attempt against Hitler on July 20, 1944 on the part of the resistance in the Wehrmacht leadership failed. Therefore, it was no more a chance of opposition and resistance on a broader basis in the totalitarian Nazi state against its repression apparatus of elimination¹¹. In the wake of the Russian advance, flight and expulsion from the East began. Neither Austria nor Italy experienced comparable quantitative losses of population or forced migration.

3. *Developments after 1945/1949*

- a. Together in the camp of the unsuccessful and the losers: Italy's farewell to the monarchy and its peace treaty—occupation, division, and the founding of two states in Germany and the reestablishment of Austria (1945-1948/49)

The age of European dictatorships turned into a global war and ended with disastrous military defeats for them. Germany and Italy had to follow the path of rehabilitation. A shorter route lay before Italy in any case, since the proportions, losses, and consequences of the German defeat differed substantially from those of Italy. Germany was divided and the Federal Republic paid reparations for decades to, among others, Jewish victim organizations, the State of Israel, and in the end to prisoners of war and forced laborers from Eastern and Central Europe. In contrast to the period of reparations after 1919, these payments took place voluntarily¹². In the peace treaty of February 10, 1947, the victorious powers compelled Italy to give up its colonies in Libya, Ethiopia, and modern-day Eritrea. The Fascist conquests from before and during the war were also lost.

In all three countries, Christian Democratic party leaders (Konrad Adenauer, Alcide De Gasperi, and Leopold Figl)¹³ were at the helm,

¹⁰ L. KLINKHAMMER, *Die italienische Gesellschaft zwischen Widerstand und Kollaboration*.

¹¹ I. KERSHAW, *Das Ende*.

¹² C. GOSCHLER, *Schuld und Schulden*.

¹³ M. GUIOTTO, *Der Europagedanke*.

and all of them had been victims of Fascist or Nazi persecution. In Italy, there was an election to a constitutional assembly with, at the same time, a referendum on the future form of the state, which turned out to barely favor the republic over the House of Savoy. The experiences with the dictatorship led to a consensus for a constitution and against Fascism¹⁴.

The political end of Nazi Germany was sealed by the capitulation of the Wehrmacht. The breach with history was deeper and more massive than the end of the war in 1918, and the break in 1945 in Germany was much more formative for the political culture than in Italy or Austria. All areas east of the Oder and the Neißé were lost, and the rest of Germany was divided into four Occupation Zones by the victorious Four Powers that took over the overall responsibility for Berlin, which had likewise been divided up into four sectors, and for “Germany as a whole”. Those chiefly responsible for the Nazi system were put on trial before the International Military Tribunal (IMT) in Nuremberg 1946 and sentenced to prison terms or death. There were no such court proceedings for the Fascist war criminals of Italy—the reckoning followed at times spontaneously, at times purposefully, with the final stroke being drawn quickly¹⁵.

The fast *epurazione* (purge) contributed to not coming to terms with the past and, with respect to Fascism, to an unreflected or even glossing-over policy of history¹⁶. The significance of Fascism was minimized and the anti-Fascist resistance was mythologized¹⁷.

After the entry into Austria by the German Wehrmacht in 1938, former Chancellor Renner (in office 1918/19) as a Social Democrat gave his “Yes” to the Anschluss, even though he did not approve of the methods. The twenty-year “wandering of the Austrian people” was now at an end, and the “sad interlude from 1866 to 1918” was now history. In the Anschluss, he saw the right of self-determination realized for Austria for which he had spoken up in Saint Germain 1919. Renner only rid himself of this idea after the Allied Moscow Declaration of November 1, 1943, which was to promise the liberation and indepen-

¹⁴ H. WOLLER (ed.), *Italien und die Großmächte*.

¹⁵ H. WOLLER, *Die Abrechnung mit dem Faschismus*.

¹⁶ A. MATTIOLI, “Viva Mussolini!”.

¹⁷ L. KLINKHAMMER, *Der Resistenza-Mythos*; F. FOCARDI, *La guerra della memoria*.

dence of Austria. Starting from this, he propagated the victim thesis, even though Austria's own contribution to self-liberation was a small one. For Stalin, to whom Renner had skillfully offered his services in 1945, it was decisive that he stood up for Austria's complete independence and thus, in so doing, repudiated the ideas of the Anschluss. Thus Renner became the head of a provisional government which formed the basis for state unity in spite of the division into zones¹⁸. Recent research has put the image of "Austria as a victim" into extremely relative terms. Even if the state had been a victim of Hitlerian aggression beyond all doubt, the assent of many Austrians to the Anschluss had in fact been a factor. The perpetrators may be personified by the "Eichmann men"¹⁹.

The memory cultures of the three countries should both be accentuated completely differently and also take a different course²⁰. Thus, the image of the "evil Germans" had a lengthy historico-political boom, while at the same time, the idea of the "good Italians" was nurtured, which in the meantime has been called into question by more recent research²¹. In between, neutral Austria with "Mr. Karl", who was symbolized by Josef Qualtinger in the person of Karl Renner and Kurt Waldheim²², convinced opportunists who had adapted to the Nazi regime or "did their duty".

b. Setting the course for western integration: The Federal Republic of Germany and Italy as the pioneers of Western Europe and Austria's position of the center (1949-1969)

With the East-West conflict, Italy and Germany were transformed into arenas of conflict between the USSR and the United States. One important reason for closer cooperation resulted from the perceived threat of communism. The connecting ideologies were anticommunism and the idea of Europe. Germany was divided in terms of state and

¹⁸ S. NASKO, *Karl Renner*, pp. 286-333, 356-388.

¹⁹ H. SAFRIAN, *Eichmann's Men*.

²⁰ C. CORNELISSEN, *Erinnerungskulturen*.

²¹ C. MOOS, *Die "guten" Italiener und die Zeitgeschichte*; A. DEL BOCA, *Italiani, brava gente?*; F. FOCARDI, *L'immagine del cattivo tedesco*.

²² M. GEHLER - H. SICKINGER, *Politische Skandale*.

territory, but Italy was also split with regard to traditional ideology, domestic policy, and social policy.

Under Prime Minister De Gasperi (in office 1945-1953) of the Democrazia Cristiana (DC)²³, Italy joined the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) in 1948, both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Council of Europe in 1949²⁴, and, like Germany, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1952. De Gasperi even coupled the project of the European Defense Community (EDC) with the plan for a European Political Community (EPC), which, however, failed on August 30, 1954, due to resistance by the French National Assembly. It was to be the year of death not only of the European Political Union (EPU) but of De Gasperi himself²⁵.

Ten years after the end of the war, Austria bid farewell to a “common German destiny”. In 1955, by simultaneously adopting a State Treaty and neutrality, a model that was not recommended for Germany²⁶, and then in 1960 with its membership in EFTA, it left behind the complex of blocs and camps that surrounded divided Germany (FRG = NATO = EEC and GDR = Warsaw Pact = COMECON).

Along with Italy, Austria—in spite of its expressed “perpetual” neutrality—became a member of the United Nations. In 1955, Italy also joined the Western European Union (WEU) and then the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1958²⁷. The Federal Republic of Germany came to the United Nations much later. Italy and Austria thus had a head start in internationalization. The two German states only achieved the leap to the United Nations some eighteen years later, in 1973.

²³ A. CANAVERO, *Alcide De Gasperi*; E. CONZE - G. CORNI - P. POMBENI (eds), *Alcide De Gasperi: un percorso europeo*.

²⁴ M. BROSIO, *Diari di Washington*.

²⁵ D. PREDÀ, *Sulla soglia dell'unione*; R. MAGAGNOLI, *Italien und die Europäische Verteidigungsgemeinschaft*; D. PREDÀ, *Alcide De Gasperi*; T. DI MAIO, *Alcide De Gasperi e Konrad Adenauer*; S. LORENZINI - B. TAVERNI (eds), *Alcide De Gasperi e la stabilizzazione della Repubblica*.

²⁶ M. GEHLER, *Modellfall für Deutschland?*.

²⁷ A. VARSORI, *La Cenerentola d'Europa?*; B. THOMAS, *Die Europa-Politik Italiens*.

Particularly in the first half of the 1950s, West German-Italian relations were especially close; this was the period when De Gasperi and Chancellor Adenauer (in office 1949-1963) were active in bringing Western Europe together²⁸. Numerous commonalities connected them: having been born in border regions, the Christian faith, a connection with political Catholicism, a close relationship with the United States, and uncompromising anticommunism²⁹ that ruled out an understanding with the East, let alone a reconciliation with Soviet Russia and its allied countries, which in West Germany only began with Chancellor Willy Brandt.

Over decades, the DC was the strongest political force in Italian postwar history. As the moderate Catholic people's party, it provided nearly all of the heads of government from De Gasperi to Giulio Andreotti and was associated with the Italian economic miracle. A serious challenge to it came repeatedly from the second strongest political force, the Partito Comunista Italiana (PCI) with its leaders, the Stalinist Palmiro Togliatti and the Eurocommunist Enrico Berlinguer³⁰.

During the Italian *miracolo economico*, the PCI broadened its influence even further and came to power at the municipal and regional level, the "red belt" in Tuscany, Umbria, and Emilia Romagna. At the national level, the PCI scored constant successes in all elections from 1946 to 1976. The Communists had more than two million members and at times gathered as much as 30% of the vote. In stark contrast to Germany and Austria, it was thus the most powerful communist party in Western Europe, although it always lagged behind the DC. In 1984, the PCI, which pursued a "Eurocommunism" that was detached from Moscow, succeeded for the first and only time in becoming the strongest party in Italy. With the elections for the European Parliament, the party achieved 33% of the vote and finished ahead of the DC by a nose. The exaggerated fear of a "red" takeover of power remained

²⁸ H.-P. SCHWARZ, *Adenauer und Europa*; P. CRAVERI, *De Gasperi*; A. CANAVERO - P. POMBENI - G. BATTISTI - G. VECCHIO, *Dal Trentino all'esilio in patria*; F. MALGERI, *Dal fascismo alla democrazia*; P.L. BALLINI, *Dalla costruzione della democrazia alla "nostra patria Europa"*.

²⁹ U. CORSINI - K. REPGEN (eds), *Konrad Adenauer e Alcide De Gasperi*; T. DI MAIO, *Alcide De Gasperi e Konrad Adenauer*.

³⁰ S. PONS, *Berlinguer*.

virulent in spite of the policy of détente in the Europe of the 1970s. On the part of the USA, the main ally of Italy during the Cold War, there were repeatedly misgivings that with Communist participation in the government in the sense of the *compromesso storico* that was already contemplated by Aldo Moro, a domino effect could take hold in Western Europe. Limited by the strategy of the exclusion of the Communists, the participation of smaller parties in the government was necessary, which repeatedly led to replacements. In spite of the frequent changes of government, there was a high degree of continuity in the personnel of Italian government policy. Nevertheless, Italy remained deeply divided in political and social terms by the polarity between the DC and the PCI³¹.

In contrast to the situation in Italy, in West Germany the Communists were not tolerated and in 1956 were banned by the state. They therefore had no chance at all to carry out a shift toward Europe the way the PCI did with its program of “Eurocommunism”. On the other hand, in Germany an arrangement could be found in the relationship of work and capital by, among other things, participation in the ECSC and a juridification of relations, the high degree of organizational density by special interest groups (unified trade unions, company associations, and chambers of commerce and industry), and cooperative labor relations. In Italy, by contrast, there were partisan unions and strong differences within the company camp. Ludwig Erhard, economic minister in the Adenauer cabinet and later on his successor as chancellor (1963-1966) became an advocate of the “social market economy” with the slogan “prosperity for all”, and thus he was also associated with the “German economic miracle”, which left no opportunity for the Communists. The “wave of gluttony” and “wave of dressing” that was used to describe the German economic miracle in consumer terms (*Fress- und Bekleidungs-welle*) were followed by a “wave of travel”, particularly to Italy. A social policy aimed at compromise (“burden sharing”) and the necessary integration of millions of refugees and exiles were the prominent achievements of the young West German republic. Adenauer’s primary matter of foreign policy concern was attaining sovereignty for the Western German state, which he achieved through the process of Western integration, whereby he consciously set aside the question

³¹ C. JANSEN, *Italien seit 1945*, pp. 65-89, 108-129.

of German unity. Like Italy, the Federal Republic of Germany was a founding member of the ECSC and the EEC. With the ratification of the Paris Agreements in 1955, Adenauer achieved a sort of “internal sovereignty”, the occupation associations were transformed into allied troops, and the Federal Republic of Germany became an “occupied ally” (Hermann-Josef Rupieper)³². Early on, the German chancellor launched “rearmament” which, although it was encouraged by the Korean War, provoked a broad defensive front by the *Ohne-mich-Bewegung* (the Without-Me-Movement) which, however, changed nothing in the Federal Republic of Germany becoming a NATO member. The former occupying powers now functioning as protecting powers. The USA received its own logistically relevant locations and military bases on German territory.

Authority, discipline, obedience, and obsequiousness were no longer asked of younger people in the second half of the 1960s. Critics of society directed themselves against the Nazi past of their fathers that had “not been come to terms with”, the emergency laws, the US war crimes in Vietnam, the capitalist system in absolute terms, and the exploitation of the “Third World” by the West. The protest movement was carried by the “1968 generation”, which had its articulation forums and flashpoints not only at German universities, but at those in Italy, as well, while things were comparatively quieter at the counterparts in Austria. Through 1966, an extremely stable government system prevailed in Austria consisting of a grand coalition between the ÖVP and the SPÖ with Christian democratic chancellors (Leopold Figl, Julius Raabe, and Alfons Gorbach). From 1966 to 1970, there was even an ÖVP single party government under the pro-European chancellor and Christian democrat Josef Klaus³³, which was then followed by the years of the SPÖ single party government under Bruno Kreisky (1970-1983)³⁴.

In terms of government policy, a change also occurred in Germany. In the grand coalition under Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger (in office 1966/1969), the social democrats with Willy Brandt achieved govern-

³² H.-J. RUPIEPER, *Der besetzte Verbündete*.

³³ R. KRIECHBAUMER - F. SCHAUSBERGER - H. WEINBERGER (eds), *Die Transformation der österreichischen Gesellschaft*.

³⁴ O. RATHKOLB, *Die Kreisky Ära*; H. FISCHER, *Die Kreisky-Jahre*.

ment participation for the first time³⁵. In the social-liberal Brandt-Scheel coalition (1969/1974) under the motto “Risk more democracy!”, the SPD then became the determining force. German democracy solidified with comprehensive reforms.

Italy, Austria, and the Federal Republic of Germany stood for stability in Western Europe, with Italy as far as stagnation and patronage through the “permanent government party” of the DC, while the political system of the Federal Republic of Germany was more constant in terms of the duration of a government and thus also possessed of greater continuity. In Italy, a diversified, polarized multiparty system developed with obstructed alternation. Membership in NATO and the transatlantic connections were viewed by Rome as guarantors for warding off the danger of communism in domestic politics³⁶. For Bonn, that held true only in the foreign policy and defense policy sense.

c. The 1970s: A policy of détente abroad and terrorism at home

The 1970s began as the period of Red Army Faction (RAF) terrorism in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany and as the *anni di piombo* (years of lead) in that of Italy³⁷. With the neighbor to the south, the left-wing extremist terrorism of the Brigate Rosse (the Red Brigades)³⁸ mixed with bloody assassinations by neofascist extremists in which the secret services were also involved. They moved the political landscape of Italy into a state of permanent tension in order to prevent an alleged or actual participation in the government by the Communists. Some prior history of the completely consciously polarized scenario can be seen in the dealings with the attacks in South Tyrol in the 1960s, where both domestic and foreign secret services already romped about and made use of Alto Adige, as the Italians called the province, as an experimental field and a laboratory for their counteractions, even though there was no “red danger” there whatsoever, but in addition to

³⁵ C. MASALA, *Italia und Germania*.

³⁶ R.N. GARDNER, *Mission Italy*.

³⁷ W. KRAUSHAAR (ed.), *Die RAF*; J. HÜRTER, *Von deutscher “Härte” und italienischer “fermezza”*.

³⁸ T. HOF, *Vom italienischen “Robin Hood” zum “Staatsfeind Nr. 1”*.

the local activists and extremists, there were also those from Germany and Austria who represented a terrorist threat to the Italian state³⁹.

In Germany, the RAF⁴⁰ carried out attacks against leading figures of the system with fatal results, but in contrast to Italy, ministers or even a prime minister did not have to pay with their lives. The Italian military secret services as well as the Gladio organization⁴¹, run by NATO and the US foreign secret service, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), as well as the secret lodge Propaganda Due (P2), were involved with the maintaining of the cited strategy of tension and were associated with assassinations—also of civilians. There were no such excesses or intrigues in postwar West Germany⁴². In parallel to the reforms of the social-liberal coalition governments (Brandt-Scheel, and Schmidt-Genscher) in the Federal Republic of Germany, social reforms were also carried out in Italy in the 1970s (the legalization of divorce and abortion). As a result of a new concordat in 1984, Catholicism lost its status as the state religion of Italy.

For Austria, terrorism was also a problem with respect to both domestic and foreign policy. The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) had moved its headquarters from Geneva to Vienna in 1965, and on December 21, 1975, a conference of petroleum ministers meeting there was interrupted by an attack by Palestinian terrorists⁴³. The Austrian federal government under Bruno Kreisky in Vienna was the first western one to accredit a diplomatic representative of the PLO in 1980. At the latest by the 1970s, Austria was no longer an “island of the happy”⁴⁴. The transit camp at Schönau Castle—from which during the years following the World War II, around 200,000 Jews from the Soviet Union were able to emigrate—was managed by the Jewish Agency. But after a hostage-taking incident, it was closed⁴⁵.

³⁹ C. FRANCESCHINI, *Zwischen Rom, Wien und Langley*.

⁴⁰ K. PFLIEGER, *Die Rote Armee Fraktion*.

⁴¹ D. GANSER, *Gli ederciti segreti della Nato*; D. GANSER, *NATO's Secret Armies*.

⁴² R. ISEL, *Terrorjahre*.

⁴³ M. FALLAH-NODEH, *Österreich und die OPEC-Staaten*, pp. 10-11, 16-17.

⁴⁴ J. BUNZL, *Gewalt ohne Grenzen*, pp. 85 ff.

⁴⁵ H. THALBERG, *Die Nahostpolitik*, p. 300.

Targeted crisis management was required of the governments in Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany not only with regard to the fight against terrorism⁴⁶, but also in economic policy, above all else with respect to the consequences of the oil price shocks in 1973/74 and 1979. After years of economic growth, a period of recession followed with growing unemployment figures. Only during the course of the 1980s would new growth once again change the development in a positive direction.

- d. Continued unification of Western Europe as a common goal: Italy and Germany as drivers and Austria as an outsider and silent partner of integration (the 1980s)

In the 1980s, few German politicians demonstrated such lively interest in the care of friendly relations with their Italian colleagues as Helmut Kohl⁴⁷, within the framework of the European People's Party (EPP) with Giulio Andreotti (DC), and Hans-Dietrich Genscher (FDP) with the Italian foreign minister and Christian democrat Emilio Colombo⁴⁸. Within that context, the change in coalition in Bonn in 1982 from the SPD-FDP to a coalition led by the CDU/CSU-FDP had a positive effect upon the integration policy that was jointly pursued⁴⁹.

As early as 1972, Austria, along with the other EFTA countries, was able to conclude free trade agreements with the European Communities (the EEC and ECSC) which entered into force in 1973 and helped redirect the trade from the small free trade zone to the "Common Market". In the European Monetary System (EMS), which had been achieved between Helmut Schmidt and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Austria, as EC Commission President Roy Jenkins made known to Kreisky, was "in the convoy". The schilling and the deutschmark were paired as twins. Austria was a secret player in the EMS as a hard currency country. The first prudent and timid attempts at rapprochement with

⁴⁶ J. HÜRTER, *Anti-Terrorismus-Politik*; T. HOF, *Staat und Terrorismus*.

⁴⁷ H. STARK, *Helmut Kohl*, pp. 145-178, 179-230.

⁴⁸ U. LAPPENKÜPER, *Die deutsche Europapolitik*; U. ROSENGARTEN, *Die Genscher-Colombo-Initiative*.

⁴⁹ E. GADDUM, *Die deutsche Europapolitik*.

the EC occurred as early as the years from 1983 to 1986 under the SPÖ-FPÖ little coalition⁵⁰.

Italy's ambassador to Bonn for many years, Vittorio Luigi Ferraris, assessed German-Italian relations⁵¹ during the 1980s as positive on the whole: both countries moved within the international scene on the same wavelength. There were of course differences in interests, but the primary matters of concern could be laid out in harmony: starting from the commitment by Chancellor Schmidt in favor of Italy's entry into the EMS to the determined Italian decision to participate in NATO's modernization program, that is, the Double Track Decision of 1979. Italy's determination in both decisions corresponded to German interests. Ferraris goes so far as to say that Bonn considered Rome's support to be imperative and therefore urgently necessary. The idea to combine the various European institutions and bodies into a single, legally binding act had already been picked up by Foreign Minister Colombo as early as July 1981 in Bonn and by Chancellor Schmidt in September 1981 in Rome, as Ferraris has made clear⁵². The negotiations were successful and were continued in the Solemn Declaration on European Union (the Stuttgart Declaration of 1983), leading to the Single European Act (SEA). After this European initiative, the relationship between Kohl and Andreotti stagnated and went on to experience cracks.

- e. Cooperation and juxtaposition: German unification, political skepticism, and public agreement in Austria and Italy. Maastricht as a solution (1989-1993)

German unification was thoroughly welcomed and very much approved of by both the Austrian⁵³ and Italian population and public at large⁵⁴, in contrast to the intellectuals, politicians, and scholars. With their Protestant-Saxon-urban revolution, the East Germans brought about

⁵⁰ M. GEHLER, *Der lange Weg nach Europa*.

⁵¹ L.V. FERRARIS, *Deutsch-italienische Beziehungen in den 1980er Jahren*.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 248-249.

⁵³ M. GEHLER, *Eine Außenpolitik der Anpassung*, pp. 520-522.

⁵⁴ See D. CUCCIA, *Italien und die deutsche Einheit*.

the collapse of SED rule⁵⁵. The Kohl government, which was clearly oriented toward German unification, viewed itself as having its course confirmed by the Volkskammer election in East Germany of March 18, 1990, in which the Allianz für Deutschland with the East German Christian democrat Lothar de Maizière triumphed. By July 1, 1990, a German currency, economic, and social union was established. This, along with the unification treaty that was ratified by the Volkskammer, the Bundestag, and the Bundesrat formed the basis for German unification that was carried out on October 3, 1990. The external aspects of unity were negotiated in the Treaty on the Final Settlement With Respect to Germany or the “Two Plus Four Treaty” (Vertrag zur abschließenden Regelung in Bezug auf Deutschland), which was to enter into force in 1991. The imbalances in power between Italy and Germany became clear when Genscher expressed to his counterpart Gianni De Michelis upon the latter’s request to wish to have a say in the Two Plus Four, “You are not part of the game!”⁵⁶.

Andreotti and De Michelis were anything but enthusiastic or happy about German unification. Ideas about Central Europe from bygone eras arose. These included the Rome Protocols of 1934 (Italy-Austria-Hungary) and were expanded with the new term Central European Initiative (CEI) from the “Quadrangonale” to the “Pentagonale”. What was striven for was specifically an Italian-Austrian-Czechoslovakian-Hungarian-Yugoslavian cooperation concept in order to set up a counterweight against the supposedly threatening growth of German power in the center of Europe⁵⁷.

But the realities looked different: The right-wing party Die Republikaner, which had been formed by Franz Schönhuber as a result of two billion deutschmark credits that had been granted to the GDR by Bavarian premier Franz-Josef Strauß (CSU) and which entered the European Parliament, did not profit from German unification. Quite the contrary: it lost influence and sank into meaninglessness. In the 1990s, Germany proved to be not nearly menacing or strong enough to exert hegemony over Europe, as it was too occupied with managing internal unity,

⁵⁵ K. BLASCHKE, *Die “sächsische” Revolution von 1989*.

⁵⁶ H. MÖLLER - I.D. PAUTSCH (eds), *Die Einheit*.

⁵⁷ E. BRIX, *Die Mitteleuropapolitik von Österreich und Italien*.

that is, with the social, ecological, and economic questions of German unification. Starting from 1991, Yugoslavia was already on the brink of collapse. In 1992, Czechoslovakia experienced a split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. As a result of urgently necessary obligations for internal reform, Austria and Italy proved to be too weak to be able to put forward an effective alternative scenario in the long run to growing German potential. The consent of the victorious powers of the World War II with the question of German unification was tied to the binding commitment of the German federal government to continue to fully and completely support the development of European unity and to accept the remaining reserved rights of the three Western powers⁵⁸.

f. Domestic challenges, problems, and crises: Obstructed and inhibited action for Europe in the second half of the 1990s

In Italy, massive, radical changes occurred in domestic politics in the 1990s. In 1992, substantial corruption and party financing scandals such as *Tangentopoli* (Bribesville) and *Mani pulite* (Clean Hands) were revealed, which resulted in a broad-reaching deconstruction of the political system and brought about a complete reorganization of the party landscape. The end of the East-West conflict led to the erosion of the political culture and plunged the country into a deep crisis of orientation. Christian democrats, socialists, liberals, and republicans who had ruled for decades ended their existence as independent parties. It became clear how greatly the political structure of Italy had profited from anticommunism and the East-West conflict that was connected with it. In terms of (party) politics, the postwar period only came to an end in the 1990s, not only in Germany, but also in Italy. Out of the PCI, the social democratic-acting Partito Democratico della Sinistra (PDS) developed. Numerous left-wing parties then went on to emerge from this. In the North, the aggressive and secessionist-oriented Lega Nord under the leadership of Umberto Bossi developed in the 1990s out of an atmosphere of opposition and a protest stance against the corrupt politics of Rome. The mixed majority and proportional electoral law with an exclusion clause that was tried out for the first time in 1994 made the uncertainties of government policy even more clear.

⁵⁸ G.H. GORNIG, *Drei-Mächte-Rechte in Deutschland*.

A coalition led by the upstart, media czar, and “Winter King” Silvio Berlusconi was able to push its way into the vacuum that came into existence through the implosion of the Italian party system with Forza Italia, which had only been founded a few months before the election date. It managed to establish itself right from the start as the strongest “party” and almost come from nowhere. But Berlusconi’s alliance with the Lega Nord and the Alleanza Nazionale, which had grown out of the neofascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), broke up right away⁵⁹.

A center-left coalition under the leadership of the former Christian Democrat Romano Prodi governed starting in 1996. For the first time in Italy’s history, a (reform) Communist minister participated. The consistent policy of cutbacks opened up for Italy’s acceptance into the euro zone. But the elections of 2001 allowed Berlusconi’s alliance to once again decide for itself. After five years in office, he was voted out of office and had to once again admit defeat by Prodi. In mid-May 2006, a candidate of Prodi’s, Giorgio Napolitano, was then elected president of the Republic. For the first time, the president was a former PCI member. Such an outcome would have been unthinkable for Germany starting out from a lack of personnel and political correctness and completely inconceivable for Austria from a lack of political support.

In spite of constitutional reforms, Italy’s structural problems remained broadly unsolved (educational policy, health care, criminality in business life, the North-South divide, the pension system, national debt, a lack of tax collection, delays in the justice system, intransigence of administration, and centralism of the finance management). In addition, over the course of the 1990s, the country which had traditionally been a source of emigrants was confronted with by an influx of a million foreigners from the Maghreb and Mashriq.

In Germany, on the other hand, in spite of the year of radical changes in 1989/90, there was continuity in coalition and government policy with the CDU/CSU and the FDP up until 1998. In the first Germany-wide election for the Bundestag on December 2, 1990, and then again in 1994, the Christian democratic-liberal coalition under the leadership of Helmut Kohl, which was aided by the unification bonus, was able to make its own decisions with the elections. With the clear support of

⁵⁹ C. RUZZA - L. BALBO, *Italian Populism*.

the federal government, the “EU Eastern Enlargement” was decided upon and then implemented under the Red-Green Coalition (Gerhard Schröder-Joschka Fischer) during the years from 1999 to 2004/2007, even against resistance within the EU⁶⁰.

The priority up to that time was German domestic policy and the “building-up of the East” which, in the initial unification euphoria, had been drastically underestimated with its financial burdens in the billions. In the “new German states” a modernization of the infrastructure began, while in the old Federal Republic of Germany, the status quo continued to prevail in this regard. In Eastern Germany, new industrial operations were set up and market-economy structures were massively forced through the use of the Treuhandanstalt (a government agency set up in the former East Germany to privatize companies). The process of economic reconstruction took longer than expected. The unemployment rate remained far higher than in the other states. With the reduction of the upswing that was associated with unification, the massive transfer payments for the adjustment of the standard of living made clear the reform bottleneck in the Federal Republic of Germany during the Kohl era (1982-1998). The emigration of young citizens and the depopulation of small towns and rural areas generated a demographic problem in the Eastern German states that were lacking in infrastructure. Right-wing extremist and neo-Nazi tendencies became noticeable, but there were above all else also successes for the successor to the SED, the Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (PDS), which was represented in the Bundestag and in the governments of all of the new states.

And out of the need for internal reform (reforms of the health services, pension system, national railway, and other nationalized industries), the grand coalition of the SPÖ and ÖVP, which had been governing since 1987 under Franz Vranitzky and Alois Mock, decided upon entry into the EC in 1989—even before the fall of the Iron Curtain and with an expressed reservation of neutrality. There was a need for internal preparations and convincing that lasted many years until the negotiations could begin in 1993⁶¹. Nevertheless, the referendum on EU entry in 1994 brought a resounding majority of 66.6%, making possi-

⁶⁰ M. GEHLER, *Revolutionäre Ereignisse*.

⁶¹ M. SCHEICH, *Tabubruch*.

ble Austria's EU membership in 1995 and speeding along the German nationalist and right-wing populist Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (which had been led by Jörg Haider since the Innsbruck party conference in 1986) from success to success until it nearly hit the 30% mark in the Nationalrat elections of 1999. With an air that was at first German nationalist—Haider had called the Austrian nation an “ideologically deformed child”—the profile of the FPÖ was transformed against the background of a “petition for a referendum on foreigners” under the motto of “Austria first” into an Austrian nationalist right-wing populist protest movement party in 1993⁶².

The boycott measures against a single state by the EU 14, which took place in 2000 following the formation of the ÖVP-FPÖ government⁶³, led to massive domestic political condemnations and to a strengthening of the FPÖ position. After the lifting of the “sanctions” in the same year, the party lost all of the elections—except in Carinthia—until its split and the collapse with the following Nationalrat elections 2002.

As a result of the internal challenges and sociopolitical changes and restructurings in the last half of the 1990s, Germany, Austria, and Italy were hardly any longer in the position to practice a thoroughly active policy of European integration. But in any case, all three countries still participated in the preparation and implementation of the “EU Eastern Enlargement” to such an extent that this was successful in 2004-2007, even if this was very controversial domestically from time to time. To what extent this also provided an upswing to populism is still to be researched in greater detail.

The second and third Berlusconi governments (2001-2005 and 2005-2006) led to a growing distance between Germany and Italy⁶⁴, which became clear during the Italian presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2003⁶⁵.

⁶² L. HÖBELT, *Jörg Haider*; R. WODAK - A. PELINKA (eds), *The Haider Phenomenon*.

⁶³ M. GEHLER, *Präventivschlag als Fehlschlag*.

⁶⁴ G. PALLAVER, *Die Amtszeit von Silvio Berlusconi*.

⁶⁵ P. KERN, *Die italienische Ratspräsidentschaft*; R. ALIBONI, *La politica estera del governo Berlusconi*; M. CACIAGLI, *Italien und Europa*.

In Italy, the situation continued to remain extremely critical up until just recently. The country was plagued by a high level of unemployment up to 12% (44% of Italians under the age of twenty-five had no job), a dramatic tendency toward undemocratizing, protracted court proceedings, incessant manifestations of corruption, rampant populism in the entire political landscape, exorbitant national debt, systematic tax evasion, an administration that could not cope with the challenge of digitalization, and continuous weakness in growth⁶⁶.

On the other hand, the grand coalition under Angela Merkel and Frank Walter Steinmeier, within the framework of the presidency of the Council of the European Union that was led by Germany in the first half of 2007, managed the ratification crisis of the EU Constitutional Treaty, thus making a valuable contribution to the preparation of the new, modified Union Treaty of Lisbon (which entered into force in 2009). In contrast to the German presidency of the Council of the European Union of 1999, Germany's increased influence and structuring capabilities within the EU had now also become visible for all the world to see⁶⁷, even though Hans-Peter Schwarz had previously already comprehended the Federal Republic of Germany as the central power of Europe for the stabilization of the continent⁶⁸.

4. *Conclusion*

Italy and Germany are young nation-states that were founded in the second half of the nineteenth century; Austria only after World War I. From 1914 to 1918, they were nations that waged war, far from a united Central Europe, and, in fact, they helped Europe deprive itself of its power. After 1918, they contributed to the disintegration, destabilization, and revision of the postwar order in Europe: after Italy, Germany and Austria followed with the establishment of dictatorships. As a result of the facilitation through World War II (triggering by Germany, par-

⁶⁶ P. ANDERSON, *Das italienische Desaster*, pp. 7-65; R. BOLLMANN, *Die italienische Misere*.

⁶⁷ M. BELAFI, *Politische Führung durch den Ratsvorsitz?*; M. GEHLER, *Le tre Germanie*, pp. 355-369.

⁶⁸ H.-P. SCHWARZ, *Die Zentralmacht Europas auf Kontinuitätskurs*.

ticipation by Austria, and involvement by Italy), they had a substantial share in the self-destruction of Europe. After the end of the war, the societies in all three countries had to reorient themselves in the direction of democracy. The Federal Republic of Germany and Italy actively participated in the social reconstruction and supranational integration of Western Europe, while Austria only sought free trade with EFTA as well as international cooperation in the OEEC and the Council of Europe. Both Italy and Austria had to accept German unification. There were no alternative options. While the domestic political systems of Germany and Austria remained stable after 1989/90, Italy experienced a cataclysm with a fall into the abyss following the collapse of the DC. This generated a vacuum in domestic politics, which were then open to all possible forms of populism. These were tied to Mussolini through the 1990s⁶⁹, whether this was a regional, separatist movement with the Lega Nord under Umberto Bossi, the neofascist party of the Alleanza Nazionale under Gianfranco Fini, the Italianist-national Forza Italia under Silvio Berlusconi, or a street-oriented populism of the Cinque Stelle with Beppe Grillo. In Austria, the Freiheitlichen profited: first under Jörg Haider from the less agile SPÖ-ÖVP grand coalition under chancellors Franz Vranitzky and Viktor Klima (1987-1997 and 1997-2000, respectively), and then under Heinz-Christian Strache from the grand coalition under Alfred Gusenbauer (2007/08), Werner Faymann (2008-2016), and Christian Kern (2016/17)⁷⁰.

After 1945-1949, Austria, the Federal Republic of Germany, and Italy went through stages of rapprochement⁷¹, but foreign relations and the corresponding domestic conditions did not always experience a parallel development⁷². In spite of all of the irritations, crises, minor shifts, and radical changes, all three states have been and indeed continue to be members of the EU, which ought to continue to serve as guarantor in preventing distancing and alienation or even a relapse into the nationalism of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries between the countries.

⁶⁹ G. FELDBAUER, *Von Mussolini bis Fini*.

⁷⁰ N. HORACZEK - C. REITERER, *HC Strache*; P. MOREAU, *De Jörg Haider à Heinz-Christian Strache*.

⁷¹ R. LILL, *Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Italien*.

⁷² G.E. RUSCONI - H. WOLLER (eds), *Parallele Geschichte?*

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Right-wing Populism in Europe

by *Karin Priester*

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past thirty years, “populism” has become a dirty word in the debate on new forms of interaction between politicians and the electorate. According to Cas Mudde, populism is a “thin” ideology polarizing between the “good” people and the “corrupt” elite, which is a convenient definition for the present purpose here¹. However, one controversial issue is the assessment of the phenomenon. It is argued that it is not only a threat to democracy, but can also be a corrective underscoring of the intrinsic tension between democracy and constitutionalism as the containment of power, thus emphasizing the limits of representative democracy². The widespread use of the term “populism” can be traced back to the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, when the Iron Curtain came down and new divisions arose. Apart from two short-lived movements after World War II—the French Poujadism and the Italian Common Man’s Front (Fronte dell’Uomo Qualunque)—the first right-wing populist parties were founded in the 1970s, followed by new parties in the 1990s.

II. POPULISM AS A PROTEST MOVEMENT

Populism in its pure form is rare, short-lived, and ambivalent. It emerges as a single-issue protest movement articulating particular grievances that

Translation by Philip Isenberg

¹ C. MUDDE, “*The Populist Zeitgeist*”. See also K. PRIESTER, *Die Wesensmerkmale des Populismus*.

² See Y. MÉNY - Y. SUREL, *Par le peuple, pour le peuple*; K. PRIESTER, *Populismus*; K. PRIESTER, *Rechter und linker Populismus*; C. MUDDE - C. ROVIRA KALTWASSER (eds), *Populism in Europe and the Americas*.

had been neglected by the political establishment. Therefore, populism can act as an agenda setter, it can initiate new incentives and break up encrusted structures. But it stands for a moralistic mindset, a mistrust of political institutions such as parties or parliaments, and it propagates a backward-looking utopia of a Golden Age, arguing that its promises have not been met. The topos of the “betrayal of the people” is a characteristic trait of the populist narrative.

Populist protest movements have a short shelf-life, first because they reject long-term programmatic assessments and obliging organizations, and secondly because the emotional impulses (indignation, popular outrage, enthusiasm, engagement) fade quickly.

In its foundational stage, populism is transversal. It is neither a distinctly right-wing nor distinctly left-wing phenomenon, focusing primarily on the overthrow of the incumbent political forces, the so-called “caste”. This *status nascendi* is short-lived. Either these movements perish quickly, such as “Occupy Wall Street”, or they are absorbed by parties providing a wider range of programmatic issues. The third possibility is the foundation of a party of its own. Some rely on forerunner parties, like the Finnish The Finns Party (originally The True Finns), which emerged from a populist farmers’ party. The protest strikes roots, gathering and unifying single resentments under a common denominator—at present, globalization as a challenge to collective identity, and in Europe first and foremost the disapproval of mass immigration and the rejection of the European Union.

III. COMMON PROPERTIES OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM

After the decline of the “grand narratives” of the twentieth century, contemporary populism does not postulate a totalizing ideology. Rather, it is a contextual phenomenon thriving under changing conditions and opportunities. However, there is a recurrent theme: opposition to the push toward modernization. Populism does not oppose modernization as such, but rather those pushes toward modernization that are perceived as too quick and threatening. Moreover, it is a relational phenomenon, acting in relation to the zeitgeist and to the established political actors. These aspects enhance a particular agility, flexibility, adaptability, or even an opportunistic streak of right-wing populism. Being first of all

an anti-movement, it changes color and cannot be grasped by specific socioeconomic or political targets. What matters are the patterns of interpretation and the direction of populist impact: the polarization between “us” and “them”.

Polarization is a political method, but not a mere procedure or a mere style of communication. Rather, it is based upon a dualistic perception of reality divided into “good” and “bad”—the good people and the morally corrupt elites. This moralistic mindset, taken by itself, is too simplistic to act in a politically coherent way. Therefore, populist movements borrow from or lean on other ideological traditions, or they are absorbed by them. This borrowing process comes along with specific combinations or blends and depends upon the primordial definition of the people, either as an ethnically and culturally homogeneous entity or as an excluded social group.

The Swedish sociologist Jens Rydgren argues that right-wing populism is merely a tactical disguise of the older right-wing extremism after World War II. Starting with the French Front National (FN), founded in 1972, right-wing extremism is said to have adopted a national-populist image for tactical reasons. Within the European context, the FN is assumed to have infected others and given rise to spin-off parties³. Undeniably, the FN had a great impact on the Belgian Vlaams Belang, although many other right-wing populist parties distance themselves from the French case. It is highly contestable to define European right-wing populist parties as mere offshoots of the French FN with some cosmetic lifting and discursive adaptations to new circumstances. In fact, contemporaneously with the FN, the Norwegian, Danish, and Swiss right-wing populist parties also date back to the 1970s, but their origins are liberal or liberal-conservative.

IV. THE SECOND GENERATION OF RIGHT-WING POPULISTS

If there is an epicenter of contemporary right-wing populism at all, it can be found in the Netherlands, not in France. The Dutch cases can be considered as the avant-garde of a “second generation” of right-wing populism, first of all, because they lack the outspoken nationalism,

³ J. RYDGREN, *Is Extreme Right-wing Populism Contagious?*, p. 429.

the biological racism, or the homophobia of older parties like the FN, the Vlaams Belang, the Lega Nord or the Austrian Freiheitliche Partei (FPÖ). Starting with Pim Fortuyn's Lijst Pim Fortuyn in 2003, the second generation of right-wing populism takes into account the boost in individualization in Western European societies. Due to this social change, they add more liberal elements to their discourses. Pim Fortuyn initiated the crossbreeding of claims or an uneven amalgam of assumptions about the threat of Islamization or state intervention into economic and social life. He distanced himself from the ideologically more coherent right-wing extremism and its anti-individualistic, anti-liberal, and anti-universalistic world view.

Reinforced by the Islamist attacks of 9/11 in New York, Fortuyn proposed a new paradigm. He was the first to proclaim anti-Islamism as the main political issue, blending it with politically progressive values (acceptance of sexual deviance, equal opportunities, freedom of opinion, pluralism). Even if the older right-wing parties or think-tanks did not unanimously and immediately accept Fortuyn's paradigm change, they had to recognize that anti-immigration issues and Islamophobia mobilize far more people than anti-Semitism.

The startling phenomenon of Fortuyn has raised the question as to whether it should be looked upon as a deviant case or as the beginning of something new⁴. The Dutchman was neither a convinced nationalist nor a defender of traditional authoritarian values. His successor, Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party (Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV), is pro-American and pro-Israel; his role model is Margaret Thatcher, not Jean-Marie Le Pen. On a discursive level, there is a noticeable shift from the older guiding principles of "nation", "hierarchy", and "authority" to the new guideline of "freedom". These parties call themselves *freiheitlich* (liberal) in stark contrast to their Central and East European counterparts as well as to right-wing extremism. The second generation of right-wing populists argues that conflicts do not arise between nation-states any more, but rather between cultures. Social conflicts have dissolved into cultural differences. The main division of the new identity populism is between a culturally, but not necessarily ethnically, homogeneous people and extra-European cultures and religions, perceived as essentially different and incompatible.

⁴ J. RYDGREN - J.J.M. VAN HOLSTEYN, *Holland and Pim Fortuyn*.

V. RIGHT-WING POPULISM AS EXCLUSIONARY ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT PROTEST

The manifold manifestations of populism in general and of right-wing-populism in Europe in particular have led to type-building⁵. Younger authors distinguish between “inclusion” and “exclusion”⁶. Left-wing populism, for example the Venezuelan *chavismo*, advocates the inclusion of the lower classes into the political, social, and economic system, from which they were previously excluded. But they are not included into a welfare state, but rather into clientelism. The initial support for *chavismo* under Hugo Chávez was based upon parallel structures and upon direct, personal ties between the leader and his followers. By contrast, right-wing populism is exclusionary. Claiming political and social participation for the indigenous population only, their slogans read “Our own people first” (Vlaams Belang) or “The French first” (FN). “National preference” is the keyword of identity populism seeking to exclude immigrants or asylum-seekers in Western Europe or ethnic minorities in Central Europe, for instance the Roma in Hungary. Exclusion is a common trait of all right-wing populist parties, even though they differ considerably from each other on a programmatic level.

VI. TYPES OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM

In order to tackle the variety of populist parties, many attempts have been made to distinguish different types. Such types are hypothetical constructs and never empirically pure or clear-cut, but rather overlapping, with blurred edges or just border cases. The advantage of type-building is a heuristic ordering function, while the disadvantage is a fixation on a static “essence” which has to abstract from the chameleonic, flexible populism and its changing appearances.

With regard to Europe, I propose a distinction between two main types with two affiliated subtypes: first, the ethno-nationalistic type (“The Finns”, the FPÖ, the FN, and the Hungarian Fidesz) and two ethno-regionalistic subtypes (Lega Nord and Vlaams Belang). Second, the national-liberal type: the Dutch PVV, the Swiss People’s Party

⁵ See K. PRIESTER, *Definitionen und Typologien des Populismus*.

⁶ C. MUDDE - C. ROVIRA KALTWASSER, *Voices of the Peoples*.

(Schweizerische Volkspartei, SVP), the Norwegian Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet, FrP), or Berlusconi's broad based alliance People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà, PdL) and a libertarian subtype (the libertarian currents inside the American Tea Party Movement, in part also the Italian Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S)⁷ Their programs or "political formulas" are mixtures of different political families or traditions. Following Herbert Kitschelt⁸, the "political formula" indicates what kind of mixture these parties endorse on the socioeconomic axis "market versus state" and on the sociocultural axis "liberal versus conservative".

But why can the two types be bracketed together under the notion of right-wing populism? First, because of their origins. With the exception of the French FN and Vlaams Belang, these parties cannot be traced back to the Fascist family or to older right-wing extremism like the German National Democratic Party (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands, NPD). Second, because of their ideologically thin morphology. Driven by an anti-authoritarian impulse to stand up against all kinds of patronizing—be it by the European Union, the nation-state, the established parties, the media, or intellectuals—they claim self-reliance, self-determination, and direct democracy, not the strong state that is dear to neofascist parties or movements. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the decreasing, but still existing, right-wing extremism rejects any family resemblance with right-wing populism⁹.

1. *The ethno-nationalistic type*

Ethno-nationalism is the common denominator of parties belonging to this type. The people are defined as *ethnos* with a common ethnic descent and cultural (linguistic, religious, etc.) identity. I distinguish between a "soft" defensive, and a "hard" aggressive version, exemplified by a West European case (The Finns Party), and a Central European case (the Hungarian Fidesz).

⁷ See N. CONTI - V. MEMOLI, *The Emergence of a New Party in the Italian Party System*.

⁸ H. KITSCHOLT, *The Radical Right in Western Europe*.

⁹ M. KOHLSTRUCK, *Rechtspopulismus und Rechtsextremismus*.

a. The Finns Party (originally The True Finns)

This party was already founded in 1995, but only in 2011 did it rise to being the third strongest Finnish party. As a “soft” version, it endorses a strong anti-elitist and anti-establishment protest, but not a fundamental anti-system protest. It defends the Finnish welfare state and endorses tax increases for high-income earners, tax reductions for low-income earners, and support for the small business sector or small family enterprises. On the socioeconomic axis, it can be located left of center. Led by Timo Soini, a converted Catholic, The Finns Party proclaim a Christian-social position but not a socialist one¹⁰. However, with regard to socio-cultural issues, the party advocates a conservative value orientation that is right of center (defense of traditional family values, homophobia, rejection of the “permissive society”, struggle against drug use, higher alcohol taxes). The party is not strictly opposed to immigration, but demands a “responsible” immigration policy and the assimilation of immigrants to “Finnishness”, although they are less xenophobic than the Danish People’s Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF) or the Austrian FPÖ.

Their “political formula” is a hybridization of left-wing socioeconomic positions and socio-cultural conservative positions.

b. The Hungarian Case

The Hungarian right-wing populism undoubtedly belongs to the “hard” version of this type. Victor Orban, chairman of Fidesz (the Hungarian Civic Alliance), aims at substantial constitutional changes and fundamental restrictions of the rule of law. Hungarian right-wing populism has very special features, dating back to the 1920s. In the aftermath of World War I and the peace treaty of Trianon, Hungary lost two thirds of its territory. As a result, roughly 2.4 million Hungarians or nearly a quarter of the Magyars ended up living in neighboring countries, mostly in Romania. This traumatic historical experience is one of the main reasons for the explosive “national question” in Hungary. Right-wing populism takes a particular nationalistic stance and aims at the

¹⁰ D. ARTER, *The Breakthrough of Another West European Populist Radical Right Party?*, p. 496.

reunification of all ethnic and linguistic Hungarians and the restoration of Hungarian hegemony in the Carpathian Basin.

Fidesz, which has been in power since 2010, is a member of the European People's Party (EPP), the Christian-conservative faction in the European Parliament. This may be the reason why their Christian democratic counterparts hesitate to call it "radically right-wing", all the more because of the existence of a rather successful far-right party, the Jobbik, which shifts between the role of Fidesz's fierce adversary and its more or less open ally.

Fidesz was founded in the late 1980s as a liberal party, but under the presidency of Victor Orban it took an ethno-nationalistic turn. In the name of "Work, Family, Order, and Health", it propagates a "national revolution" and does not hesitate to reformulate the constitution. The retrenchment of the competences of the constitutional court, restrictive media laws, and a draconian cutback in the freedom of the press cause concerns over a "Putinization" of the country. Orban successfully mobilizes the Trianon trauma and the backward-oriented utopia of irredentism.

Being itself part of the establishment, Fidesz nevertheless mobilizes the notoriously populist anti-establishment protest, directed against the previous social democratic government. It is denounced as technocratic, whereas Orban presents himself as a man of the people of humble origins. In fact, Orban's predecessor, Ferenc Gyurcsány, had supported corruption, clientelism, multinational companies, and neo-liberal austerity politics.

Fidesz's "political formula" is based upon socioeconomic liberalism (neoliberal politics of austerity, a cutback of public debt primarily at the expense of old-age pensioners, a flat tax of 16%, although paired with some protectionist elements) and upon socio-cultural conservatism and irredentist nationalism.

2. *The ethno-regionalist subtype*

The most striking cases in point are the Belgian (Flemish) Vlaams Belang and the Italian Lega Nord. Vlaams Belang refers to the ethno-linguistic identity of the Flemings inside the multilingual Belgian nation-state, while the Lega Nord refers to the Celtic origins of Northern Italians.

Their background is the division of their countries into two unequally prospering regions: in Belgium, the economic hegemony of the franco-phone Walloons during the period of industrialization, and in Italy, the failure of the development model for the Southern regions. In spite of the high level of transfer payments from Northern Italy, these regions have not succeeded in coping with endemic clientelism, organized crime, and high unemployment rates. Even seventy years after the end of fascism, Southern Italians still lack equal living conditions. With racist overtones, the Lega Nord mobilizes northern Italians against the “lazy” Southerners and denounces them as welfare scroungers and the capital Rome as a “thief”, stealing money from the prosperous North in order to redistribute it to the undeserving South.

Moreover, Belgium and Italy are latecomers to the process of the building of the nation-state, thus bringing along separatist aspirations. The “political formula” of both parties is based on socioeconomic liberalism and socio-cultural conservatism.

VII. THE NATIONAL-LIBERAL TYPE

Parties classified as national-liberal differ from the ethno-nationalistic type in two aspects: the absence of socio-cultural authoritarianism and, particularly in the Netherlands, the lack of nationalism¹¹. Nevertheless, the common link between national-liberal and ethno-nationalistic parties is exclusiveness. The criterion for exclusion may be ethnic or cultural. In reality, however, the reasons for exclusion are intermixed.

1. *The Norwegian Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet)*

This Norwegian party, founded in 1973, emerged from a tax-resistance party and can be classified as a “soft” version of this type. Cas Mudde even excludes it from the right-wing populist party family and labels it as “neoliberal-populist”¹². Tor Bjørklund also postulates that the

¹¹ S.L. DE LANGE, *A New Winning Formula?*, p. 430, and J. RYDGREN - J.J.M. VAN HOLSTEYN, *Holland and Pim Fortuyn*, p. 49.

¹² C. MUDDÉ, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, p. 47.

Fremskrittspartiet (FrP) is not “extreme”¹³. The party defines itself as “classically liberal”. In 2009, it scored 22.9% in the general elections, and in 2013 still 16.3%. Since 2013, it has been a junior partner in a conservative minority coalition.

The “political formula” of FrP is based upon a hybridization of socio-economic liberalism (rejection of Keynesian public politics and deregulation of the Scandinavian welfare state, tax reduction, privatization, cutback of bureaucracy) and socio-cultural conservatism (commitment to the occidental Christian tradition, rejection of abortion and same sex-marriage).

2. *The Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV)*

In contrast, Geert Wilders’ PVV stands for a “hard”, aggressive version of this type. Just as his predecessor Pim Fortuyn, Wilders refers to a theory of “culture circles” (*Kulturkreistheorien*) and polarizes between two culture circles: the Western liberal one and the Islamic “totalitarian” one. Cultural identity is no longer defined as a biological-cultural amalgam of a specific ethnos, but rather as transnational. By contrast, to the ethno-nationalistic type, not the particularism of Finnishness or Dutchness is at stake, but rather the freedom of the “West” against its enemies.

Wilders started his political career in the conservative-liberal People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, VVD). After 2002, he was influenced by American neoconservatism. More than others, this reputed outsider represents the second generation of (Western) European right-wing populism. His formula of success is based on the paradox of a left-leaning liberal right-wing party. To a certain extent, the chair of the FN, Marine Le Pen, has adopted this ideological readjustment and is campaigning for the “de-demonization” of her party.

Wilders’ definition of identity is neither ethno-pluralistic nor nationalistic, but rather cultural, understood as a community of values. This is quite a new tone, which is typical for the second generation of right-wing populism. Compared to the national-populism proclaimed by the FN

¹³ T. BJØRKLUND, *Die radikale Rechte in Norwegen*.

in the 1970s and 1980s, Wilders is an outsider, but also a pioneer of a new right-wing-populism of the twenty-first century. The ideological innovation is based upon the acceptance of the boost in individualization and upon a positive attitude towards emancipatory movements and the “participatory revolution” of the last century.

Wilders has given up his previous neoliberal agenda. The “political formula” of the PVV is socioeconomically based on a left-wing, welfare defense line, although it is limited to the indigenous population only. But on a socio-cultural level as well, he rather represents a left-wing liberal position (the right to abortion, medically assisted suicide, selection of embryos, defense of feminist and homosexual emancipation)¹⁴. The PVV’s party manifesto rejects mass immigration on the grounds that it is a threat to Jews and homosexuals.

a. The libertarian subtype

In the USA, the nationalization of liberal values, which roughly since 2000 began to mold Western European right-wing populism, but not that of Central or Eastern Europe, has a longer tradition. Critique of the elites and anti-establishment protest are merely secondary characteristics of a primarily anti-statist protest. Libertarians argue that the modern intervening state is pursuing the disfranchisement and patronization of free citizens. Libertarians cling to the liberal minimal state of the eighteenth century and call for less government and lower taxes. The state is not supposed to intervene in the free interplay of individuals or groups, whereas the “arrogant”, expertocratic elites are endorsing government spending and supporting “parasites”. These “welfare scroungers” live at the expense of the productive, hardworking people, and, moreover, they are put under state tutelage. The state, represented by bureaucrats, technocrats, social workers, and intellectuals, is wasting public means on the undeserving, unproductive welfare recipients.

Libertarians plead for radical individualism and free market liberalism. Their main adversary is “big government” and the redistributive state. But the more European right-wing populists appealed to the “common man”—the underclasses and formerly left-wing blue-collar workers—

¹⁴ K. VOSSEN, *Vom konservativen Liberalen zum Nationalpopulisten*.

the more they had to turn away from laissez-faire liberalism and focus instead on the preservation of the welfare state. The Austrian FPÖ, the Vlaams Belang, the Lega Nord, and last but not least the French FN take up the grievances of the underprivileged urban underclasses and profit from the dealignment of formerly left voters.

VIII. REASONS FOR THE EMERGENCE OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM

For analytical purposes, it is useful to distinguish three levels: a macrostructural, mesostructural, and microstructural level.

1. *The macrostructural level*

On this level, the reasons for the occurrence and increasing success of right-wing populism are social and ideological megatrends, first and foremost the deindustrialization, the tertiarization, and the de-ideologization of mainstream, catch-all parties (*Volksparteien*) since the 1970s. The second generation of right-wing populists has reacted to these changes and attempts to profit from their anti-authoritarian, anti-paternalistic impacts. This does not mean that the classic populist polarization between the elites and the people is obsolete, but it takes a semantic turn. The elites are not primarily the economically rich or the “plutocrats”, but the cultural cosmopolitans betraying their own people. They are the henchmen of “foreign infiltration” and cultural alienation. As a follow-up to Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* and Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*, the line of attack of contemporary right-wing populism has shifted from material challenges to the mobilization of a deeply rooted cultural anxiety.

2. *The mesostructural level*

On a medium level, the politics of collusion between the state, the trade unions, and the agents of big business is fertile humus for the emergence of populist anti-movements. It is widely acknowledged that countries with a distinct culture of consensus tend to minimize or attenuate political conflicts in a “power cartel”. *Consociativismo* or *trasformismo* in Italy, “pillarization” (*verzuiling*) in the Netherlands and Belgium,

“proportional representation” in Austria, or the French “cohabitation” provoke the notorious populist protest against the political “caste” in a party cartel.

Other reasons for the success of right-wing populism are new cultural divisions and the turn from a “materialist” orientation of values to a “postmaterialist” one. Up to the 1970s, the preference for a party was dominated by economic choices. Meanwhile, they have overlapped with socio-cultural divisions (for instance, same-sex marriage or abortion rights versus traditional family values), alienating voters from the lower social segments of left-wing parties. However, these floating voters do not convert to a new ideological belief. Driven by status anxiety, fear of unemployment, or the stagnation of their wages, they look for a mouthpiece of the “common man” and a vehicle for protest against the walled-off professional politicians.

3. *The microstructural level*

On this level, a favorable precondition for the success of right-wing populist parties is the crisis of hegemony of a party or party coalition incumbent for a relatively long period. The decline of the Italian Christian Democrats after four decades of uncontested hegemony was correlated with the rise of the Lega Nord in the 1990s. The long predominance of the German Social Democrats in Hamburg was accompanied by the short-lived success of the Party for a Constitutional Offensive (Partei Rechtsstaatliche Offensive). The end of the social democratic era in Scandinavian countries went hand in hand with the rise of right-wing populists, mainly in Norway and Denmark, while the decline of the Austrian social democrats in the middle of the 1980s fueled the success of Jörg Haider’s FPÖ. In hegemonic crises or in long-lasting grand coalitions, right-wing populists present themselves as a third, fresh political force of *homines novi* offering a moral alternative to the corrupt and non-transparent elites.

Right-wing populism not only plays the game of fear, it also occupies a political vacuum on the edges of the political system, which has turned to the center. For a relatively long period, Germany has been the exception to the rule. Surrounded by countries with well-established, thriving right-wing populist parties, it seemed to be immune against the rhetorical seductions of charismatic or uncharismatic populist leaders.

Not long ago, in 2012, German political scientist Frank Decker emphasized the (relative) inefficacy of right-wing populist parties in Germany with convincing arguments, as long as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) did not exist: the capability for integration of the Christian Democrats (CDU and CSU); the German political culture after 1945; the comparatively successful integration of mainly Turkish immigrants (before the abrupt mass immigration in September 2015); the moderation of the mass media, and last but not least, the role of the left-wing party Die Linke in channeling and absorbing voices of protest against the elites¹⁵. Only four years later, these considerations are outdated and merely of historical interest. Germany is not the exceptional case anymore, but rather it has to deal with a newcomer—within the European perspective, a latecomer—getting an unprecedented amount of support. Since the beginning of the banking crisis in 2008 and the flux of mass immigration, right-wing populists are ascending: the AfD, garnering around 12% at the polls, and the protest movement Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes, PEGIDA). Likewise, the far-right Sweden democrats (Sverigedemokraterna), also a latecomer compared to the Danish and the Norwegian cases, rose from 5.7% at the general elections in 2010 to 13% in 2014. According to a polling organization, the support went up to even 21.5% in 2016, due to immigration, the fear of Islamist attacks, and growing crime rates.

For the time being, it is difficult to classify the AfD. Founded only in 2013 as a Euroskeptic, national-liberal party, the liberal faction quit the party in 2015, leaving it to its chauvinistic and “nationalist” (*völkisch*) members. Meanwhile, the AfD has established itself in the German party system as an ethno-nationalistic, xenophobic, and culturally conservative force. Its influence can be mitigated, but not altogether avoided.

IX. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have argued that right-wing populism should be distinguished from the traditional political right: it has turned away from a holistic world view and is based upon a hybridization of political targets from different

¹⁵ F. DECKER, *Warum der parteiförmige Rechtspopulismus in Deutschland so erfolgreich ist*.

political traditions. The spectrum is wide, ranging from economic protectionism and state intervention to privatization and neoliberal politics of deregulation; from conservative to liberal tendencies on the socio-cultural level. Central European populist parties are generally more nationalistic and culturally more authoritarian than Western European parties. Their main issues are Euroskepticism, anti-immigration protest, anti-Islamism, and the defense of a European community of values. But what does “community of values” mean? The spectrum ranges from “militant Christianity” (FPÖ) to individual choice and self-determination in the Netherlands (LPF, PVV), from the values of the Enlightenment to the defense of the ethnos and “nationalist” (*völkisch*) currents in the German AfD. The prevailing features depend on the political culture, the history, and the tradition of a country, but also on the depths of the actual crisis and the alternatives on the left. Why is it that in spite of its socio-economic problems and high unemployment rates, Spain is largely immune to right-wing populism? And why is the Front National the strongest right-wing party in Europe and the second strongest party in France?

I have also argued that starting in the Netherlands in the late 1990s, a second generation of right-wing populists has appeared. They do not fight the individualization boost, but take advantage of it and succeed in recruiting new electoral strata. Furthermore, they have adopted the concepts of difference, identity, and recognition, originally hallmarks of the left. Just as left-wing populism, such as the Spanish Podemos, proclaims a Third Way between communism and the established social democracy, right-wing populism is a right-wing Third Way, shifting unevenly between right-wing extremism or neo-fascism and mainstream conservatism.

The new polarization between Western freedom and Islamic totalitarianism marks the beginning of an amalgam of conservatism and liberalism. The concept of freedom is sufficiently plurivalent to absorb the changes in values after the boost in individualization and, at the same time, to legitimate the exclusion of ethnic or religious minorities as culturally backward. It is open to debate as to whether this discursive turn is just an image change of a substantially unchanged “extreme right” or is an ideological adaptation to new conditions in the twenty-first century.

Whenever the cultural elites act as cosmopolitans, the political elites as Europeans, and the economic elites as neoliberal global players, the excluded perceive themselves as the backbone of society, which is over-

looked, forgotten, or they even see themselves denounced as objectors to modernity. The rise of populism is a warning shot and an indicator for the degree of seclusion of mainstream politics. Warning shots should be taken seriously and self-critically, otherwise the increasing distance between the voting public and the elites might lead to political rearrangements from above—not necessarily at the expense of liberalism, but certainly at the expense of democracy.

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Populism: Definitions, Questions, Problems, and Theories

by *Koen Abts* and *Rudi Laermans*

1. *Introduction*

Since the beginning of the 1980s, populism has reemerged worldwide as a lasting ideological discourse with increasing electoral and political impact. Alberto Fujimori, Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid), Beppe Grillo's Five-Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle), military-backed Venezuelan "Chavezism", Victor Orbàn's Fidesz, American "Trumpism", and left-wing parties such as Die Linke or Syriza are commonly regarded as prime examples of populism. Given the ideological and organizational differences between these political actors, it is anything but surprising that considerable confusion exists about the attributes or manifestations of populism and its impact on democracy. This article will focus on the concept of populism as well as the most discussed academic questions and problems it has elicited.

Our *tour d'horizon* of contemporary populism studies will proceed in four steps. First, we observe that populism is interpreted in different terms, namely mobilization, leadership and style, and a particular ideology. We argue that populism needs to be understood first and foremost as a thin-centered ideology or representation of sociopolitical space that advocates the sovereign rule of the people as a homogeneous body. Second, we further develop this starting point through a discussion of the three elements of populist discourse that are recurrently highlighted as essential: the construction of a central antagonistic relationship between "the people" and "the elite", who have "stolen" political power from the people; the idea that democracy equals popular sovereignty and political power must therefore be given back to the people; and the conceptualization of the people as a homogeneous unity. Third, and deliberately limiting ourselves to the European context, we give a short overview of varieties of populism by distinguishing three dominant manifestations by ideal type: radical rightwing populism, neoliberal

populism, and social or leftwing populism. Fourth, we investigate the two main theoretical positions regarding the relationship between populism and democracy: it is either a threat or a corrective to democracy. Hence, we also address the question of how established political actors may react to populist movements, parties, or forms of policy-making.

2. *Defining populism: Mobilization, leadership and style, or ideology?*

Notwithstanding the divergences between the manifestations of populism, which vary from populist radical right to populist radical left, researchers agree that as the name itself already suggests, the core idea of populism rests with the claim to represent or act in the name of the people, understood as the “common people” and the “silent majority”, against an elite that has undemocratically usurped political power. In spite of this basic consensus, the conceptualization of populism gives rise to some confusion. The main problem in defining populism is that most approaches aggregate very different traits, while analysts apply the term to diverse phenomena. Overall, three views may be discerned in the field of populism studies which has recently been exploding. A first approach suggests that populism is essentially a strategy of political mobilization using a typical political rhetoric¹. It considers populism to be a tool for a movement, a party, and/or a leader for seeking and exercising power. More particularly, populist actors appeal to the power of the common people in order to challenge the legitimacy of the political, economic, and/or cultural establishment. At the same time, they may highlight this opposition by emphasizing that the people are in danger because of an existential threat that the scorned elite willingly denies. Whereas migrants are paradigmatically put in this position in the right-wing populist “politics of fear”², “irresponsibly gaming bankers” often fulfill an analogous role in radical left-wing populism.

A second approach focuses on populism as a type of organization and a style of politics. Populism presents itself not as an ordinary party characterized by different factions and an appeal to a specific section

¹ M. KAZIN, *The Populist Persuasion*, pp. 1-7; M. CANOVAN, *Trust the People!*, pp. 3-4; H.-G. BETZ, *Conditions Favoring the Success and Failure*, pp. 197-205; H.-G. BETZ - C. JOHNSON, *Against the Current*.

² R. WODAK, *The Politics of Fear*.

of society, but as a unified bloc or movement expressing a presupposed will of the people or giving voice to “the silent majority”. The claimed unification and representation is characterized by a personality and leadership politics centered on a strong, even charismatic *caput* who is said to embody “the general will”³ in a direct, unmediated way. In line with this emphasis on the embodying and performative-demagogic qualities of the populist leader, populism is often linked to a particular style of communication⁴. Conceptualizing populism as a “performative political style”, Benjamin Moffitt⁵ unfolds a framework in which “the leader is seen as the performer, ‘the people’ as the audience, and crisis and media as the stage on which populism plays out”. More particularly, populism utilizes an anti-theoretical rhetoric and anti-intellectual oratory to politically exploit feelings of resentment⁶. Populists offer simplistic solutions to complex political problems in a very direct and demagogic language, appealing to the presumed common sense of the people, and denouncing the intellectualism or technocratic leanings of the established elites.

Although charismatic leadership and simplistic language might be typical and important features of populism, these characteristics can be understood as expressions of an underlying populist ideology. This refers to a third approach that inspires our own argument and was first formulated by Margaret Canovan⁷, who has rightfully argued that populism must be understood as a thin-centered ideology. Although populism does not provide a comprehensive vision of society, it gives a precise meaning and priority to certain key concepts of political discourse, thereby generating a particular representation of socio-political space. Since populism mainly focuses on the concepts of “the people” and “sovereignty”, it indeed provides a “meager” ideology regarding the structure of power in society: besides overstepping the crucial role of the rule of law within democracy, it tends to negate the pluralism of both material and ideal interests within the people as well as the

³ D. PELS, *Het volk bestaat niet*.

⁴ M. TARCHI, *Populism Italian Style*, pp. 120-138.

⁵ B. MOFFITT, *The Global Rise of Populism*, p. 5.

⁶ H.-G. BETZ, *Radical Right-Wing Populism*; K. ABTS, *Social Resentment and Ethno-Populism*.

⁷ M. CANOVAN, *Taking Politics to the People*.

elite. Therefore, we define populism as a thin-centered ideology, which advocates the sovereign rule of the people as a homogeneous body in the name of democracy⁸.

3. *The core structure of populist ideology*

Fitting our definition, three elements of populism-as-ideology are recurrently highlighted in academic literature. First, populism revolves around a central antagonistic relationship between “the people” and “the elite”⁹. In her seminal article, Margaret Canovan¹⁰ conceptualizes populism as an “appeal to ‘the people’ against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of society”. The political, economic, and/or cultural establishment is attacked for its alleged privileges, its corruption, and especially for its lack of accountability to the people. Elites are accused of representing and defending only their own interests and of being alienated from the interests, values, and opinions of “the common man”. Within the realm of politics, the establishment consisting of the dominant parties and their leaders has thus hollowed out the basic democratic idea of sovereignty. Particularly in contemporary European populism, this accusation often goes hand in hand with the allegation that the party elites form one body with an administrative technocracy both legitimizing the decisions of the political elite and fending for its own positions.

Secondly, and actually a direct consequence of its dualist representation of the political space, populism tries to give power back to the people and restore popular sovereignty. Populists believe that notwithstanding its representative character, politics should be based on the immediate expression of the general will of the people. They regard this claim as a logical consequence of the idea of democracy in the strictest sense of the word: since all the power (*kratein*) must come from the people

⁸ See K. ABTS - S. RUMMENS, *Populism versus Democracy*, p. 409.

⁹ E. LACLAU, *On Populist Reason* and E. LACLAU, *Populism: What's in a Name*; by M. CANOVAN, *Populism; Trust the People!; Taking Politics to the People*; Y. MÈNY - Y. SUREL, *The Constitutive Ambiguity*; P. TAGGART, *Populism*; C. MUDDE, *The Populist Zeitgeist*; C. MUDDE - C. ROVIRA KALTWASSER, *Populism*, as well as C. MUDDE - C. ROVIRA KALTWASSER, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*; J.-W. MÜLLER, *What is Populism?*

¹⁰ M. CANOVAN, *Trust the People!*, p. 3.

(*demos*), those who are ruled, must rule themselves. Populist movements, parties, and leaders indeed speak and behave as if “democracy meant the power of the people and only the power of the people”¹¹. Hence, populist ideology favors more direct forms of democracy such as majority rule or referenda, which should replace current representative and intermediary institutional arrangements. At the same time, it supposes that the will of the people is transparent and immediately accessible to those willing to listen to the *vox populi*. This is exactly what the populist leader says he is doing: he (it is rarely a she) speaks and acts directly on behalf of the people, thus actually representing “the will of the people”, yet denying representation because he claims to just present it within the political sphere¹². Thus, populism is wary of compromise and accommodation: in the name of the people, it emphasizes the need for a politics of will and decision¹³. As a consequence, there is no need for elaborate parliamentary discussions regulated by the idea that the best argument must win, or for party politics dominated by the practice of bargaining and compromising. In a word, against the difference between “those who govern” and “those who are governed” that may be considered to be constitutive for politics¹⁴, populist democracy attempts to achieve an immediate identity of governed and governing. As has been said, populists claim to present, not to represent, “the will of the people”: the leader positions himself discursively as a direct emanation of “the popular”.

Thirdly, the presumed transparency of the will of the people, which the populist party or leader is supposed to express in an unmediated way, refers to a conception of the people as a homogeneous unity¹⁵. In populist ideology, “the people” effectively functions as a central signifier receiving a fundamentally monolithic interpretation that is difficult to reconcile with a pluralist view articulating class, gender, or ethnic differences—and the concomitant hierarchies they espouse—within or

¹¹ Y. MÉNY - Y. SUREL (eds), *Democracies*, p. 9.

¹² On this performative paradox, see B. ARDITI, *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism*.

¹³ N. URBINATI, *Democracy and Populism*, pp. 116-118.

¹⁴ N. LUHMANN, *Die Politik der Gesellschaft*.

¹⁵ M. CANOVAN, *Trust the People!*; P. TAGGART, *Populism*; J.-W. MÜLLER, *What is Populism?*

among the people. The people are discursively presented as united and indivisible, fully formed, self-aware, and identifiable by the majority of numbers. Accordingly, this collectivity is not seen as a heterogeneous collection of social groups and individual subjects with diverse values, opinions, needs, and interests. On the basis of a supposed shared identity, which may for instance be rooted in ethnic features, the people are considered to form a collective body that is capable of having a common will and a single interest, and can express this will or make decisions¹⁶. However, as a thin-centered ideology, populism in general only implies that the people constitute a homogeneous body: the question “*what* is this substantive identity homogenizing the people?” is variously answered by different types of populism. All existing populist movements, parties, or leaders indeed supplement their thin-centered ideology with additional values and beliefs that substantialize the central signifier, which is empty in tendency, of “the people” co-founding populist discourse¹⁷. That is precisely why populism so easily cohabits with other, more comprehensive ideologies that are already known, depending on the context and the values of the heartland to which it appeals. In this respect, we can paradigmatically distinguish between a leftist version of populism that identifies the people in socioeconomic terms as the working class exploited by a bourgeois elite on one hand, and a radical right populist version that refers to ethno-national characteristics in order to position the people as an ethnically defined nation on the other hand¹⁸. As we already indicated in passing, the presumed unity of the people implies that populism cultivates antagonistic relationships toward both the elites who negate the people’s interests or values and the “other” who does not fit in and therefore threaten homogeneity. Depending on the specific nature of the populist image of the people, this “other” might include immigrants, minorities, welfare-recipients, deviants, and/or intellectuals.

Based on these three core elements, scholars present different yet overlapping analytic descriptions of populism. Mudde¹⁹ defines populism as

¹⁶ M. CANOVAN, *Taking Politics to the People*, p. 34.

¹⁷ Compare E. LACLAU, *On Populist Reason* and E. LACLAU, *Populism: What’s in a Name*.

¹⁸ See C. MUDDÉ - C. ROVIRA KALTWASSER, *Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism*.

¹⁹ C. MUDDÉ, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, p. 543.

“an ideology that considers society ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and argues that politics should be an expression of ‘the *volonté générale* of the people’”. Albertazzi and McDonnell²⁰, on the other hand, conceptualize populism as “an ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous “others” who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice”. We believe that the first part of this definition is redundant and that the cited antagonistic relationship is already implied by the idea of popular sovereignty itself. Hence, we stick to our definition of populism that was already presented as a thin-centered ideology presuming that democracy equals the sovereign rule of the people as a homogeneous body²¹.

4. *Varieties of populism: Radical right, neoliberal, and radical left*

Given the great number and diversity of both movements and ideological traits fitting our definition, populism indeed takes on various forms in terms of style, strategy, and ideological orientation on the one hand and is not confined to one specific type of political actor on the other. In their groundbreaking volume on populism, Ionescu and Gellner²² already observed that populism was used to refer to actors from a wide-ranging set of political ideologies. Later on, Margaret Canovan²³ argued that it was not possible to unite the varieties of populism “into a single political phenomenon with a single ideology, program, or socio-economic base”. This confirms that populism is definitely a thin-centered ideology that can be combined with divergent established “-isms”. It is therefore found within the whole traditional spectrum of political ideologies, though it predominates on the radical right and radical left sides. Moreover, not all populist parties or movements continuously or consistently incarnate all the traits defining populism in the outlined ideal-typical form. We may therefore differentiate within the diversity

²⁰ D. ALBERTAZZI - D. MCDONNELL, *Twenty-First Century Populism*, p. 3.

²¹ K. ABTS - S. RUMMENS, *Populism versus Democracy*.

²² G. IONESCU - E. GELLNER (eds), *Populism*.

²³ M. CANOVAN, *Populism*, p. 133.

of populist actors between “more” or “less” types, implying that even as a thin-centered ideology, populism is not a matter of yes-or-no but actually refers to a continuum of various political positions.

Notwithstanding this diversity, some patterns can be distinguished. For example, whereas populist leaders in Latin America tend toward a socioeconomically left position, European populism often has a radical-right orientation²⁴. Also, in the United States populism is often regarded as an intrinsic feature of politics, particularly in relation to the more general wariness of big government and the Washington elite²⁵; more recently, the term has often been associated with the culturally conservative and anti-statist Tea Party. Overall, this double tradition of a politically normalized populism and anti-government stance is rather absent—or at least not that strong—in Europe, which helps explain why the recent upsurge of populism caused that much uneasiness, not to say dismay. In institutional and organizational terms, populism in Latin-America and the US is often related to the existence of strong presidential regimes facilitating the kind of “leadership democracy” that was described—and also advocated—by Max Weber²⁶. In contrast, European populism is predominantly seen as a feature of political parties rather than individuals, although many populist parties are characterized by centralized and strong leadership.

Irrespective of the general tendency of populism to cohabit with the xenophobic right, populism in Europe has also been associated with other ideological orientations or “party families”. Mudde²⁷ identifies populism as a core element of the radical right but additionally discerns two other types of populist parties, nuancing the already introduced paradigmatic differentiation between right-wing and left-wing populism: neoliberal populists (such as Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands) and social populists (such as Die Linke in Germany or Syriza in Greece²⁸). While populist radical right parties promote nativism and authoritarianism, neoliberal populism and social

²⁴ C. MUDDE - C. ROVIRA KALTWASSER, *Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism*.

²⁵ A. WARE, *The United States*.

²⁶ M. WEBER, *Political Writings*.

²⁷ C. MUDDE, *Populist Radical Right Parties*.

²⁸ See L. MARCH, *Radical Left Parties in Europe*.

populism—or left-wing populism²⁹ —are mainly concerned with socio-economic themes: they promote free-market economics and welfare protectionism, respectively. Thus, even though it would not be accurate to speak of a populist “party family” in light of the striking ideological divergences leading to clashes between the presumed family members, it is possible to delineate “sub-families” that combine populism as a defining characteristic with an outspoken ideological orientation related to one of the more traditional “-isms”.

Notwithstanding the prominent examples of neoliberal and social populism, the majority of the populist cases in Europe appear to fall within the category of radical right³⁰. In Western Europe, these parties are characterized by their appeal to political and cultural authoritarianism: they defend the need for a strong political leadership voicing “the will of the people” and simultaneously promote the idea that societal order or social cohesion require shared imperative norms. Their translation of the historical heritage of anti-Enlightenment conservatism into nativism results in an outspoken hostility towards multiculturalism and immigration on the one hand, and an emphasis on the need for foreigners to adapt to a nation’s customs on the other. Several such radical right-wing parties have already been around for quite some time. For example, the National Front (Front National, FN) in France was founded in 1972 and the roots of Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang, VB) go back to 1978. Still other successful populist radical right parties such as the Austrian Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) and the Swiss People’s Party (Schweizerische Volkspartei, SVP) were established political actors with a longer history that have undergone an ideological transformation. In post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe, where immigration levels have been low or even negative, ethnic minorities—particularly the Roma population—have typically been identified as the non-native elements who threaten the presumed homogeneity of the people. Examples include parties such as Jobbik, the Movement for a better Hungary, the Greater Romania Party (Partidul România Mare, PRM), and the Slovak National Party (Slovenská národnej strana, SNS).

²⁹ Y. STAVRAKAKIS - G. KATSAMBEKIS, *Left-wing Populism*.

³⁰ C. MUDDE, *Populist Radical Right Parties*.

Although we already argued that populism is not just a matter of discursive style or rhetoric, it must be noted that it is not necessarily a phenomenon confined to certain parties only. In Europe too, populism can take on the form of a more fleeting rhetorical device used to blame governing electoral competitors for having lost touch with the “ordinary people”. Particularly in post-communist countries, where political trust tends to be low and public sector corruption is often a salient electoral theme, many—often newly established—political parties have deployed a populist anti-establishment rhetoric³¹. The term “populism” has therefore also been used regularly to describe large mainstream parties such as the Hungarian Civic Alliance—Fidesz and the Polish Law and Justice (PiS)³². Much can be said for this characterization, yet we simultaneously admit a watershed does not exist, which clearly divides populist political actors or discourses from non-populist ones. The difficulty in pinpointing exactly which actors or party programs are populist and which are or not has added to the unsystematic use of the concept and the more general conceptual confusion surrounding the expression. Yet another problem is that particularly in Europe, the notion of populism is used rather randomly as a negative or blaming term, not the least because without much substantiation, the phenomenon to which it refers is often quasi-automatically regarded as threatening the quality of democracy, if not its very essence.

5. *Populism and democracy: Symptom, corrective, or threat?*

Both within and outside academia, populism is regularly applied as a synonym for demagoguery, simplistic solutions, or opportunism³³. Especially in the vernacular sphere, the term is often used pejoratively to refer to vote-winning policy proposals, attempts to pander to public opinion, or blunt anti-immigration attitudes³⁴. The academic debate about the concept may be more sophisticated, but in the scholarly literature populism, as well, is frequently seen as a negative phenomenon.

³¹ S. VAN KESSEL, *The Populist Cat-Dog*.

³² E.g., C. MUDDE - C. ROVIRA KALTWASSER, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*.

³³ E.g., C. MUDDE, *The Populist Zeitgeist* and P. TAGGART, *Populism*.

³⁴ T. BALE - S. VAN KESSEL - P. TAGGART, *Thrown around with Abandon?*

Betz³⁵, for instance, regards populism as a form of political opportunism that is unscrupulous and exploits the anxieties of the electorate³⁶. Others view populism's support for unmediated popular sovereignty as a threat to liberal-democratic checks and balances and the protection of minorities. Abts and Rummens³⁷, for instance, argue that populism is inherently incompatible with democracy: populism's conception of the people as a homogeneous body is fictional and "generates a logic which disregards the idea of otherness at the heart of democracy and aims at the suppression of diversity within society". In general, this anti-pluralist stance is combined with a highly moralized one regarding the relationship between the populist actor and the people. Since the populist claims to directly represent the *vox populi*, every other party, movement, or leader is portrayed as untrustworthy, if not as outright corrupt, because of belonging to the elite³⁸. In other words, populism is not just claiming to represent the will of the people, but also tends to morally monopolize the access to "the general will", which goes against the grain of democracy's logic of the "empty space of power" as described by Claude Lefort³⁹.

A more optimistic view states that populism is an indicator of the health of representative or liberal democracy. Although not denying the dangers of populist politics, some scholars argue that populism emerges when the political elite lose track of popular discontent and demands, or when the "constitutional" or "liberal" pillar of democracy—as opposed to the "popular" one—is seen as becoming too dominant. On top of that, populism is nowadays also regularly analyzed as a clear sign of protest against a proverbial overdose of technocratic rule, if nothing else at the level of the European Union⁴⁰. Taggart therefore contends that populism may act as a "bellwether"⁴¹ for the health of representative politics. In addition, Mény and Surel describe populism as "a warning

³⁵ H.-G. BETZ, *Radical Right-Wing Populism*, p. 4.

³⁶ See R. WODAK, *The Politics of Fear*.

³⁷ K. ABTS - S. RUMMENS, *Populism versus Democracy*, p. 4.

³⁸ J.-W. MÜLLER, *What is Populism?*

³⁹ C. LEFORT, *Democracy and Political Theory*.

⁴⁰ S. RUMMENS, *Wat een theater!*

⁴¹ P. TAGGART, *Populism*, p. 63

signal about the defects, limits, and weaknesses of representative systems” and argue that “in spite of its often unpleasant tones, it may constitute an effective reminder that democracy is not a given, but is instead a constant enterprise of adjustment to the changing needs and values of society”⁴². More generally, Canovan highlights the tension between the “pragmatic” and “redemptive” faces of democracy:

“When too great a gap opens up between hallowed democracy and the grubby business of politics, populists tend to move on to the vacant territory, promising in place of the dirty world of party maneuvering the shining ideal of democracy renewed. Even from the point of view of pragmatic politics, the vital practices of contestation and accountability grow weak without the energy provided by democracy’s inspirational, mobilizing, redemptive side”⁴³.

Still, populism is seldom seen as an unequivocally positive thing. Not many scholars subscribe to Ernesto Laclau’s⁴⁴ argument that populism and democracy are essentially interchangeable terms and that “the end of populism coincides with the end of politics”⁴⁵. Panizza instead describes populism as a “mirror in which democracy can contemplate itself,” adding that “populism is neither the highest form of democracy nor its enemy”⁴⁶. Once again, a more general and also more nuanced position may be taken, such as the one advocated by Arditì⁴⁷. In his view, populism can take up three possible guises, i.e. representation, symptom, or underside. The first mode is compatible with liberal-democratic politics, the second presents a disturbance of democracy, and the third entails an actual interruption of democracy. Pasquino, in turn, argues that the appearance of populism is often a sign of a poorly functioning democratic regime (the symptom mode), but due to, for instance, its unrealizable promises, it often has a negative impact on the democratic framework itself (the underside mode)⁴⁸.

⁴² Y. MÉNY - Y. SUREL (eds), *Democracies*, p. 17.

⁴³ M. CANOVAN, *Trust the People!*, p. 11.

⁴⁴ E. LACLAU, *Populism: What’s in a Name*, p. 48.

⁴⁵ Also see E. LACLAU, *On Populist Reason*.

⁴⁶ F. PANIZZA, *Introduction*, p. 30.

⁴⁷ B. ARDITI, *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism*.

⁴⁸ G. PASQUINO, *Populism and Democracy*, p. 28.

Through the assembling of insights from different corners of the world, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser have tried to get a more empirical grip on the consequences of populism in several countries in Europe and the Americas⁴⁹. Based on a variety of case studies, they conclude that populism can be a corrective as well as a threat to democracy. Populism can, for instance, place issues on the agenda that have been ignored by the political establishment and give voice to excluded sections of society. This is especially true within authoritarian regimes or unconsolidated, purely electoral democracies. However, populism may also undermine liberal-democratic institutions because of its monist conception of society and its disdain for checks and balances guaranteed by the independence of the judicial system, a well-functioning media system, and a flourishing civil society. Notwithstanding their membership in the EU, such a process of de-democratization has recently been initiated by the reigning populists in Hungary and Poland. In the name of a homogeneous conception of the people and the populist party's capacity to directly represent its will, the exercise of constitutional rights and judicial controls is restricted⁵⁰.

6. *Reactions to populism: The dilemma of "tolerance for the intolerant"*

Given the pros and cons of populism from the point of view of its relationship with democracy, an obvious question arises: how may established political actors react to populism? A quick glance reveals that division reigns within Western Europe when dealing with populist radical right parties. In Italy, Austria, Denmark, and the Netherlands a rather open and accommodating approach prevails. Populist challengers are treated as ordinary political opponents and forms of cooperation remain possible, for instance through the support by a populist party of a minority government to which it does not belong. In other countries, such as France and Belgium, institutional and political actors pursue a more rejecting or even openly antagonistic approach that delegitimizes right-wing populist parties and positions them as genuine enemies of the democratic system⁵¹. For example, in Belgium, the established Flemish

⁴⁹ C. MUDDE - C. ROVIRA KALTWASSER (eds), *Populism in Europe and the Americas*.

⁵⁰ C. MUDDE - C. ROVIRA KALTWASSER, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*.

⁵¹ R. EATWELL - C. MUDDE (eds), *Democracy and the New Extreme Right Challenge*.

parties have opted for a strategy of principled non-cooperation towards Vlaams Belang—the so-called *cordon sanitaire*—implying a commitment not to govern with the populist radical right on any political level.

Given this overall twofold stance, the public debate is largely determined by different attitudes toward the well-known dilemma of “tolerance for the intolerant”⁵². Overall, two positions dominate the discussion. On the one hand, the procedural view conceives of democracy as a set of procedures organizing the struggle for power. In the electoral marketplace, all opinions and parties are tolerated as long as they follow the procedural rules. As a result, freedom of expression and association is almost unlimited: democracy is built on the practice of “a higher amoralism”⁵³, as Niklas Luhmann somewhat provocatively stipulates. The adherents of the procedural view propose treating populist parties as legitimate opponents in the political struggle since it would be inappropriate, even illegitimate, to exclude political adversaries primarily on the basis of what in essence is a moral judgment. Underlying this view is the idea that in terms of content, “democracy” is an empty signifier whose possible meanings may be articulated again and again as long as one sticks to the basic rules of “the democratic game”. On the other hand, the substantive view advocates a more repressive stance towards populism in case it leads to extremism. According to this approach, democratic procedures are not an end in and of themselves, but rather only the means for realizing and protecting a set of substantive democratic values and rights. Consequently, all political parties are required to underwrite the fundamental values of freedom, equality, respect, and tolerance. When populists threaten these values, “the tolerance for the intolerant” may be limited. Hence, repressive measures like a *cordon sanitaire*, which aim to obstruct extremist parties, are not just allowed, but actually required⁵⁴.

In trying to overcome the traditional opposition between procedural and substantive views of democracy, which are somewhat antagonistic principal positions, Rummens and Abts⁵⁵ propose a concentric contain-

⁵² K. ABTS, *The Cordon Sanitaire*.

⁵³ N. LUHMANN, *Die Zukunft der Demokratie*, p. 131.

⁵⁴ G. CAPOCCIA, *Defending Democracy*, pp. 55-67.

⁵⁵ S. RUMMENS - K. ABTS, *Defending Democracy*.

ment policy for dealing with populist parties. On the procedural side, this policy emphasizes the importance of tracking all of the relevant concerns of citizens in the public sphere; on the substantive side, it stresses the need for an adequate filtering guaranteeing the compatibility of actual policies with the democratic core values of liberty and equality. Such a twofold requirement of tracking and filtering translates into a guideline of decreasing tolerance towards populists as they approach the centers of formal decision-making power. The resulting containment policy listens to populist voters but simultaneously puts unremitting civilizing pressure on populist parties themselves. Undoubtedly, both the proposed twofold approach of concentric containment and its more concrete double translation are not easygoing pathways. Yet their plausibility seems only to increase during the times in which populist parties have come to power within nation-states that are members of the EU. It is not really an option to just stand aside in the name of procedural democracy until a populist party takes power and begins to “illiberalize” the democratic political regime. At the same time, it may indeed also be too easy to just voice concerns in the face of the success of populist parties or movements and to not take seriously the voters’ underlying concerns.

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Populism vs Constitutionalism

The Theoretical Core of Populist Ideology and the Foundations of the Democratic System

by *Maurizio Cau*

1. *Preliminary definitions. The conceptual spectrum of populism*

Studies of populism have increased exponentially over the years, offering very different interpretations of the phenomenon. However, most of this mass of literature appears to start from the same assumption, which is the need to define the conceptual limits of a political category that is particularly difficult to pin down due to its theoretical indeterminacy.

Starting by underlining the vague and conceptually undefined nature of the historical category of populism has by now become a cliché¹, and even the present work is unable to escape this mantra. Remaining faithful to the cliché, it starts with some reflections on the outlines of a historical-conceptual category that, despite an abundance of studies, in many ways remains blurred. Shedding light on the jagged conceptual spectrum of populism is the first step towards the heart of this essay, which intends to reflect on the relationship between certain aspects generally attributed to populist ideology, and the constitutional tradition of 1900s democracies.

The conceptual confusion that accompanies reflection on populism is well represented by the wide extension of the defining limits within which the phenomenon is traditionally contained. For some populism is a political movement, for others it constitutes a genuine ideology, for others still it is a syndrome of democracy or, to use a less categorical

Translation by Gavin Taylor

¹ M. TARCHI, *Italia populista*, p. 19.

formula, a reflected image of its evolutionary course. For yet others, it is simply just a way of conducting politics².

The same term is used for historical phenomena that vary widely. Consider for example the difference between Russian agrarian populism, the Latin-American version, and the European nationalist based variety. Clearly, this does not help to clarify the issue, requiring constant specifications to lend concrete substance to a concept, which like all omnibus terms runs the risk of being imprecise on an analytical level³. In order to answer the question as to what is “that set of more or less connected ideas”⁴ that are typically referred to as populism, it is worthwhile recalling some of the reflections set out in recent historiography, starting from those that see populism as “intrinsic element of democratic societies”, in which “in one way or another the principle of the sovereignty of the people has become established as the single and predominant source of legitimization of power”⁵.

This leads to interpretations that acknowledge in populism the existence, though marked by a thousand weaknesses and incongruences, of a variably structured ideological dimension. This makes it something more than a useful and simple label for political phenomena that seem similar. The uncertain morphology of the set of ideals that it expresses, leads to the perception of populism not as a traditional ideology, but as a “mental map” or “set of ideas”⁶ born out of the re-interpretation, often simplified, of certain basic principles of the democratic model. It is precisely in this sense that populism maintains a very close relationship with democracy, in which it aims to act as a corrective force⁷.

² For an examination of the different interpretations of the phenomenon refer to C. MUDDE - C. ROVIRA KALTWASSER (eds), *Populism*, p. 493; L. ZANATTA, *Il populismo*, p. 330; L. CEDRONI, *Il populismo come ideologia*.

³ P. POMBENI, *Il populismo nel contesto del costituzionalismo europeo*, p. 368.

⁴ L. ZANATTA, *Il populismo: una moda o un concetto?*, p. 329.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

⁶ C. MUDDE - C. ROVIRA KALTWASSER (eds), *Populism*, p. 499.

⁷ For a wider view on this point see C. MUDDE - C. ROVIRA KALTWASSER (eds), *Populism in Europe*, pp. 1-25.

Many authors appear to agree on the relative “weakness” of the ideological spectrum of populism⁸. It is after all a phenomenon born out of a “vision of social order based on belief in the innate virtue of the people, whose primacy as a source of legitimization of political action and government is openly claimed”⁹. However, this lack of sufficiently stringent definitions should not lead to the idea that populism is void of all meaning¹⁰. Recent literature has described it, in each specific case, as a protean pseudo-ideological phenomenon¹¹, a “radial category”¹², a “political strategy”¹³, a “hybridized archetype”¹⁴, a “category of political analysis” half way between the descriptive and regulatory¹⁵, or even as a “multi-template” form of thought and political action¹⁶. It is in any case possible to identify certain elements that define the theoretical and conceptual nucleus of populism.

As demonstrated among others by Cas Mudde, Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, and Lorella Cedroni, based on the model for morphological analysis defined by Michael Freedén¹⁷, populism can be considered, notwithstanding its fluidity and indeterminacy, as an ideology. It has a “tenuous core” and is “weak” in nature, but it remains an ideology and its theoretical template can be defined. In simple terms, the ideological nucleus of populism can be broken down into three elements: faith in the centrality of the sovereignty of the common people, the development of an essentially anti-elitist perspective, the construction of a political mythology and a community ethos founded on the idea of the people as

⁸ See Y. MÉNY - Y. SUREL, *Par le peuple, pour le peuple*; G. HERMET, *Les populismes dans le monde*; M. TARCHI, *Italia populista*; for an examination of these positions refer to M. CROSTI, *Per una definizione del populismo come antipolitica*, in particular pp. 426-428.

⁹ M. TARCHI, *Italia populista*, p. 21.

¹⁰ Compare M. TARCHI, *Il populismo*.

¹¹ L. CEDRONI, *Il populismo come ideologia*, p. 362.

¹² D. COLLIER - J. MAHON, *Conceptual Stretching Revisited*.

¹³ K. WEYLAND, *Clarifyng a Contested Concept*, p. 18.

¹⁴ L. ZANATTA, *Il populismo*, pp. 196-197.

¹⁵ E. LACLAU, *La ragione populista*, p. 5.

¹⁶ N. MERKER, *Filosofie del populismo*.

¹⁷ M. FREEDEN, *Ideologie e teoria politica*; compare M. MARCHI (ed.), *Michael Freedén*.

an organic whole, exercising a will without mediation. All these elements concur in the definition of the “polysemantic synchrony”¹⁸ which, according to some scholars, appears to characterise the relationship between populism and democracy.

Recently Jan Werner Müller reflected in depth on the underlying design of this “thin ideology” founded on a moral contradistinction between the purity of the people and the corruption of the elite¹⁹. In this interpretation, populism is again not seen simply as a phenomenon of criticism of the ruling class, but is founded on an essentialist and unitary view of a people. This is deemed to be the origin of the fundamental assumption of every populist political outlook, claiming to represent, or rather incarnate, the will of the people understood as a unitary and morally pure entity. Deriving from this is the characteristic refusal to accept pluralist perspectives and the idea that the popular will might be fragmentary (and represented) in diverse forms.

2. *Populism vs constitutionalism*

Underlying this “political theology of the part that substitutes the whole”²⁰ is a profound criticism of some of the typical structures of the system of political representation of western constitutionalism. The aspect considered here regards the relationship between the theoretical nucleus of populism and the foundations of contemporary democratic systems. In other words, the relationship between populism and constitutionalism. The hostility shown by many areas of European populism towards the institutional values and mechanisms typical of the continental constitutional tradition induces reflection on the basic compatibility between populism and the democratic model set down in the constitutional declarations of the second half of the 1900s.

For this purpose, it is useful to isolate some elements of the controversial populist ideological apparatus and verify whether they fall within the constitutional paradigms of post-World War II European democracies. Therefore, rather than a survey of the complex and fragmented geog-

¹⁸ L. CEDRONI, *Il populismo come ideologia*, p. 363.

¹⁹ J.W. MÜLLER, *What is Populism?*, pp. 1-2.

²⁰ N. URBINATI, *Un termine abusato*.

raphy of populism, the focus is on a historical-constitutional review of some of the key theoretical ideas around which populist ideology developed. These reflections take into account the constitutional experiences of Italy, Germany, and Austria, but only along general lines and without any pretense of providing a comparative presentation of the three specific national contexts.

The relationship with democracy is a central aspect for defining the historical and theoretical boundaries of populism. The populist approach acts in a spirit that is to some extent redemptive. The objective is not to counter the democratic model, but to correct its aberrations and restore the central authority of the people. A key rhetorical element in populist discourse is the oppression that the contemporary democratic model is thought to have progressively exercised over the popular nucleus that gave rise to political power. This derives from the excessively “mediated” structure of the mechanisms for political participation.

The contrast that emerges is thus between “democratic extremism”²¹, of which populism is the standard bearer, and the traditional liberal-democratic model, in which the principle of popular sovereignty and the role of the majority is filtered and mediated by the system of political representation, creating an equilibrium between power and the protection of the rights of minorities²². In this lies the ambiguity of populism, which in its underlying assumptions represents simultaneously a threat and a possible corrective force for democracy.

The ambiguity derives from a stark contrast that emerges between the political proposals of populist movements and the traditional structures of representative systems. The antipolitical aspect of populism resides in the rejection of the system of representation that underlies the historical model of western constitutionalism²³. A rejection, (at least in words) that populists justify in the name of a higher and more radical democratic principle, that of increased activeness of an educated public in its self-evident and mythological unity.

There is no question that populist movements participate in the traditional circuit of democratic representation without contesting the

²¹ C. MUDDE - C. ROVIRA KALTWASSER (eds), *Populism*, p. 507.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 506

²³ P. POMBENI, *Il populismo nel contesto del costituzionalismo europeo*, p. 369.

representative procedures and, as demonstrated in the Italian, Austrian, and Hungarian cases, populists are fully capable of exploiting their potential. However, the discursive register that they promote expresses a profound deviation from this model. This is testified in numerous attacks on the guarantee institutions and mechanisms of the political system characterized by a lack of popular legitimization.

In this way the populist parties represent a threat to constitutionalism. This is not just because the model of constitutional guarantees and limits to political power is substantially extraneous to populist thought, but also because populists constantly highlight a crisis of legitimization in the political and constitutional systems established in the founding declarations of the 1900s. In order to better understand where the differences and incompatibilities between populism and constitutionalism lie, it is worth dedicating a few lines to defining what the latter means. Modern constitutionalism comprises a set of historical experiences, doctrines, and organizational practices created with the aim of limiting power by establishing legal and procedural boundaries for its exercise. In this sense, the 1900s constitutional model represents an instrument for constraining political tensions within a framework that imposes forms and limits. At first sight the theoretical nucleus that gives rise to populism appears to fall entirely within the boundaries of the 1900s tradition of constitutional democracy, but closer analysis clearly reveals that the antagonism of populism towards certain principles of the democratic model place it outside this tradition, at least from a theoretical perspective.

Some of the discursive roots around which the populist political project (at least the European version) developed are discussed below, considering to what extent they are problematic within the context of the constitutional culture of the 1900s democracies. The basis of the populist interpretation of the democratic model includes three closely connected elements: the idea of a common people, the concept of the sovereignty of the people, and the system of political representation.

Many aspects of populist discourse, like for example the anti-pluralist attitude, the anti-elitist component, the aversion to forms of institutional guarantees and to the traditional checks and balances of the democratic order, arise from an interaction between the particular versions (often elaborated in moral terms) of these concepts in populist thought²⁴.

²⁴ For a critical examination, see J.W. MÜLLER, *What is Populism*.

3. *The idea of a people*

In populist ideology, the people represent a homogenous undifferentiated entity²⁵. This entity appears in every respect prepolitical, an abstract subject that does not take shape through the interaction of politics and institutions, but instead pre-exists these and claims the right to guide them. The markedly antipolitical aspect of populism adopts this fictional and idealized conception of a people as a concrete theoretical reference.

The hostility towards the political tradition does not arise so much from a contestation in principle of the institutions, but from the conviction that a unitary people, regardless of the ambiguity and semantic indeterminacy of the word²⁶, exists in a de-institutionalized form²⁷, almost as an idea above reason, capable of resolving in a sweep the fragmentary and contradictory nature of the social order.

The monolithic nature of this image of a people naturally encourages faith in the existence of an equally unitary and one-dimensional will of the people. In the populist view, Rousseau's dilemma regarding the boundaries and content of the popular will is resolved with radical linearity, bringing about a genuine fusion of the concepts of "general will", "common good", and "common sense". In populist ideology, the people can be easily identified and univocally represented.

This is not a structured theoretical proposal, but a simplification of the cultural heritage from which European constitutionalism was defined. As clearly stated, "populism does not claim to be an original idea or a global theory, even less a conception of man and society, but first and foremost a will for the redemption of common good"²⁸. The popular will is no more than an instrument for pursuing the "common good", which in turn is the result of a projection of what "common sense" has established within collective thought. There is no form of mediation between ordinary thought expressed by society and the idea of common good, almost as if the people were unable not to think for

²⁵ Y. MÉNY - Y. SUREL, *Par le peuple, pour le peuple*, p. 198.

²⁶ On this point see C. CHIMENTI, *Il populismo fra democrazia e demagogia*, p. 26.

²⁷ For this aspect see J.W. MÜLLER, *What is Populism*, pp. 2-16.

²⁸ A. DORNA, *Le populisme*, p. 48.

their own good, and that the weighted average of common thoughts is the instrument for measuring their will.

This dangerous tendency towards generalization draws on a notion of the common people very distant from the one passed down to us in the constitutional traditions of contemporary democracies. Take for example the Italian Constitution, which presents the image of an inhomogeneous people consisting of individuals, political groups, and social bodies all with conflicting interests²⁹. The people of the Italian Republican Constitution, as underlined by Costantino Mortati, one of the most refined and influential founding fathers, “is not a monolithic subject, but an interweaving of multiple forces from whose *concordia discors* there simultaneously derives what a society is and what a society intends to become”³⁰. The people of the constitution are not a homogenous social aggregate capable of sustaining specific permanent values; on the contrary they comprise a subject articulated around mediation and sharing of social interests, and that “encounters precise legal limits, represented specifically by the democratic decision making procedures”³¹.

4. *Popular sovereignty*

The second conceptual root around which populist discourse develops is the sovereignty of the people (or popular sovereignty). As stated elsewhere, “populist rhetoric often inverts the meaning of the concepts to which it refers”³². This phenomenon is particularly obvious in the case of the principle of popular sovereignty, since—in an attempt to interpret it in its authentic form—populism in reality inverts the traditional theoretical spectrum.

Among the objectives of populism is the regeneration of the democratic system through the full exercise of the authority of popular sovereignty³³.

²⁹ G. BRUNELLI, *Ancora attuale*, p. 11.

³⁰ On this point, see P. COSTA, *Il problema del potere costituente in Italia*, p. 133.

³¹ G. BRUNELLI, *Ancora attuale*, p. 13.

³² L. CEDRONI, *Il populismo come ideologia*, p. 367.

³³ L. CEDRONI, *Die Morphologie des Populismus*, p. 249.

This is a typical example of how the populist argumentative scheme leverages the theme of the common people, mythologizing its form and content. In the populist version of popular sovereignty, the will of the citizens represents the nerve center of the entire constitutional system. It is a permanently active force that refuses to be bridled, regulated, or limited by the institutions of representation or by the traditional power balancing system. The populist outlook does not contemplate or accept the idea that the holders of sovereignty, in this case the people, should encounter limits in the exercise of their authority.

This represents an obvious contradiction to the theoretical view of the principle of sovereignty, the true linchpin of the modern constitutional model, as conceived until the late 1500s. During a historical period in which the evolution of statehood within the global context requires a significant reconceptualization of the traditional argumentative baggage linked to the principle of sovereignty³⁴, populist movements have taken a strongly conservative approach, largely overturning the 1900s conception of sovereignty.

Recalling certain principles of constitutional doctrine can help focus on this issue, highlighting characteristics and limits of the action of “de-contestation”³⁵ that populism implements regarding the theme of popular sovereignty. As stated repeatedly in legal doctrine, the contemporary constitutional state assigns competences (and so the exercise of power subject to limitations defined by the constitution itself) rather than genuine attributions of sovereignty. In its fullest expression, sovereignty refers back to the constituent power, which is expressed only at the moment of constitution³⁶.

In democratic forms of government, popular sovereignty is always limited. In the national contexts under discussion, in reality the real sovereign power lies in the constitution. The people are formally acknowledged as the sovereign body, but only within the limits defined in the consti-

³⁴ See D. GRIMM, *Souveränität*, pp. 11-12.

³⁵ For Freedden the de-contestation of political concepts is the key idea underlying ideologies. It represents “an operation by way of which it is possible to assign a given meaning to a political term subtracting it from “contestation” and establishing a ‘correct’ use”, M. FREEDEN, *Ideologie e teoria politica*, p. 15.

³⁶ D. GRIMM, *Souveränität*, p. 72.

tution and through the process of mediation between social needs and regulatory orientations promoted by political parties and parliament. In the mature 1900s constitutional model in other words,

“the common people are sovereign because, and in that, their infinite complexity is represented, without exceptions, in parliament; and conversely parliament is sovereign because it is the place in which the infinite complexity and totality of the people is represented and where sovereignty is exercised through the parties, producing laws and governments”³⁷.

In contrast, populists want the active role enjoyed by the common people at the constituent moment, which becomes latent during the ordinary life of the constitution, to be the rule, extending Schmitt’s maxim that “sovereign is he who decides on the exception” effectively to all “normal cases”. There is the desire to extend the centrality (in particular the logical role) that the people enjoy at the moment of origin of the new constitutional order into everyday democratic life, but this is not exactly what the Italian, German, and Austrian constitutional authors had in mind when they defined the scaffolding for their respective constitutional edifices. By invoking “the removal of all barriers between the will of the citizens and its implementation”³⁸ and by thinking of popular sovereignty as a power and function that can be activated in everyday democratic life, populism refuses to recognize the very essence of democracy, understood as a system founded on limits.

When reading through the debates during the constitution of the Italian Republic it becomes obvious how “the idea itself of popular sovereignty was far from being universally dominant in the political and legal culture of the constituent era”³⁹. At least initially, many of the members of the constituent assembly (including Dossetti, Togliatti, Moro, and La Pira) were quite critical of the possibility that the principle of popular sovereignty should form the foundation for the Republic, underlining how this was out of date and overburdened with Jacobin ideas. The limits of liberal parliamentarianism needed to be overcome through the stipulation of a new form of state sovereignty, “whose primary expres-

³⁷ M. FIORAVANTI, *Costituzione*, p. 96.

³⁸ P. IGNAZI, *La fattoria degli italiani*, p. 17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91. Also see P. POMBENI, *La questione costituzionale*.

sion should be the sovereignty of parliament as the place of presence and representation of the sovereign people”⁴⁰.

It is through the primacy of parliament and thanks to the centrality of the parties within the new constitutional dynamic that the figure of the sovereign people is inserted into the traditional framework doctrine of state sovereignty. In other words, it is through active organization of interests by institutions and political forces that the people become sovereign. Thus an actively participating people, but always “within the forms and limits of the constitution”, as stated in Article 1 of the Italian Constitution.

Though having direct consequences for the entire constitutional system, for which it represents to some extent the keystone, popular sovereignty is “invisible”. It serves the function of political legitimization and organization of the constitutional system, but in reality, it is a fiction, a principle of political legitimization⁴¹. The sole deed in which it is expressed, and here necessarily in mediated form, is that of founding the constitutional order. In the normal life of the democratic system, the people have very limited opportunity for political action, as shown by the referendum mechanisms provided for in the different constitutional contexts.

In Italy, the complex discussion around the referendum mechanism during the constitutional assembly led to a significant limitation on referendums, surviving only in the abrogative version. Mortati unsuccessfully proposed arbitral referendums to restore to the people, at least in certain circumstances, the full exercise of sovereignty. Likewise, preventive referendums that assigned to the sovereign people a power of veto in relation to the legislator were also blocked. In the Italian Constitution, the Italian people can correct the will of the legislator by denying legality, “but cannot substitute the same with their own will: at the sovereign moment of deciding on a law it is the Parliament that acts, and not the people as a distinct and primary subject”⁴². It is precisely this conceptual point that populism is not prepared to accept, the marginalization of popular will across the entire constitutional process.

⁴⁰ M. FIORAVANTI, *Costituzione*, p. 95.

⁴¹ D. GRIMM, *Souveränität*, p. 75.

⁴² M. FIORAVANTI, *Costituzione*, p. 99.

This is not only true of Italy and the German situation is in many ways similar. Paragraph 2 of Article 20 of the German *Grundgesetz* states, “all state power emanates from the people”. Popular sovereignty, as defined in the same article, is exercised “in elections and in referendums and through special organs of legislative power, executive power, and legal power”. The German constitutional system is thus supported on two columns: the democratic principle on one hand, which is expressed in elections and referendums, and the representation system, which guarantees the democratic origin of state powers.

German democracy thus conceals a dual nature: parliamentary and plebiscitary. However, the latter aspect has been largely ignored by the legislators, who failed to give concrete form to a regulation of the *Abstimmungsrecht* provided for in the original German Constitution. In a sense this was in response to the degree of temerity with which the *Parlamentarische Rat* expressed itself regarding the expediency for German democracy to assume a fully plebiscitary form, in a context as uncertain for national consciousness as the post-war period. Once again it is clear that the forms of direct popular participation in legislative activity are limited, confirming the partiality and residual persistence of the model of direct democracy in 1900s constitutionalism. This, in brief, gave rise to a state that while claiming legitimization founded on the people, was not limited by them and instead represented them in the sphere of legislation⁴³.

The model of popular sovereignty is further eclipsed by the ever more incisive role of constitutional justice for determining the forms and balances of the contemporary state⁴⁴. One example is a ruling of the Italian Constitutional Court that illustrates the limited status of the idea of popular sovereignty in the dynamics of constitutional transformation. In the ruling of the Constitutional Court No. 496 of 2000, it is queried whether it was possible for “the people, even in the more limited dimension of a regional electoral body, and obviously more tenuous grade of representation of a consultative referendum, could be called upon to decide on provisions intended to change the constitutional order”⁴⁵.

⁴³ L. CARLASSARE, *La sovranità del popolo*, pp. 4-5.

⁴⁴ A. SPADARO, *Costituzionalismo versus populismo*, p. 2041.

⁴⁵ On this point see N. ZANON, “*Superiorità*” della rappresentanza politica sul popolo.

The Court established that within the ambit of referendums the Italian Constitution does not designate the people deciding powers for constitutional change, this being assigned exclusively to the national political representation.

As regards sovereignty, the German *Bundesverfassungsgericht* (Federal Constitutional Court) produced a highly conservative jurisprudence. An example is the well known and highly controversial ruling of June 30, 2009, on the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon in which, referring back substantially to the early 1900s, a one-dimensional interpretation of sovereignty was sustained with the role of the people being to invest the authentic sovereign (the state in its traditional conception) with the right to define their own rights⁴⁶. In general, the role of “Hüter der Verfassung” (guardian of the constitution) and of “super-legislator” attributed to itself by the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany has led to a marginalization of the principle of popular sovereignty⁴⁷, which a section of German juridical doctrine by now considers to be an empty expression or an obsolete concept.

5. *The system of political representation*

The third element that characterizes populist rhetoric is a specific criticism of the system of political representation. While constitutionalism sustains that the device of representation leads to the substantial,

“surmounting of natural, original, or intermediate communities through their participation (and dispersion) in a new political body created by political decision, ... populism, in its most extreme form, ... tends to assert that the political body is a mythological, pre-existent reality that is simply brought to life and made operative through the demiurgic action of the force that embodies it”⁴⁸.

Rather than being “represented”, for populism the common people tend to be “embodied” in the leader, to whom the public will is effectively conceded and delegated⁴⁹. This is one of the underlying paradoxes of populism, which accepts, or even considers authentically democratic, an

⁴⁶ See A. PIN, *L'integrazione europea*, p. 501.

⁴⁷ V. SCHÖNEBURG, *Volksouveränität und Bundesverfassungsgericht*, p. 421.

⁴⁸ P. POMBENI, *Il populismo nel contesto del costituzionalismo europeo*, p. 369.

⁴⁹ L. ZANATTA, *Il populismo: una moda o un concetto?*, p. 332.

even more radical mediation between social body and political decision than the one so strongly contested and guaranteed by the traditional system of representation. In pursuing the ideal of a government of the people capable of overcoming the limits of a sovereignty mediated by the circle of representation, populism opts for the shortcut of the leader as authentic interpreter of the popular will.

The absorption of the general will into the will of the leader is the mechanism that, from a populist perspective, avoids the complex and inevitably lengthy process of the construction of a political will. A desire for a reduction in institutional complexity⁵⁰ is thus reflected in an atrophy of the process of mediation, differentiation, and aggregation of the political system that the mechanism of party representation has guaranteed over decades, with all its obvious and well-known limitations.

The crisis of legitimacy of the political system, the outcome not least of the progressive fraying of state sovereignty and the growing importance of supranational public powers, is confronted by populism with a refusal for mediation, considered to be futile and noxious. Populism does nothing more than reiterate that—beyond all procedural limits—the principle of legitimization of the political system is the sovereignty of the people⁵¹. However, this form of renewal of democracy comes about through a “confiscation of sovereignty”⁵² by the leader and a contraction of the pluralist model around which contemporary constitutionalism developed.

In complex societies “every form of government and every political decision making mechanism results in mediation ... An intermediary between the people and a political decision is inevitable, even when the decision is attributed to the people themselves and as a manifestation of their will”⁵³. This is the other face of the paradox of democracy, the tendency to identify the governed with the governors, the state with the people, but which has to face the impossibility of completely merging them into each other.

⁵⁰ See P. TAGGART, *Populism*, p. 170.

⁵¹ See P.A. TAGUIEFF, *Populism*, p. 85.

⁵² L. CEDRONI, *Il populismo come ideologia*, p. 368.

⁵³ M. LUCIANI, *Democrazia rappresentativa e democrazia partecipativa*, p. 183.

For this reason, constitutionalism assigns a central role in the action of intermediation and integration of the will the political parties. They are the preferred instruments for implementing popular sovereignty, giving substance to representative democracy by establishing contact between the political will of individuals and institutional decisions.

The parties, on the other hand, have demonstrated poor “representative quality”⁵⁴, long since being locked into an unyielding self-referentiality. Instead of acting as a link between the social base and the institutions, they have effectively become a baffle between the citizens and the course of national politics. The crisis of the model of mediated democracy, the so-called *Parteienstaat*, provided an opportunity and sustenance for populism, which with its call for “direct democracy” and its anti-elitist register enjoys ever-growing success among voters.

Of little value in this respect are the alarms sounded by constitutional doctrine for, what Hans Kelsen defined as, the mythical and fictional conformation of direct democracy. Recent political history has demonstrated that the populist wind is already blowing with a certain strength. This appears to revive the confrontation between those like Carl Schmitt who defended (from an anti-parliamentary perspective) the concrete and real nature of the people as a political subject, and those like Kelsen who attacked the meta-political illusion that the will of parliament coincides with the will of the people and is supposedly its direct expression⁵⁵.

It is precisely this claim of eliminating the distance between citizens and government that shapes a relevant part of populist ideology. In this sense populism might seem like the maximum expression of democracy, based on a process of incorporation of the will of the people into the hands of the leader, who is effectively attributed the capacity to define the outlines of this homogenous and undifferentiated will⁵⁶. However, this clearly does not fit with the characteristics attributed to the democratic model in the constitution. In the liberal democratic model, the rules and procedures combine to generate the political will, while in populism decisions are conceived of as pure and immediate reflections of a one-dimensional and unitary popular will.

⁵⁴ S. GAMBINO, *Dal Parteienstaat al populismo*, p. 7.

⁵⁵ H. KELSEN, *Vom Wesen und Wert der Demokratie*, p. 22.

⁵⁶ On this point, see L. CANFORA - G. ZAGREBELSKY, *La maschera democratica*.

6. *Conclusions*

Up to this point it has been observed how populism, conceived either as a weak ideology or as “an anthropology of the modern socio-political imagination”⁵⁷, is based on reifications, myths, and values that make it an anti-systemic and anti-party phenomenon. An examination of the key ideological points around which the populist message is shaped shows that the effort to regenerate democracy and politics through the full exercise of sovereign power in reality translates into a negation of the very foundations of democracy and a substantial negation of the political process. In this sense, populism is clearly remote “from contemporary constitutionalism, that political and idealistic conception confirming the historical necessity for rights and limits of power to be defined, enforced, and guaranteed by law”⁵⁸.

We appear to be living in an intermediate time period. In many European contexts the poor impression of governments, the crisis of the traditional party formations, and the uncertainty deriving from the evolution of the global market and international politics have significantly weakened the role of the parties in political mediation and within the system of representation, with a resulting growth of phenomena of “direct democracy politics” and claims for the constitutional (and constituent) role of the electoral body. A partial blurring of the constitutional role of political parties has been accompanied by a true exaltation of the constituent power of the electoral body⁵⁹.

Within this framework, populism plays an ambiguous role. It uses the instruments provided by the democratic system, while many of its underlying assumptions appear to challenge the democratic foundations. Whether its advance will lead to a breakdown of representative democracy, or whether the latter will have the strength to resist these centrifugal forces, perhaps at the price of partially reforming its rules, remains to be seen.

⁵⁷ P.A. TAGUIEFF, *Populism*, p. 85.

⁵⁸ P. MARSOCCI, *Le tracce di populismo*.

⁵⁹ G. FONTANA, *Riforme costituzionali*, pp. 301-302.

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Populism in the Mainstream Media

Germany, Austria, and Italy in Comparison

by *Günther Pallaver*

1. *Introduction*

Anyone who believes that right-wing populism currently forms on the fringes of a society has been taken in by a false picture and a false empirical analysis. That holds true in any case for some countries in Europe. As early as the rise of the Nazi Party, it could be easily observed that it was precisely the middle class that had helped that party rise. Chafing between the proletariat and the upper class had radicalized the middle class, which felt threatened in its existence, and made fascism acceptable¹. To stay within the picture: society does not change from the fringes, but rather the center radiates its right-wing populist signals, words, messages, and ideologemes toward the fringes of society.

The political scientist Cas Mudde supports the thesis—and not for the first time—that the political contents of right-wing radical parties are also presented by other parties that are not right-wing radical, but rather also by conservative and other parties. But while right-wing radical parties have as a rule been found in the opposition, conservative parties are found as mainstream parties in the government. And for that reason, according to Mudde, liberal democracies are threatened by right-wing radical parties because they make their way into the living room through the back door of the mainstream parties².

Thus we have returned to an old question—with all the problem areas of conceptualization—as to whether the political center is right-wing

Translation by Philip Isenberg

¹ R. KÜHNL, *Formen bürgerlicher Herrschaft*, pp. 80-84.

² C. MUDDE, *Victor Orbán*.

or even right-wing extremist³. The fact that an anti-democratic body of thought is found not only on the fringes, but also in the center of society is not a new finding, as Seymour Martin Lipset already wrote about the extremism of the center as early as 1960⁴.

When Mudde speaks of the danger of this populist body of thought splashing over into the political center, then it is obvious that such developments and trends also permeate political communication.

In all democratic countries, there are two types of media: the elite media and the tabloid media. The elite media ideally attempt to present themselves as impartial and equidistant, to report fairly and responsibly, and to be less attached to the logic of ratings and the humor of the audience or readers. On the whole, it is assumed that the quality media is less willing to be the megaphone of populist movements.

The popular media, on the other hand, to a large extent take up rather populist demands, concentrate far more on the political personality, give preference to entertainment, emphasize the conflict, and give gossip priority over reputable analysis. This type of media is very sensitive to ratings and a wide readership, dramatizes things, loves a sensation, and is superficial⁵. On top of that, the thesis is presented again and again that “yellow journalism, sensationalism, exaggerated curiosity, hunting prominent figures, and incitement” spreads through the Internet like “stinking mushrooms”⁶.

While the contribution by the tabloid media to the rise in popularity and support of populist parties and movements has already been studied in many cases, the elite media have been contemplated somewhat less under this aspect, in no small part because their “natural” support by the mainstream parties is assumed⁷.

³ V. NEU - S. POKORNY, *Ist “die Mitte” (rechts)-extremistisch?*, p. 3.

⁴ S. M. LIPSET, *Political Man*.

⁵ J. RAABE, *Boulevardpresse*, pp. 33-34.

⁶ M. BRAUCK - I. HÜLSEN, *Noch einmal mit Gefühl*, p. 74.

⁷ G. MAZZOLENI, *Media e Populismo*, p. 134. With regard to the question of tabloidization and media, there is a broad scholarly debate and correspondingly comprehensive literature.

As far as the relationship between the media and right-wing populism is then concerned, different comparative studies⁸ go to show that the media—with different levels of intentionality—have supported the rise in popularity of populist leaders and, in turn, have exploited the media presence for their own purposes.

This goes back to a “concordance of needs”, to the need to reach and the interest in reaching the attention of the “civil masses”, to quote Gianpietro Mazzoleni⁹, even if there is a dissonance with regard to politics. That means that the media and the populists mutually need each other in order to achieve their own goals, even if they are not the same goals. The result of this “concordance of needs” consists of visibility and publicity for the latter and more copies, higher ratings, and Likes for the former.

Even if with the information about the populist parties, movements, and leaders, the mainstream media reports to a certain extent “more moderately”, more balancedly, and more critically, such movements nevertheless receive publicity and visibility. But as we can observe, the boundaries and differences in the reporting on populist activities between the tabloid media and the quality media are becoming more and more planed away, they resemble each other more and more, and in many cases they differ only in style, but no longer in content.

This trend has been—and continues to be—supported by the development of the variety of multimedia options available, by a greatly concentrated and even overheated media market, by the competition for information, and by offensive attempts by the political elite to control topics and emphasis in editorial reporting¹⁰. In spite of national differences, it can be established that transnational macro trends have formed, which shape media-centered democracies and their communication systems¹¹. Within that context, television, in spite of increasing

⁸ G. MAZZOLENI et al. (eds), *The Media and Neo-Populism*; T. AKKERMAN et al. (eds), *Populist Political Communication in Europe*; L. BOS et al., *An Experimental Test of the Impact of Style and Rhetoric on the Perception of Right-Wing Populist and Mainstream Party Leaders*, pp. 192-208.

⁹ G. MAZZOLENI, *Media e Populismo*, p. 134.

¹⁰ F. PLASSER - G. PALLAVER, *Österreichische Medien und politische Kommunikation*, p. 249.

¹¹ P. NORRIS, *A Virtuous Circle*.

competition by the new media, continues to be the leading medium which, in the meantime in connection with new technologies and forms of communication, influences, changes, and controls the communicative processes, and the logic of action and views, as well as the styles, contents, and practices of political communications¹².

In media-centered democracies in which party identification is being eroded more and more and voting behavior is becoming less and less predictable, election campaigns have won even greater attention. In the wake of the transformation of election campaign logic, which itself competes for attention with the media, the media logic has also changed. Thus, a high degree of the personalization of reporting can be noticed, as can a tendency away from central themes and toward negativism and emotionalization, just like with sports dramatization¹³. On top of that, the pluralization of the media landscape increases the chances of addressing voters by bypassing the classic intermediaries¹⁴.

It would consequently be obvious to deal with the populist reporting of the big popular media such as the “Bild Zeitung” in Germany or the “Kronen Zeitung” in Austria, while there is no comparable classic popular newspaper in Italy. The period when the attempt was made with “L’Occhio” to also have a local popular publication in Italy now dates back many years. After only two years, from 1979 to 1981, the newspaper had to cease publication.

Studies have provided the empirical proof of the lasting effects of the reporting of the two large popular newspapers on decision-making and on the electoral behavior of its readers. Challengers such as right-wing populist parties and their leaders rely on media that shape public opinion¹⁵. The more these right-wing populist topics are taken up, the more potential voter resonance these parties can expect. Thus, for example, the rise in popularity of the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche

¹² F. PLASSER - G. PLASSER, *Globalisierung der Wahlkämpfe*; F. PLASSER, *Politik in der Medienarena*.

¹³ G. LENGAUER - G. PALLAVER - C. PIG, *Redaktionelle Politikvermittlung*, p. 104.

¹⁴ F. DECKER, *Die populistische Herausforderung*, p. 18.

¹⁵ P. SHEETS - L. BOS - H.G. BOOMGAARDEN, *Media Cues and Citizen Support for Right-Wing Populist Parties*, pp. 307-330; L. BOS - W. VAN DER BURG - C. DE VREESE, *How the Media Shape Perceptions of Right-Wing-populist Leaders*, pp. 182-206.

Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) in Austria under Jörg Haider would not have been so easy without the influential “Kronen Zeitung”. The same also holds true—although somewhat less so—for the success of the Party for a Rule of Law Offensive (Partei Rechtsstaatlicher Offensive), also known as the Schill Party, in Hamburg, which was written about in the media by the potent Springer press, as Frank Decker (2012) was able to establish. But once Schill lost the sympathy of the tabloids, things went downhill with him very quickly. The phenomenon of Umberto Bossi of the Lega Nord can be classified as similar. Even though no tabloid newspaper was present, both the print media and the electronic media in Italy opened up a playing field that was in part folkloric, guaranteeing the Lega Nord a broad public. But the popular media also take on a function of focusing a central theme independently of the parties, which can serve and absorb the right-wing populist opinions. But in this respect, how do things look with the “center” media?

It is my thesis that the competitive battle in the media market for ratings and readership, surfers and users, and thus for advertising income—just like in very general terms the development toward a media-centered democracy—has also led to the increasing tabloidization of the quality media. Elements and manners of representation that originally fell within the domains of the tabloids are today used by the media which views itself as mainstream as if they were to be taken for granted. Personalization, trivialization, a loss in differentiation, the replacement of elements of information by elements of entertainment, graphic presentation, abbreviated argumentation, a tendency toward populism, and the like are evidence of this trend¹⁶.

Drawing on several case studies, this populist trend in the mainstream media in Austria, Germany, and Italy will be shown without making the claim of analyzing these thrusts toward development in the three comparison countries through the use of a common design.

2. *Austria*

In a study of populist campaign and editorial styles in the Austrian election campaign of 2008 for the Nationalrat (parliament), Georg

¹⁶ T. MEYER, *Populismus und Medien*, p. 87.

Winder¹⁷ studied populist communication patterns in media reporting. Aside from the transregional popular papers that had the greatest media presence (the data refer to the period of the 2008 elections for the Nationalrat), which were the “Kronen Zeitung” (around 46.8% penetration) and “Österreich” (9.5% penetration), the two quality newspapers “Der Standard” (6.3% penetration) and “Die Presse” (6.1% penetration) were analyzed¹⁸.

On television, the two news broadcasts in prime time programming with the greatest media presence were included in the analysis. These were “Zeit im Bild” (39% penetration) of the public broadcaster ORF and ATV “aktuell” (around 15% penetration) from the private channel ATV. Since 2008, those penetrations have in part collapsed to a large degree¹⁹.

In his study, Winder starts out from three analysis dimensions. First, from the dimensions of exclusion. Within that context, the vertical exclusion primarily encompasses feelings of resentment against the established elites or against the establishment, while the horizontal dimension encompasses all of the dissociations that are oriented against groups in the population that are portrayed as not belonging to the “people”. Secondly, from the dimension of inclusion with an identificational/advocating reference to the people which portrays the other side of the coin of the exclusion dimension. Thirdly, the frequently described centrality of a “charismatic leader figure” is taken into consideration in the analysis. More than a few authors do in fact start out from the premise that populism or populist communication have a direct connection with the increased presence of charismatic leader personalities.

The result is informative for our matter. The highest result with the inclusion dimension is currently achieved by ATV. In the next place is “Zeit im Bild 1” (“ZiB 1”), followed by the daily newspapers “Der Standard”, “Die Presse”, “Kronen Zeitung”, and “Österreich”. This result is astonishing—particularly since with both “ZiB 1” and with the media “Die Presse” and “Der Standard”, they all consist of quality media. The author substantiates this with the assertion that the reporting in the quality media tends to be more multilayered than that in the

¹⁷ G. WINDER, *Populist Framing*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁹ MEDIA-ANALYSE, <http://www.media-analyse.at/table/2683>.

popular media. What is meant by “multilayered” is the presentation of different perspectives in which heterogeneous opinions and views also tend to find a balanced space.

With the exclusion dimension, ATV once again takes on the highest score of all of the media that were studied at the level of the addressing of external/elite or fringe groups, followed by “Die Presse”, “Der Standard”, and “ZiB 1”. The results suggest the conclusion that in media reporting, exclusion-centered communications content is included in party communications. The scores that are at times even slightly higher in comparison with party communications indicated that journalists do not just absorb the exclusion-centered impulses of the party communications, but even expand it within the framework of their journalistic work.

The dimension of leader-centering takes on the highest expression out of all three of the dimensions that were studied. In the study of this leader-centering, it becomes clear that the concentration on the top candidates in the two audiovisual news broadcasts is significantly higher than the average of all of the print media that were studied. We find a significantly higher expression of leader-centering in the popular media. In his comparative, transnational study, Hanspeter Kriesi comes to the conclusion that popular-type media are shaped significantly more by leader-centered reporting than the quality media is²⁰.

With reference to a total populism index that is calculated, which is intended as a mean value of all three dimensions of populism, the author arrives at the conclusion that the quality newspapers in particular react to the populist communications impulses of the popular media. Within that context, quality newspapers achieve scores that are similarly as high as those of the popular media itself²¹.

3. *The Federal Republic of Germany*

In 2012, a group of researchers with the Bielefeld pedagogue Wilhelm Heitmeyer presented its findings after ten years of systematic empirical social research. The group had worked with a concept of “grup-

²⁰ H. KRIESI, *Personalization of National Election Campaigns*.

²¹ G. WINDER, *Populist Framing*, pp. 243 ff.

penbezogene Menschenfeindlichkeit” (group-focused enmity), which encompasses the following twelve items: sexism, homophobia, privileges of the established, xenophobia, racism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, rejection of the handicapped, debasement of the homeless, debasement of the Sinti and Roma, debasement of asylum-seekers, and debasement of the long-term unemployed²².

The empirical results of this work group are extremely disquieting because they show developments whereby in upper-class circles, obvious attempts were made to protect and safeguard privileged positions. There is apparently a “locked and loaded bourgeoisie”, which—as a result of both economic and societal crises—feels threatened and also vents its attempts for protection through the liberal daily and weekly newspapers, and therefore through the quality media. And thus it is necessary that when considering the relationship between right-wing populism and the media, one must not concentrate on media at the politically right-wing edge, and thus not on the “Bild Zeitung”, the “Kölner Express”, the “Münchener Abendzeitung”, or “Junge Freiheit”. Instead of that, what is concerned is right-wing populism in the big national newspapers, such as the “Süddeutsche Zeitung”, “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”, “Die Welt”, “Handelsblatt”, “Frankfurter Rundschau”, or the “Tageszeitung”.

One example out of many: a research group from the University of Tübingen analyzed the reporting on the so-called “Döner-Morde” (“Kebab Murders”) in the German press (“Unwort des Jahres”, the ugliest word of the year of 2011). In an unprecedented series of murders between 2000 and 2006, nine foreign-born small business owners were killed with the same handgun. Since two of the victims sold kebab, the crimes were often called the “Kebab Murders”. The results of the media analysis:

“[The media reporting] contributed to the ostracizing of the victims, it stigmatized the members of their group, and in addition it in part even participated in the extensive speculation with the search for the Perpetrator ... Among the [deficiencies of the reporting] are a continued distance from immigrant life, the insufficient representation of the immigrant perspectives, and a ‘mob behavior’, which ... can contribute to the intensification of discriminatory reporting”²³.

²² W. HEITMEYER, *Gruppenbezogene Menschenfeindlichkeit*, pp. 34 f.

²³ F. VIRCHOW - T. THOMAS - E. GRITTMANN, “Das Unwort erklärt die Untat”, pp. 10-11.

For this, the authors studied a series of newspapers, but the big national newspapers and magazines such as the “Süddeutsche Zeitung”, “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”, “Die Welt”, “Frankfurter Rundschau”, “Tageszeitung”, “Spiegel”, “Stern”, and “Focus” in no way stood out in a positive way from the corresponding reports in the tabloid press.

A very strong trend toward right-wing populism can currently be seen in the reporting of the entire press on refugees and asylum seekers, and incidentally also and specifically in quality newspapers. To cover this here, the essay which was published in 2015 by well-known immigration researcher, Klaus Bade, *Zur Karriere und Funktion abschätziger Begriffe in der deutschen Asylpolitik* is quoted here. Bade speaks of “lexically manifested defensive attitudes”:

“Over the long run, the measures of deterrence in fact did not bring about any reduction in the immigration pressure; but in large circles of the population, they increased the defensive attitudes with respect to refugees and asylum seekers. In particular during the periods of electoral campaigns, they were pushed by incessant political and media agitation against the ‘abuse of the right of asylum’ by alleged ‘social swindlers’, ‘social freeloaders’, and asylum-seeking ‘social tourists’ (Unwort des Jahres [ugliest word of the year] of 2013) ... Even [with the term ‘economic refugee’], denunciatory intentions are at the root. In contrast to the German Asylanten, which on the whole insinuates a skeptical distance from Asylbewerber [both of which would be rendered into English as ‘asylum seekers’, although the latter literally translates as ‘asylum applicants’], the term Wirtschaftsflüchtling [economic refugee] was aimed at a special form of ‘asylum abuse’. What was concerned were supposedly only political reasons that were put forward for fleeing ... with alleged motives for immigration that were primarily economic and social”²⁴.

That balance was already negative twenty years ago. Because with a view toward the content of the reporting of press organization in Germany on the topic of integration, it was provided about people of non-German origin in a discriminatory manner not only in the tabloid press, but also not rarely in the so-called “quality media”, as, for example, Georg Ruhrmann²⁵ of the Jena Institute of Communication Research was able to determine as early as the late 1990s.

Just as in Austria, the expression of leader-centering in the German media is also significantly high. Thus, for instance, media researcher Uwe Krüger established as early as the beginning of 2000 for Germany in an analysis of the television evening news that approximately half

²⁴ K. BADE, *Zur Karriere und Funktion abschätziger Begriffe*, pp. 5 f.

²⁵ G. RUHRMANN - D. SONGÜL, *Wie Medien über Migranten berichten*, pp. 69-81.

of all mentions of political figures were limited to a small group of a total of twenty individual figures²⁶. Other studies, such as Genz²⁷, for example, arrive at similar results.

While in 2005, Donsbach and Büttner established yet another trend toward tabloidization in German television news²⁸, Leitenberger, in his study of news broadcasts from the years 1992, 2001, and 2010, which included the main editions and evening editions of the “Tagesschau” (ARD), ZDF “heute”, RTL “aktuell”, and SAT.1 “Nachrichten”, came to the conclusion that typical features of tabloidization such as sensationalization and scandalization did not play any role in German television news, and that the tendencies toward tabloidization that were asserted by Donsbach and Büttner for the late 1990s had significantly weakened and, in some points, were even declining²⁹.

4. *Italy*

In comparison to Germany and Austria, we are dealing with some special features with the media system in Italy. As has already been mentioned, in Italy there is no typical tabloid newspaper. As a substitute, the famous pink newspaper “Gazzetta dello Sport” is referred to from time to time, and in any case, Italy has three daily sports newspapers (“Gazzetta dello Sport”, “Corriere dello Sport/Stadio”, and “Tuttosport”). Or else the “omnibus newspaper” is spoken of, which offers something for all layers of readers, from the tabloid level to the discriminating quality article. But while in Austria and Germany, the print media are more in the center of populist reporting, in Italy this role is taken on by television. This is closely connected to the situation that is not comparable with the other democratic countries in which a media tycoon was at the same time the head of the government and dominated the political life of Italy for twenty years.

In any case, even before Berlusconi’s entry into politics, television in Italy brought completely new basic conditions to the development of

²⁶ U. KRÜGER, *Meinungsmacht*.

²⁷ A. GENZ - K. SCHÖNBACH - H.A. SEMETKO, “Amerikanisierung”?, pp. 401-413.

²⁸ W. DONSBACH - K. BÜTTNER, *Boulevardisierungstrend*, pp. 21-38.

²⁹ J. LEITENBERGER, “Boulevardisierung” von Fernsehnachrichten?, pp. 317, 320.

political competition. The weakening of social divisions for the generating of political identities and the process of erosion of the political parties that was associated with this led to a deficit in political communication and political representation, a deficit that was filled by television. In TV-based politics, an extreme personalization of politics and of media reporting was practically predestined. This is also because the personalization of Berlusconi's leadership with the duopoly of RAI as the public radio and television company and Berlusconi's private media company Mediaset were connected, since as the owner of one and as head of the government, Berlusconi had access to both TV companies. The competition between the two companies led to the public RAI more and more approaching the TV logic of the private Mediaset, getting further and further away from information and closer to entertainment and talk-showification³⁰. This is completely aside from the fact that as early as the 1990s, the American journalist Wolfgang Aichtner³¹, in his book still worth reading today, *Penne, antenne e quarto potere*, knew to report on the weak autonomy of Italian journalists who encouraged this populism even with quality newspapers in hurried obedience.

The data provided by the Osservatorio di Pavia media research center on the leadership centering of political TV reporting in the Berlusconi era, especially during the parliamentary elections, furnish eloquent information. The *par condicio* that was adopted in Italy for the purpose of a balanced media presence of political figures is likewise a special feature in Europe, but it did not do any damage to the dominance of Berlusconi in the television broadcasters. Sergio Fabbrini³² thus also speaks of a teleleadership of Berlusconi and of the party Forza Italia or the People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà, PdL) as a teaparty.

This tendency toward personalization and leaderization also remained after the twenty-year era of Berlusconi. If we take as an example the video presence of the head of the Northern League (Lega Nord, LN) Matteo Salvini, in the evening news broadcasts of the three RAI channels from January 1 to September 15, 2015, then thanks to the recording by the Osservatorio di Pavia, we see that the person in second place, Lega

³⁰ G. MAZZOLENI - A. SFARDINI, *Politica Pop.*

³¹ W. ACHTNER, *Penne, Antenne e Quarto Potere.*

³² S. FABBRINI, *When Media and Politics Overlap*, pp. 345-364.

Nord member Roberto Maroni, president of the Region of Lombardy, came in at around ten percent of the video presence of Salvini (577 to 67, direct quotes 125 to 16).

When Lega Nord head Umberto Bossi entered the political arena and provoked, and at times shocked, the political establishment with his statements, he immediately received broad media attention and coverage³³. At the same time, the ambivalence of the quality media in the print and TV sector came to light. The media attention concentrated on Bossi's anti-politics and his crude speech. At the same time, the broad media coverage of the Lega Nord helped it address a broader public. This is a phenomenon that we can also ascertain with the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) of Beppe Grillo³⁴.

The Lega Nord and Bossi viewed themselves as a movement against institutions, against Rome, and against the South; and today, with Matteo Salvini as Bossi's successor, against foreigners and immigrants, but also against the European Union.

Berlusconi, on the other hand, presented himself as a politician against the establishment, against the "old parties", against the old political class, or against the "democracy tourists", as Berlusconi provocatively assessed and called the members of the EU parliament.

As a final example, reference is to be made to the reporting on refugees. According to the Osservatorio di Pavia in June 2015, the RAI prime time television news marked an exceptional situation that arose from refugees who were associated with criminality, an image which portrayed the country on the verge of collapse, about to be overrun by thousands upon thousands of refugees. But the reality was completely different³⁵.

The increase in sound bite news, the high degree of personalization, and the trust in TV personalities provided the populist parties with a great upswing. The populist parties such as the Lega Nord or Forza Italia/PdL profited from a cyclical process of mutual influencing on the part of the media and political spheres, which strengthened the anti-establishment and anti-party mood. Gianpietro Mazzoleni and

³³ R. BIORCIO, *The Lega Nord*, pp. 71-94.

³⁴ G. PALLAVER, *The Extensions of Television*, pp. 159-180.

³⁵ *Notizie di confine*.

Anna Sgardini very concisely defined this development as *pop politics* when they wrote,

“Once television discovered that politics can increase audience and politicians understood that broad publicity can be achieved if it is subjected to the logic of the spectacle, then pop politics arises from this, a media environment in which politics and culture, information and entertainment, the comic and the serious, the real and the surreal run together in a new, expressive mixture”³⁶.

5. Digression: The role of the new media

In the literature, it is generally established that populism has an especially close relationship to the modern mass media in order to reach the “people” as quickly and directly as possible and in order to mobilize them politically. New electronic media, “as multimedia and hypermedia, additionally offer widely varied possibilities of individualized multimodal addressing and speech”³⁷. The success of populist parties and movements in the media-centered democracies of the West is very much based upon the systematic use of new media: the social media. Text messages (SMS), e-mail, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are among the basic populist media of the day³⁸. In contrast to television and the popular media, whereby the quality newspapers are also to be cited, the conditions have changed for the political parties. The ability to reach the citizens is no longer a technical problem these days, starting out from enormous growth in multimedia and multimodal offerings on the web connected with the possibility of increasing networking of the recipients with each other³⁹. This leads to a continuous *Stimmungsdemokratie* (democracy based upon popular moods) with stagings, symbolic politics, politainment, the ritualization of power⁴⁰, and “post-factual manipulations”, all of which are potent feed for “those ruled by emotions who scorn facts”⁴¹.

³⁶ G. MAZZOLENI - A. SFARDINI, *Politica Pop*, p. 14. Regarding leaderization and populism in Italy, cf. R. BIORCIO, *Il populismo nella politica italiana*.

³⁷ F. JANUSCHEK - M. REISIGL, *Populismus – Editorial*, p. 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ U. SARCINELLI, *Symbolische Politik*.

⁴¹ C. GEYER, *An der Leine der Moral*, p. 11.

The new media are suited for more direct, more participatory forms of democracy. That is one side. But they can also be instrumentalized in order to suggest through fictitious participatory processes that the “true people” and their (populist) leaders make unadulterated decisions beyond parliamentary representationalism in a sort of *direttissima* [supreme directness].

If we look at the use of new media by right-wing populist parties in Germany, Austria, and Italy, then in addition to a series of commonalities, we can also establish some relevant differences.

In an essay, Marcel Lewandowsky analyzes the media practice—namely, Twitter and Facebook—of the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) and the Pro Deutschland party shortly before the 2013 parliamentary elections. Both parties have obviously used the media in question to stimulate a direct democratic movement and to articulate the populist protest against “the ones up above” and against “the ones out there” (the others), even if, for instance, the dissociation from the others during the study period was hardly demonstrable with the AfD⁴². Overall, Lewandowsky comes to the conclusion that both parties have feigned broad support throughout the new media and, in so doing, have presented themselves as the voice of the people. Both practiced provocations and stagings with respect to the political elites, with respect to “the ones up above”, while above all else Facebook and Twitter served as support for the analogous campaigns⁴³.

For Austria, Martin Reissigl shows how the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ), under the modern terms of political communication, “selectively and with a target group in mind drew up a right-wing populist conception of the world according to all of the rules of stimulating media attention by means of provocative surprise, polemical attacks, dramatic exaggeration, and emotional personalization”⁴⁴. Under its new leader Heinz Christian Strache, the FPÖ also uses the new media to stage the proximity of the populist leader to the people in an instrumentalizing manner. Within that context,

⁴² M. LEWANDOWSKY, *Populismus in sozialen Netzwerken*, pp. 42-43; F. JANUSCHEK - M. REISIGL, *Populismus – Editorial*, pp. 14-15.

⁴³ M. LEWANDOWSKY, *Populismus*, pp. 42-43.

⁴⁴ M. REISIGL, *Österreichischer Rechtspopulismus*, p. 96.

communication formats that are atypical for politics are also used, such as music videos of rap songs, comics, and caricatures, in connection with legends and fairy tales. Clicking the Like button has turned into a sports competition and has been built up into a pseudo election. Along those lines, with the fictionalization and narrativization of the inflammatory politics of Islamophobia, the attempt has been made to elude the presence of incitement under criminal law⁴⁵.

The use of the new media in Italy is different from that in Germany and Austria. Populist parties such as the Lega Nord under Umberto Bossi and Forza Italia under Silvio Berlusconi, who made use of different populist emphases, operated with the traditional media, with Berlusconi having his own available. In contrast to these parties, Beppe Grillo's electoral success also came about through the extensive use of the new media. But while neither Bossi nor Berlusconi were capable of adapting their communication style to the new media (although Bossi's successor, Matteo Salvini, has arrived in the digital age), the Movimento 5 Stelle is a product of the web world. This birth began in 2005 with the blog www.beppegrillo.it, which soon grew to be one of the most influential blogs and by 2008 was already ranked by "The Guardian" in ninth place among the most powerful blogs in the world⁴⁶. At the same time, he asked his blog followers to organize themselves independently of the [beppegrillo.meetup](http://beppegrillo.meetup.com) platform. The philosophy, at least originally, was to formulate the conveying activity by and in parties in a web-centered manner, in the sense of post-representationalism. And while with the 2013 electoral campaign, the traditional parties still used the Internet almost exclusively as an information platform, Grillo and his movement played on all of the keys of the digital piano, above all else against the political establishment, but also against immigrants or even, in isolated cases, against women. In many cases, the Grillo movement was compared with civic populism⁴⁷ and was also called a "post-modern populist party"⁴⁸ or "web-based populism"⁴⁹, because this movement did not use

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-97.

⁴⁶ *The world's 50 most powerful blogs*, in "The Guardian"; <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2008/mar/09/blogs>.

⁴⁷ M.E. LANZONE - D. WOODS, *Riding the Populist Web*, pp. 54-64.

⁴⁸ M.E. LANZONE, *The "Post-modernist" Populism in Italy*, pp. 53-78.

⁴⁹ G. CORBETTA - E. GUALMINI, *Il partito di Grillo*.

the traditional media to mobilize its electorate and sympathizers, but rather first and foremost the new media.

6. *Populism as a variable of the media system*

If we draw a comparison between the three countries, then roughly speaking we can determine that there is a differing intensity with the populist penetration of the quality media. In this regard, Italy appears to have the greatest penetration, followed by Austria, and then Germany. According to my thesis, this qualitative ranking is also associated, among other things, with the corresponding media systems, an association that substantially influences, among others, the practice of the mass media conveying of politics.

Hallin and Mancini developed a theory-driven, historical-explorative differentiation of Western media systems along four dimensions whereby their typology differentiates the media systems according to four influence factors⁵⁰: the degree of commercialization, measured by the presence of mass-oriented, high-circulation press; the degree of political parallelism between editorial lines and positions of individual party figures; the degree of professionalism, measured by the institutional autonomy and independence of the professional group of journalists; and the degree of state interventionism, measured by the regulatory influence of the state on the regulation of the media⁵¹.

Within that context, the authors differentiate between the Mediterranean polarized-pluralistic model, the Northern European or democratic-corporatist model, and the Northern Atlantic or liberal model.

It is apparent that the Mediterranean polarized-pluralistic model in which Italy is categorized is more susceptible to populist penetration of the media in general and the quality media in particular than the democratic-corporatist model in which Austria and Germany are classified.

What is characteristic for the Mediterranean model are low circulation of the daily newspapers, extensive consumption of TV and the paramount significance of television as the primary news medium, a high

⁵⁰ D. HALLIN - P. MANCINI, *Comparing Media Systems*, p. 21.

⁵¹ F. PLASSER - G. PALLAVER, *Österreichische Medien*, p. 260 f.

degree of political parallelism, which is expressed in distinct ideological and relational connections between politics and journalism, and limited journalistic autonomy as a result of the direct exertion of influence by the political elites.

The type of Northern European or democratic-corporatist model distinguishes itself through the high circulation of the daily newspapers and a comparatively moderate consumption of television. Public radio and television companies continue to occupy a market-dominating position. The degree of professionalization is high, and in spite of the strong state influence on the public media sector, political parallelism in these media systems is even declining.

On the other hand, the Northern Atlantic or liberal system, with the prototype of the USA, is characterized by moderate print media circulation, a great centering of television, a highly commercially organized media system that, at the same time, is deregulated, and great autonomy of the news editorial staff⁵².

Since Hallin and Mancini have carried out their categorization into typologies, both they themselves and others have supplemented and refined their approach⁵³. Brüggemann et al., for example, come to the conclusion that the liberal model according to the categorization into typologies by Hallin and Mancini is no longer empirically tenable. In their new classification into four empirical models (nordic, central, western, and southern types), Austria is categorized with the Federal Republic of Germany and Switzerland but also with the United Kingdom in the central type, which essentially corresponds to the democratic-corporatist model. Italy is then classified with France, Greece, and Spain in the southern type⁵⁴.

More than a few leaders of traditional parties as well as representatives of governments enjoy riding the discontent and dissatisfaction of the citizens, use populist language within that context, and make demagogic statements that the media gladly and greedily pick up. In any case, though, this phenomenon is not a new one. What is new, however, is

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 261-262.

⁵³ R. BLUM, *Bausteine zu einer Theorie der Mediensysteme*, pp. 5-11; M. BRÜGGEMANN et al., *Hallin and Mancini Revisited*, pp. 1037-1065.

⁵⁴ M. BRÜGGEMANN et al., *Hallin and Mancini Revisited*, p. 1056.

this diffused populism of the “center” that is also present in the media, which attacks and erodes the mainstay of democracy, as well as the fundamental values of such a democracy⁵⁵.

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⁵⁵ G. MAZZOLENI, *Media e Populismo*, p. 133.

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II. Political Actors

Shaping the Populist Challenge

Jörg Haider and His Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs

by Reinhold Gärtner

1. Introduction

The first three decades of Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) history can, on the one hand, be described a time of (German) nationalism with strong remnants of national socialism, and, on the other hand, as a time of liberalism. Most of the time, though, liberalism was not very distinctive.

The FPÖ was founded in 1955. Its predecessor was the Federation of Independents (Verband der Unabhängigen, VdU), a political party founded in 1949 as a platform for post-war-soldiers and the so called *Minderbelasteten* (less implicated; former low ranking NSDAP members) who were entitled to vote for the first time in 1949. The FPÖ's link to National Socialism can be illustrated by the fact that Anton Reinthaller, first leader of FPÖ (1956-1958), and Friedrich Peter, second leader of the FPÖ (1958-1978) had been SS and NSDAP members. Reinthaller had joined the NSDAP in the late 1920s already. After 1945 he was, first, sentenced to imprisonment and, second, pardoned in the early 1950s.

Friedrich Peter had been member (*Obersturmführer*) of an SS combat group (*Infanteriebrigade*). Though his combat group had committed various war crimes, Peter had always pointed out that he had not been personally involved in any of them:

“Peter’s official biography stated that he had discharged his ‘duty’ ‘at the front’ during the World War II. In 1975, Simon Wiesenthal showed that the SS unit in which Peter served was mainly concerned with large-scale slaughter mostly of Jewish civilians behind the front. Yet, Peter continued to be Party chair. His most prominent defender at that time was SPÖ leader Bruno Kreisky who, while protecting Peter, launched harsh and personal attacks against Wiesenthal”¹.

¹ A. PELINKA, *SPÖ, ÖVP and the ‘Ehemaligen’*, p. 253.

As pointed out already, the FPÖ had two ideological wings: on the one hand, it was (German) nationalist and lacking any serious distance to National Socialism. Many former NSDAP supporters found a new political home country in the VdU and FPÖ. The difference between VdU and FPÖ was not so much substance but emphasis, wrote Riedelsperger: “Most VdU adherents shifted their support to the new party, although cofounder Kraus resigned, issuing a bitter statement accusing the new Party of trying ‘to create a new political platform for the once tumbled greats of the National Socialist regime’”². Among the FPÖ clientele were many former Nazis and German-Nationalists who were “causing the center of gravity of the FPÖ to shift to the Right”³.

On the other hand, the FPÖ had liberal roots—but it became more and more obvious that there was not really much space left for liberalism at all.

This started to change for a short period of time in the 1970s. A group of younger FPÖ officials (members who formed the so called *Atterseekreis*) tried to push liberal ideas within the FPÖ. In the early 1970s it became obvious that the FPÖ was more and more seen as a serious political (coalition)partner: As the Social Democratic Party of Austria (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs*, SPÖ) got the relative majority of seats in the newly elected parliament in 1970, the FPÖ supported the SPÖ minority government. And in the political and social awakening of the 1970s there seemed to be more support for liberal ideas than for Nazi and nationalist ones (at least as far as the new generation of FPÖ supporters was concerned).

This development culminated in the SPÖ-FPÖ coalition in the 1980s (1983-1986/7). Bruno Kreisky’s SPÖ lost the absolute majority of seats in the 1983 election. Kreisky’s successor was the former Minister of Education Fred Sinowatz. He formed a coalition government between SPÖ and FPÖ which he led as chancellor. The new Vice Chancellor Norbert Steger (FPÖ) got the most important political office FPÖ had to staff so far. But the liberal era lasted for a short timespan only: during these years in power, the new FPÖ-shooting star Jörg Haider started his campaign to overthrow the liberals for good and in September 1986 he cropped the harvest and replaced Steger as FPÖ-chair.

² M. RIEDELSPERGER, *FPÖ: Liberal or Nazi?*, p. 260.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

2. Jörg Haider: *The early years*

Jörg Haider was born on January 26, 1950 into a stout German nationalist family in Bad Goisern/Upper Austria. Both, his father Robert and his mother Dorothea had been convinced National Socialists, his father being one of the so called “illegals” (*Illegale*—NSDAP Members in the time from the ban in 1933 until the Anschluss in 1938) and member of the Österreichische Legion (an SA formation of Austrian Nazis in Germany prior to the Anschluss). Haider’s mother had been a leading member of BDM (Bund deutscher Mädels).

Haider started his political career within the Austrian Students’ Association (Österreichische Hochschülerschaft, ÖH) in the 1970s, representing the FPÖ’s student party (Ring Freiheitlicher Studenten, RFS). The RFS has always been (and still is) dominated by right wing and right wing extremist student fraternities.

In 1976, he became FPÖ-party secretary in Carinthia and in 1979 member of the Austrian National Council. When the FPÖ formed a coalition government with the SPÖ in 1983, Haider was not part of the government but started to criticize the liberal FPÖ members of the coalition. According to polls, the FPÖ was losing support among voters in these years and so it was not really surprising that in September 1986 Haider could replace Norbert Steger as party leader in a crucial vote. Later on, Steger called this a “Putsch der Burschenschaftler” (coup of right wing student fraternities)⁴. The take-over was carefully planned by a group of hard-core nationalist within the FPÖ (the so called Lorenzener Kreis), who met just a few days before the Innsbruck convention. Finally, 263 delegates voted for Haider and 179 for Steger: “The howling Haider supporters recalled memories of fascist demonstrations, Steger was labelled a Jew and threatened with execution or gassing. Both the mood and the policies of the party were changing”⁵.

It was obvious that the liberal era within the FPÖ was over: there was no more space for liberalism in the future and the stout right wing fraction had taken full command of the party. Consistently, many of

⁴ H.H. SCHARSACH, *Strache*, p. 140.

⁵ R. GÄRTNER, *The Development of FPÖ*, p. 84, and B. BAILER - W. NEUGEBAUER, *Die FPÖ*, p. 370.

the former more or less liberal FPÖ party activists left the party or withdrew from political activity immediately (e.g. Volker Kier) or within the next years (e.g. Helmut Krünes). The final elimination of liberal elements was the founding of the Liberal Forum (Liberales Forum, LiF) and the withdrawal of FPÖ from the Liberal International (1993) just before being expelled because of its shift to the right. Five FPÖ MPs founded LiF in February 1993. They had left the party shortly after the FPÖ had carried out its anti-foreigner popular petition (*Volksbegehren*).

The liberal Steger-era was replaced by the right wing populist era of Jörg Haider. During this time Haider's FPÖ did not only act like other right wing populist parties but revitalized its continuity to German nationalism and to a rhetoric which relativized National Socialism: "Since 1986 the FPÖ and especially Haider were inclined to bring back to life an FPÖ tradition and continuity which included their remembrance to National Socialism"⁶. The FPÖ's German Nationalist ideology can be illustrated by the attitude towards an Austrian nation. In 1958, Friedrich Peter pointed out, that it would be outrageous that expressions like "Austrian Nation" were used in Austrian textbooks. This would be a distortion of history and against common historical knowledge; Otto Scrinzi, FPÖ hardliner and candidate for presidency in 1986 called an Austrian Nation a test-tube baby hardly able to survive and Haider called the Austrian nation a miscarriage⁷.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s hardliners within the FPÖ—like Andreas Mölzer or Kriemhild Trattnig—became stronger and stronger. But Haider also gave power and influence to a group of younger men (*Buberlpartei*) who were not ideologically grounded.

Between 1993 and 1995, Haider's interest in the hardliners and in German nationalism faded away. The main reason for this was party strategy. Haider and FPÖ started the way to become a catch all party, so they had to cut off the sharp and extreme edges—at least superficially.

The German nationalist clientele, though, was still of some importance for FPÖ's future success. So Haider didn't hesitate to give them clear signals at other occasions. One of these signals was the so called "Krumpendorf Affair". At a meeting of former members of the Waffen-SS, Haider

⁶ *Die FPÖ in der vergleichenden Parteienforschung*, pp. 287-288.

⁷ H.-H. SCHARSACH, *Haider's Kampf*.

enthusiastically praised the crowd: Waffen-SS members were, for Haider and the likes, respectable, strong-minded men who in times of adversity stuck to their convictions. Though FPÖ was not in the majority at the moment, “we’re still mentally superior to the rest”⁸.

We find many examples that the FPÖ of Haider’s time still had not distanced itself from the extreme right. The most important issue, though, became the FPÖ’s anti-immigrant policy, its xenophobia. In addition, this issue has been of utmost importance for the FPÖ until today. Haider’s anti-immigration policy began in the late 1980s. Even before the transformation of the until then communist countries in Europa and the growing mobility of the people of these countries, the FPÖ had been warning against *Überfremdung* (foreign domination) and too much influence of foreigners in Austria.

3. Electoral success

In the time in which Haider started as FPÖ-chairperson the FPÖ was, according to surveys, relatively weak. Even before, from its beginning in the 1950s up to 1983, the FPÖ got 7.7% only as a maximum (1959).

Table 1: *The FPÖ in National Council elections*

year	1956	1959	1962	1966	1970	1971	1975	1979	1983	
%	6.5	7.7	7.1	5.4	5.5	5.5	5.4	6.1	5.0	
year	1986	1990	1994	1995	1999	2002	2006	2008	2013	2017
%	9.7	16.6	22.5	21.9	26.9	10.0	11.0	17.5	20.5	26

Source: author’s own compilation based on interior ministry data

⁸ See “Die Zeit”, Februar 17, 2000; http://www.zeit.de/2000/08/200008.reden_tabelle_2_.xml: “Dass es in dieser regen Zeit, wo es noch anständige Menschen gibt, die einen Charakter haben und die auch bei größtem Gegenwind zu ihrer Überzeugung stehen und ihrer Überzeugung bis heute treu geblieben sind. Und das ist eine Basis, meine lieben Freunde, die auch an uns Junge weitergegeben wird. Und ein Volk, das seine Vorfahren nicht in Ehren hält, ist sowieso zum Untergang verurteilt. Nachdem wir aber eine Zukunft haben wollen, werden wir jenen Menschen, den politisch Korrekten, beibringen, dass wir nicht umzubringen sind und dass sich Anständigkeit in unserer Welt allemal noch lohnt, und auch wenn wir momentan nicht mehrheitsfähig sind, aber wir sind den anderen geistig überlegen”.

This was to change rapidly within the next years: In 1986, the FPÖ got 9.7% of the votes cast, in 1999 a remarkable 26.9%. But this was not only due to the newly established political style of (right wing) populism; it was also due to fundamental changes within Austria's structure of political camps. Up to the mid 1980s, Austrians were part of one of the three political camps—social democrat, catholic-conservative, or German national. The political camps had been established in the First Republic already. In these years, the camps were very much isolated from each other but involved in various acts of violence against each other (e.g. Schattendorf 1927; burning of the Palace of Justice (*Justizpalastbrand*) 1927; civil war 1934; NSDAP putsch 1934). Until the 1980s, these political camps still had to a certain extent identification power for parts of the Austrian population.

But these orientations had begun to lose their identifying power in the late 1980s and so the voters' mobility grew considerably. Voters were no longer (emotionally) aligned to a certain political party but became floating voters. Until 1999, Haider was very successful in attracting these new groups of voters. He was even more successful in Carinthia, the new FPÖ stronghold, where he was governor from 1989-1991 and from 1999 until his death in 2008.

Table 2: *The FPÖ: elections in Carinthia*

year	1956	1960	1965	1970	1975	1979	1984	1989	1994	1999	2004
%	15.7	14.9	13.4	12.1	11.8	11.7	16.0	29.0	33.3	42.1	42.4

Source: author's own compilation based on Carinthia election commission data

In the general elections of 1999, the FPÖ got 26.91%, thus 415 votes more than the ÖVP. So the FPÖ was the stronger party in the newly formed ÖVP-FPÖ coalition in 2000. Despite this fact, the FPÖ could neither occupy the Chancellor's office nor could Haider himself be part of the new government. Haider's right wing populist strategy was one reason for Haider's electoral success and that of the FPÖ. But it was achieved at the cost of a possible chancellorship. No political contender was—at that time—willing to make a Chancellor Haider possible. So his lifelong dream faded away despite the electoral success.

4. *Who is number one, who is number two?*

Consequently, Haider had to clear the way for a new number one in the party. This number one was Susanne Riess-Passer. Riess-Passer had been a long time confidant of Haider's (nickname *king cobra*) and now she seemed to be the one who could replace Haider and continue his ideological strategies. Haider's sentimental words "Susanne, it's your turn to lead!"⁹ indicated Haider's future role as number two. But he would not have been Jörg Haider if he would have been content with this position. Haider stood in Carinthia but he was neither able nor willing to keep quiet. He torpedoed the FPÖ cabinet; he performed a policy of opposition and was never really willing to cooperate with representatives of the party he had built up in recent years.

While he led the party, Haider had not accepted anybody but himself at the top of the party. Thus, the FPÖ did not have a considerable amount of people who were really able to lead the party or even to successfully lead a ministry. The fluctuation within the FPÖ cabinet was extraordinary. When Haider noticed serious electoral losses of the FPÖ (Vienna, Styria, or Burgenland), he began openly criticizing the cabinet. Finally, on September 7, 2002, he staged a coup widely known as the "Knittelfeld Putsch". Result of this "implosion of the FPÖ"¹⁰ was the resignation of Riess-Passer and the rest of the FPÖ top management:

"Jörg Haider lockte am 7.9.2002 seine Getreuen in die steirische Bezirkshauptstadt Knittelfeld, um der von ihm nicht mehr wohlgeleitenen FPÖ-Regierungsmannschaft den Marsch zu blasen. Das Ergebnis war für die Freiheitlichen fatal. Obfrau Susanne Riess-Passer ging am nächsten Tag, Klubchef Peter Westenthaler zog den Hut und sagte Adieu und Finanzminister Karl-Heinz Grasser ward fortan nur noch in der ÖVP gesehen. Ein historisches Wahldebakel folgte. Der sogenannte Knittelfelder Putsch hatte eine lange Vorgeschichte. Schon bald nachdem Haider im Jahr 2000 im Zuge der Regierungsbildung der Freiheitlichen den FPÖ-Vorsitz an Riess-Passer abgegeben hatte, begann sich das Verhältnis zwischen den langjährigen Weggefährten einzutrüben. Sticheleien aus Klagenfurt gehörten zum Alltag der blauen Regierungsmannschaft in Wien. Krisensitzung jagte Krisensitzung, oft nächtelang. In die Luft ging das blaue Regierungsexperiment schließlich wegen der Verschiebung der Steuerreform infolge einer Hochwasserkatastrophe. Angeführt unter anderem von Ewald Stadler rüsteten

⁹ "Susanne, geh' Du voran".

¹⁰ See <http://www.nachrichten.at/nachrichten/ticker/10-Jahre-Knittelfeld-Jahrestag-der-freiheitlichen-Implosion;art449,959883>.

FPÖ-ler vor allem aus der zweiten Reihe für einen Sonderparteitag, was Riess-Passer mit einer Rücktrittsdrohung beantwortete”¹¹.

Chancellor Schüssel threw the FPÖ out of the cabinet and new elections were scheduled for November 2002. Riess-Passer resigned and Herbert Haupt became the new party chair (after a very short interregnum of Matthias Reichhold). The elections proved to be a real disaster for the FPÖ: From 26.91% in 1999 the FPÖ fell to a measly 10% in 2002 and it was not before 2013 that the FPÖ could reach 20% again.

Haider’s undisputed position as number one was challenged more and more, though, within the party in the next years. He saw himself confronted with a new jumped-up man, Heinz Christian Strache. In 2004, Strache succeeded Hilmar Kabas as FPÖ leader in Vienna and in the first months of 2005 it was debated within the FPÖ whether Strache or Haider should be elected as new party leader. As it became more and more visible that Strache would challenge Haider in a crucial vote in the next convention, Haider left the FPÖ and founded a new political party, Alliance for the Future of Austria (Bündnis Zukunft Österreich, BZÖ). The FPÖ no longer seemed to be the area in which Haider could act without contradiction.

5. *Haider and the BZÖ*

In April 2005, Haider and some of his supporters left the FPÖ and founded a new political party called the BZÖ. In 1993 already, five FPÖ MPs had left the FPÖ to found the Liberal Forum (Liberales Forum, LiF)—at that time, it was because of Haider’s fierce xenophobic and anti-immigration policy. This time it was Haider himself who no longer saw any personal political future within the FPÖ. The FPÖ was still part of the government and though the majority of the FPÖ MPs decided to defect to the BZÖ, some of them still remained within the FPÖ (e.g. Böhmdorfer and Rosenkranz).

Carinthia was the only state, in which the BZÖ could successfully gain seats in the country parliament because Carinthia had been an FPÖ stronghold since the mid 1980 and because Haider had been governor from 1989-1991 and from 1999 until his death in 2008. So this result was not really surprising.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Table 3: *The BZÖ: election results*

National Council elections 2006	4.1%	
National Council elections 2008	10.7%	+6.6%
National Council elections 2013	3.5%	-7.2%
Carinthian state election 2009	44.9%	
Carinthian state election 2013*	6.4%	
Carinthian state election 2013 FPK	16.8%	-28.1%
EU 2009	4.6%	
EU 2014	0.5%	-4.1%

* In 2013 both the FPK and the BZÖ ran for election in Carinthia; the former leaders of the BZÖ had changed to FPK late in 2009. Despite this, a separate BZÖ list ran for seats as well.

Source: author's own compilation based on interior ministry and Carinthia election commission data

The main question for the BZÖ in 2006 was whether or not it would get seats in the *Nationalrat*. To get seats, a party has to win at least one seat in one of 39 regional constituencies or it has to get at least 4% nationwide. The BZÖ could not win a seat in a regional constituency, but it got 4.1% nationwide and thus seven seats (out of 183). In the next general elections in 2008, Haider presented himself as reputable political leader—in contrast to the coarse Strache. Haider was omnipresent, and on October 1, the BZÖ scored a remarkable win with 10.7% of the votes cast.

Haider, though, died only a few days later, on October 11.

October 10 is Carinthia's very important state holiday. On October 10, 1920, the voters in the southern part of Carinthia had to decide in a plebiscite whether they wanted to remain part of Austria or to become part of Yugoslavia. A considerable majority voted for staying in Austria (59%). Thus, on October 10, there are celebrations throughout the country and it is not surprising that Haider as governor took part in many of these events. This might to a certain extent explain the fact that he was seriously drunk in the early hours of October 11 and in this state drove his car all too fast and died in a terrible accident.

6. *Right-wing extremism*

There are uncountable instances that show that Haider had no fear of contact with the extreme right at all¹². On the contrary, there is a close connection between Haider's political career and right wing extremism in Austria.

From its beginning, the FPÖ was a party of old Nazis and German nationalists. Beside a short liberal era from about 1970 until 1986, this vigorous right wing faction was dominant within the FPÖ until the 1990s. And Haider himself was, as pointed out before, socialized within this ideology. Bailer and Neugebauer¹³ see a clear "shift towards racism and right-wing-extremism" beginning in 1986, the elimination of the remnants of liberalism and the "restructuring of FPÖ from a members' party to an authoritarian movement under Haider's diktat".

But Haider was too much a strategist to overlook that a party of old Nazis could simply not gain an adequate majority in Austria. So he slowly changed to what is now called right wing populism.

According to National Socialism, Haider was a master of downplaying and relativization. And many of his supporters within FPÖ were acting the same way¹⁴.

In the first election for the European Parliament in Austria (1996), FPÖ got some 28% of the votes cast. Bailer and Neugebauer comment on this as follows:

"Haider's FPÖ has established itself as the most successful, extremely right-wing party in Europe, thus becoming a model for the far right in the other states of the European Community. Even if one does not agree with our estimation of the FPÖ as an extremely right-wing party threatening the contemporary political system, but maintains that it is a populist movement of the right striving to gain power by mobilizing as many voters as possible in order to enforce profound political change, there is little disagreement about the content and style of the policies of the FPÖ at the moment"¹⁵.

¹² B. BAILER - W. NEUGEBAUER, *Die FPÖ*; R. GÄRTNER, *FPÖ*; A. PELINKA - R. WODAK, *The Haider Phenomenon*; H. SCHARSACH, *Haiders Kampf*; G. TRIBUTSCH (ed.), *Schlagwort Haider*.

¹³ B. BEIBER - W. NEUGEBAUER, *The FPÖ of Jörg Haider*.

¹⁴ M. AHTISAARI - J. FROWEIN - M. OREJA, *Weisenbericht*, pp. 28-29.

¹⁵ B. BAILER - W. NEUGEBAUER, *The FPÖ of Jörg Haider*, p. 172.

Other EU members and countries like Israel heavily criticized the ÖVP-FPÖ government that was built in February 2000. One of the reasons for this was the fact that for the first time a right-wing populist party took governmental responsibility in a EU-country. Another reason for the criticism was the fact that FPÖ had never seriously distanced itself from NS-ideology. A clear condemnation of NS-crimes also came only on demand. Finally, in September 2000 a *Weisenbericht* (report of wise men) was presented in which the authors made clear that the FPÖ could be characterized as a right-wing populist party with radical elements, using racist and xenophobic language and at times undertones reminiscent of NS-phraseology.

7. *The end—What is left of the politician Jörg Haider*

Haider died on October 11, 2008, at the age of 58. In the parliamentary elections of November 1986, the FPÖ got 9.7% of the votes. This was Haider's first election as FPÖ chair. In 2002, the FPÖ got 10%. In the next parliamentary elections (2006), Haider ran as head of the BZÖ already. In between, the FPÖ got a remarkable 26.9% (parliamentary elections 1999) nationwide or even 28% (EU-parliamentary elections 1996). The FPÖ had become a serious contender to both the ÖVP and SPÖ, but Haider had not been successful in building a team able to govern. Thus in 2000, the political flight came to a sudden end. The fluctuations within the FPÖ's government team were relatively intense (e.g. Krüger, Sickl, Schmid, Forstinger) and the showdown of Knittelfeld proved that Haider was never really able (or willing) to accept being runner-up.

In 2005, Haider saw himself confronted with a new contender, Heinz Christian Strache, who seriously questioned Haider's role as the FPÖ's number one. Haider did not even try to compete with Strache in a crucial vote but left the party for good.

Haider's last election campaign was for the parliamentary election of 2008. In this campaign, Haider presented himself as the one and only head of the BZÖ. In an outstanding way, he was omnipresent—no one knew about the local or regional candidates of the BZÖ, it was Haider who was on the posters, in the leaflets, and the shining star of party events around Austria. A result of this was the BZÖ's success of 10.7%.

In the elections held in Lower Austria in the same year, the BZÖ got only 0.72% (7,250 votes) while the BZÖ share in the parliamentary elections in Lower Austria was at 6.35% (65,851 votes)—almost ten times as many. The same had happened in the Tyrol with 9.7%. In the elections held in June 2008, the BZÖ did not even run for candidacy.

It was similar in Upper Austria (2.8% compared to 9.9% in the 2008 elections), Vorarlberg (1.2% and 12.8% respectively), and Salzburg (3.7% and 12.2%).

After Haider's death, the Haider nostalgia lasted a bit longer only in Carinthia, where the BZÖ got 44.9% in 2009 (with 38.5% in the parliamentary elections in 2008). But at the end of 2009, the BZÖ was replaced by the newly formed Freiheitliche Partei Kärntens, FPK. And in 2013, the BZÖ faded away for good.

Haider left a shattered FPÖ. However, his successor Strache has had some success in bringing the FPÖ back to life again. In the parliamentary elections of 2008 and 2013, the FPÖ got 17.7% and 20.5% respectively; in 2015 in Vienna 30.8%, in Styria 26.8%, and in Upper Austria 30.4%. In Burgenland (2015), the FPÖ got 15% only—but formed a coalition government with SPÖ.

And in 2016, the FPÖ candidate for presidency, Norbert Hofer, got 35% and thus reached the runoff against Alexander van der Bellen. Regardless of the final result (the first runoff from May 2016 was cancelled by the constitutional court and so a second runoff was held in December 2016; the winner van der Bellen got 54%, Hofer 46%), it was the first time an FPÖ candidate reached the runoff. The maximum, which an FPÖ candidate had gotten so far in presidential elections, was Wilfried Gredler's 16.9% in 1980.

Twice, in 1983 and in 2000, the FPÖ had become part of a coalition government. Twice this happened without Jörg Haider. In 1983, he was too young and in 2000 it was obvious that chancellor Schüssel and the ÖVP could not legitimize a Haider-chancellery among their European partners. So Haider's dream of leading Austria as chancellor had come to an end in the late days of 1999 and the early ones of the year 2000. What Haider did, though, also twice—from 1983-1986 and from 2000-2002—was attack his party and his party's cabinet members. Apparently, Haider could not stand seeing anybody in his party above him.

Haider had been of some importance in Austrian politics in the early 1980s already and during his time as FPÖ leader. Summing up, one can say, though, that Haider was far from being a political genius. He had been a successful party chair, his success was relativized by himself and his egomania.

In his last years, he could only watch from the sidelines that a newcomer had overtaken his party and that his, Haider's, image had faded away.

8. *The FPÖ after Haider*

In 2005, Haider left his FPÖ. At that time, it was not clear whether or not the FPÖ would and could stand up to the new challenger BZÖ. After Haider's death in October 2008, it was obvious that the BZÖ would be the loser in this match. Beside the general elections of 2006 and 2008, the only elections between 2005 and 2008 were held in Lower Austria and Tyrol. Neither in Lower Austria nor in Tyrol could the BZÖ win seats in the regional parliaments, and both general elections made it clear that there was not much room left on the national level either. Under its new leader Strache, the FPÖ made its way back and eventually it got the votes back that had been temporarily lent to the FPÖ.

Strache managed to repeat what Haider had achieved in the 1980s and 1990s: the FPÖ was expanding again. The elections in Burgenland, Vienna, and Styria in 2005 were held in October and the time until then was too short for Strache to gain ground. Carinthia was a special case with the BZÖ - FPÖ controversy and the losses in Lower Austria and Tyrol in 2013 were comparatively moderate. Beside these results, the FPÖ was successful in all other regional elections. Outstanding results were the wins in Upper Austria and Styria in 2015. In Vienna, Strache lost the mayor-match against Michael Häupl and the FPÖ did not come off as successful as expected (SPÖ 39.6%; FPÖ 30.8%), but it seems possible that Strache might become Austria's first FPÖ-Chancellor—a position Haider dreamt about but could never reach.

Table 4: *FPÖ results in regional elections 2005-2016*

	2005	2008	2009	2010	2013	2014	2015
Burgenland	5.7% (-6.9%)			9.0% (+3.2%)			15.0% (+6.1%)
Carinthia			BZÖ 44.9%		16.8% (-28%)		
Lower Austria		10.5% (+6.0%)			8.2% (-2.3%)		
Upper Austria			15.3% (+6.9%)				30.4% (+15.1%)
Salzburg			13.0% (+4.3%)		17.0% (+4.0%)		
Styria	4.6% (-7.8%)			10.7% (+6.1%)			26.7% (+16.1%)
Tyrol		12.4% (+4.4%)			9.3% (-3.1%)		
Vorarlberg			25.1% (+12.1%)			23.4% (1.7%)	
Vienna	14.8% (-5.3%)			25.8% (+10.9%)			30.8% (+5.0%)

Source: author's own compilation

Finally, in the 2017 elections the FPÖ finished third with 26% (ÖVP 31.5% and SPÖ 26.9%). Nonetheless, Sebastian Kurz (ÖVP) built a coalition with the FPÖ—and since December 18, 2017, the FPÖ is in government again.

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The Northern League: Bossi, Salvini, and the Many Faces of Populism

by *Marco Brunazzo*

1. *Introduction*

The Northern League (Lega Nord, LN) is the oldest party of the so-called “Italian Second Republic” inaugurated in the 1994 general election. This is a quite paradoxical result for a party that started as a protest movement. Born in Northern Italy as a group of regional autonomist leagues that were gathered into a single political party in 1991, it transformed itself into one of the most prominent parties of the new party system that emerged in Italy in the early 1990s and into a key component of several government coalitions.

The LN was the main defender of the interests of the “imagined community” of Padania, corresponding more or less, to the regions touched by the Po River. However, the defense of Padania’s interests was not a completely new issue in the political and intellectual debates in Italy. One of the future main intellectuals of LN, Gianfranco Miglio, wrote in 1945 that so-called “Padania”, though loosely defined,

“Has a specific *raison d’être*, its own historical economic and productive—and even linguistic—physiognomy, so it can ask—for the purpose of its full development, and also for the benefit of the whole nation—for a clear and specific position within the new emerging Italy. Italian unity will not function on any other basis ... Northern Italy as a whole ... constitutes a geographical, economic, ethnic, and spiritual harmonious unity, which deserves to be governed by itself”¹.

Miglio was not alone in asserting Padania’s distinctiveness from the rest of Italy: in the post-war period, several local movements (particularly in the northern provinces of Como and Bergamo) managed to build (short-lived) electoral success on anti-Southern prejudice and an assertion

¹ G. MIGLIO, *Unità e federazione*.

of northern regional identity². However, it was not until Bossi appeared on the political scene in the mid-1980s that northern regionalism took the national stage.

Moreover, it was only after the crisis of the *Democrazia cristiana* (Christian Democracy, DC) and the loss of its connections with the electorate from Northern Italy—a trend that did happen with the LN and which is central in most relevant analyses of it³—that a new potential political space was available for the development of *leghismo*. To be successfully occupied, it required a work of political mobilization⁴, which was done through the creation of regional leagues, dominated by one of them, the Lega Lombarda run by Umberto Bossi, until the gathering of most of them into one single political party, the LN.

In the general election of 1987, the Lega Lombarda obtained its first *deputato* (6.7% in the local electoral constituency of Como-Sondrio-Varese) and *senatore* (Umberto Bossi himself, 7% in the constituency of Varese). United regionalist and autonomist movements of Northern Italy, already members of an electoral coalition in the European elections of 1989, decided to merge into one single movement, the LN, during its founding congress in Milan December 7-9, 1989. The LN was officially presented in a congress in Milan February 8-10, 1991. Since then, the consensus with the LN has known different fortunes. However, this party was successful in becoming a pivotal party in several government coalitions, specifically those led by Silvio Berlusconi, which were in power between 2001 and 2006, and again in 2008 and 2011.

In 2012, a political scandal concerning the mismanagement of public funds by LN politicians and by members of Bossi's family jeopardized the future of the party. Specifically, judicial investigations conducted by two different public prosecutor's offices (in Naples and in Milan) determined that the son of the LN's charismatic leader and member of the Lombardy Regional Council, Renzo Bossi, had utilized the funds aimed at covering the party's electoral expenditures for personal reasons. Moreover, these investigations demonstrated that such behavior was widespread among the closest collaborators of Umberto Bossi, the

² C. BOUILLAUD, *Les antécédents idéologiques*.

³ I. DIAMANTI, *La Lega*.

⁴ M. DIANI, *Linking Mobilization Frames and Political Opportunities*.

so-called *cerchio magico* (magic circle) that had gained much power after the leader's illness.

As a consequence, the shocked LN electorate started to show a profound dissatisfaction towards a party that was supposed to be “different” from the others. In the May 2012 administrative election, the LN lost more than 50% of its votes in comparison to the 2010 regional election (Istituto Cattaneo 2012). Only in the smallest municipalities did the LN confirm its previous electoral performance. Moreover, the LN won only in those big municipalities (such as Verona) where the candidates had shown a certain degree of autonomy from the party. Umberto Bossi resigned as secretary to become the president of the party, a position that moved him away from the strategic decisions. Many of the leading party members were expelled from the party. The traditional annual meeting in Pontida was “temporarily” cancelled. Many commentators (like Ilvo Diamanti in the pages of the newspaper “La Repubblica”) defined these events an “earthquake” and started to prophesize the end of the LN. The percentage of votes (4,1%) obtained in the 2013 national election confirmed the crisis.

However, the new LN secretary, Matteo Salvini, who was elected in December 2013, has managed to overcome the crisis. Taking advantage of the dismantling of Forza Italia (FI) and the end of Berlusconi's leadership of the center-right coalition, Salvini turned the LN into the inevitable ally for any new coalition between the center-right parties. Moreover, building on the results obtained in the European elections of 2014 showing an unprecedented capacity of the LN to acquire new electoral consensus in areas traditionally less inclined to vote for the party, Salvini defined a new national strategy and reframed the LN's political discourse with a more evident national and Lepenist accent⁵.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first presents the populist rhetoric of the LN under Bossi. The second focuses on the three challenges the LN has faced since the beginning of the new century and the answers provided by Matteo Salvini. The third illustrates an example of the shifting rhetoric of the LN, examining how the LN framed its discourse on EU integration. The general assumption of this chapter is that the LN is a populist party showing an uncommon

⁵ M. BRUNAZZO - M. GILBERT, *Insurgents against Brussels*.

capacity to adapt its stances to the changing conditions of Italy and to the perceptions of its electorate, even if these stances are at times contradictory⁶.

2. *The LN's populist ideology*

The origin of the traditional LN ideology is based upon three pillars. First, from a cultural and identity viewpoint, there is a Northern people distinct from the “Italian” people living in the rest of Italy: people from “Padania” share common historical roots, relative linguistic peculiarities, the same ethos of good workers, and a tradition of local freedom⁷. Second, from an economic perspective, the North, within Italy, is a loser in the game since it produces a great deal but pays too much tax, providing the South with money that is not well spent. Third, in political terms, the unitary Italian state is the source of the northern regions’ problems because of its incapacity to govern well and because of its corrupt political class that does not take into account the real needs of Padanian citizens. As a consequence, the northern regions need a political emancipation under the minimal form of federalism, which can turn into secession if northern claims are not satisfied. Protest against fiscal policy, state centralism, southern and then foreign immigration, and European integration are progressively combined into a distinctive political program supported by an efficient aggressive and populist tone and a rigorous party organization (from the party itself to its many satellite-organizations like trade-unions, journals, youth organizations, and so on)⁸. As Brunazzo and Gilbert point out, Umberto Bossi’s political genius—and the source of his domination of the movement—lay in his undeniable capacity to combine all these (sometime contrasting) elements into a single and distinctive political offer, even if he was sometimes compelled to undertake very “risky” ideological shifts and simplifications⁹.

⁶ *Ibid.*

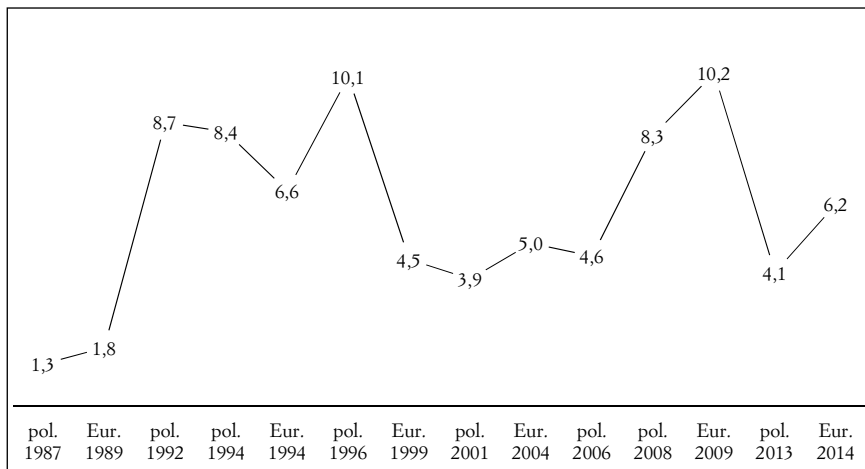
⁷ G. ONETO, *L'invenzione della Padania*.

⁸ R. BIORCIO, *La rivincita del Nord*.

⁹ M. BRUNAZZO - M. GILBERT, *Insurgents against Brussels*.

As a consequence, many authors have pointed out the inconsistency of this political program¹⁰. The artificiality of the identity-building process (the invention of the “Padanian”) has also been emphasized several times¹¹. Moreover, its relative heterogeneity has fueled the debate about the correct labels to apply to the party itself: is the LN a regionalist, autonomist, federalist or, even, secessionist party? Is it a populist, extreme-right wing, or even left wing party? However, this ability to combine different elements into a distinctive political offer¹² was greatly helped by the sudden vacuum brought on by the breakdown of the so-called “First Republic”, i.e. the system of powers that lasted from the late 1940s to the early 1990s¹³. This crisis caused the disappearance between 1992 and 1993 of all political parties that dominated post-war Italian politics, at the same time providing the LN with new political opportunities that it was able to exploit, as both a promoter and a beneficiary of the crisis. Figure 1 gives a general view of the electoral performance in general elections (both chambers) and European elections held in Italy between 1992 and 2014.

Figure 1. *Votes for the LN in the general and European elections*



¹⁰ M. BRUNAZZO - C. ROUX, *The Lega Nord*.

¹¹ L. DE WINTER - H. TURSAN (eds), *Regionalist Parties*.

¹² M. HUYSSSEUNE, *A Eurosceptic Vision*.

¹³ S. FABBRINI, *Quale democrazia*.

Two main general observations can be drawn from these figures. First, the League is a stable political competitor in the Italian political game. It has participated in all major elections and has always obtained a significant percentage of votes. This is particularly relevant if it is taken into consideration that the LN presented candidates only in the northern regions and that it has been substantially absent from Florence southwards. Second, the electoral dynamics are not linear: rather, they are cyclical. After a surprisingly high score in the 1992 and 1996 general elections, electoral results were more modest in 2001 and 2006 before a good performance in 2008. More specifically, in 2008 the LN was one of the only five political parties present in the Italian Parliament, i.e. a dramatic change compared to the previous fragmentation—a success which has been linked to the LN's populist style, as suggested by some scholars¹⁴. Again, it is important to underline the LN's strategic shifts according to the electoral cycles. While it has been a traditional ally of the center-right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi's party for some years, in other periods it strongly criticized Berlusconi, breaking up the political alliance with him.

Corbetta identifies some specific features of the traditional LN electorate: 1) it is based in the northern regions, living mainly in small towns and villages rather than in big cities; 2) in terms of socio-economic and cultural profile, it tends to be less educated and formed by autonomous workers active within small firms and, to a lesser extent, small employers; 3) it is not necessarily influenced by the job of the LN's local administrators; 4) it does not show a strong pattern of party identification even if it does express a strong sense of belonging to local identities, which is a genuine particularity compared to those citizens who vote for other parties¹⁵.

Looking at the party manifestos and at a post-electoral survey on the LN's electorate, Bulli and Tronconi have concluded that the LN is “a multifaceted party, where elements of localism and regionalism are present alongside traits of populism and characters common to other European far-right parties, especially as far as immigration policy is concerned”¹⁶.

¹⁴ P. CORBETTA, *Le fluttuazioni elettorali della Lega Nord*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ G. BULLI - F. TRONCONI, *Regionalism, Right-wing Extremism, Populism*.

Emphasizing the role that the LN has played in the Italian political system in the last fifteen years, other authors¹⁷ have tried to understand if the LN is a *partito di lotta* or a *partito di governo*, concluding that these two souls are inextricably interlinked in this party: if, on the one hand, the LN is a party that wants to be in government in order to realize its political program, on the other hand it uses a language typical of parties characterized by antagonist and antisystemic positions. For this reason, the LN can be considered the only Italian party successfully able to walk the fine line between playing the role of the “opposition in government” and showing that they too can be responsible members of government, capable of governing as mainstream political actors¹⁸.

The ability of the LN to combine all of these elements together at the same time is the result of a long process of adaptation to the different phases of the Italian political system. However, the LN’s behavior has sometimes appeared quite schizophrenic. Represented in government for the first time in March 1994 supporting the first Silvio Berlusconi cabinet, in December of the same year it decided to abandon this experience by refusing to approve a reform of the pension system and a decree modifying the legislation concerning preventive custody for corruption offences. The exit from the government in 1994 was not only due to their wish of not being “corrupted” by “Rome” (the Italian capital in the LN rhetoric is synonymous with old-style politics and corruption) but also by the need of maintaining a distinction from the Berlusconi’s party, FI¹⁹.

Between 1994 and 1998, the LN preferred to renounce being part of a stable coalition, triggering the electoral defeat of the center-right coalition. However, if at the national level the LN opted for going it alone and independence from the other parties, at the local level it pursued the political line of “free hands”, choosing its allies according to its specific interests and to the local political dynamics. During this period, at the national level the LN radicalized its position and argued in favor of the

¹⁷ D. ALBERTAZZI - D. McDONNELL, *The Lega Nord in the Second Berlusconi Government*.

¹⁸ D. ALBERTAZZI - D. McDONNELL - J. NEWELL, *Di lotta e di governo*; M. BRUNAZZO - C. ROUX, *The Lega Nord*.

¹⁹ G. BULLI - F. TRONCONI, *Regionalism, Right-wing Extremism, Populism*; R. BIORCIO, *La rivincita del Nord*.

independence of Padania. However, in September 1998 Bossi addressed the militants at the traditional summer meeting in Venice calling for a new attempt at creating a coalition with the center-right parties. The new coalition went on to win the 2001 general election and the LN played a relevant role in the second Berlusconi government.

Between 2001 and 2006, the LN backed the reform of the judicial system requested by Berlusconi, asking in return for devolution, which was finally approved in 2005 (but rejected in the 2006 confirmative popular referendum). At the same time, it played the role of the anti-system party, severely criticizing its junior coalition partners, the Christian-democratic Union of Center Democrats (Unione dei democratici di centro, UDC) and the post-fascist National Alliance (Alleanza nazionale, AN). Playing this double role of credible ally of Berlusconi and severe critic of the more traditional parties, the LN preserved its distinct identity within the House of Freedoms (Casa delle Libertà, CDL) alliance. At the same time, the LN

“was able to establish a certain ‘issue ownership’ and high visibility on questions regarding immigration (particularly Islamic immigration), constitutional reform (particularly devolution), protectionism (mainly against Chinese products), the Euro, and the European integration process (with the LN vehemently against the single currency and both the widening and deepening of the integration process)”²⁰.

In opposition during the 2006-2008 period, the LN went back into government in 2008, as part of a Berlusconi-led coalition. The composition of that new government very well reflected the changed attitude and strategy of the LN in terms of governmental positions. If in the past, the party had tried to maximize its numerical presence in terms of governmental posts, in 2008 Bossi's party decided to increase its qualitative presence by occupying ministries focused on issues that were highly salient for the party: the ministry of the interior (covering issues such as criminality, law and order, immigration, etc.) and normative simplification (one of the main refrains of the LN is that Italy has an overwhelming number of norms and laws that impede the development of the enterprises), and institutional reform (that is to say, first of all, federalism)²¹.

The 2013 election pushed the LN to the opposition. The political scandal explained above and the leadership change challenged the support

²⁰ D. ALBERTAZZI - D. McDONNELL - J. NEWELL, *Di lotta e di governo*, pp. 14-15.

²¹ M. BRUNAZZO - C. ROUX, *The Lega Nord*.

of the LN, at the same time offering the opportunity of adopting a new political profile. An opportunity that the new secretary Matteo Salvini seized.

3. *Three challenges for the LN*

Three developments pushed the LN into rethinking its role²². The first was the approval of the 2001 quasi-federal reform of the Italian Constitution²³. With the confirmative referendum of October 7, 2001, Italy formally abandoned its once traditional model of a unitary state, which became decentralized after a 1970 reform instituting regional government. Even if this reform has fallen short by far in reaching all the outcomes proposed by its promoters²⁴, it transferred more competencies to the regions in areas such as public health and in all subject matters not expressly covered by state legislation. This reform altered the relations between the national and the regional governments, making the LN's campaigning for federalism and devolution more difficult. In fact, the subsequent (further) federal reform in 2006 of Title V of the Italian Constitution, strongly pursued by the center-right government, which included the LN, was not approved by the Italian electorate in a second constitutional referendum. Moreover, in the debate concerning the new 2016 proposal for constitutional reform (rejected on December 4, 2016), the critiques (even those coming from the LN) were primarily focused on the limits of the proposed new senate of the regions and the majoritarian electoral law instead of the neo-centralistic reform of the Title V of the Constitution.

The second challenge posed to the LN arose from the sudden success of Beppe Grillo's party, the 5 Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) in the 2013 national elections. This party challenged the Lega on its own field: the LN was no longer alone in asking for the change of the Italian political system and the political class. Since its inception in 2009, the M5S narrative has successfully combined elements of a new form of direct democracy with popular disgust at the political

²² J. DEL PALACIO MARTÍN, *La Nueva Lega Nord*.

²³ S. FABBRINI - M. BRUNAZZO, *Federalising Italy*.

²⁴ S. VASSALLO (ed.), *Il divario incolmabile*.

elites. Its anti-establishment, anti-globalist, and Euroskeptical narrative attracted supporters from across the political spectrum and from all Italian regions. The M5S might have been a perfect partner for the Lega. However, it refused to accept any form of political alliance with traditional parties (including the LN).

Finally, a further challenge was posed by the Lega itself and, more specifically, by the political scandal which erupted in 2012 concerning the mismanagement of public funds operated by Lega politicians and by members of Bossi's family²⁵. After more than twenty years, the charismatic leader Umberto Bossi resigned. Therefore, Roberto Maroni became Lega's federal secretary in 2012, followed the next year by Matteo Salvini after the first primaries ever organized by the party.

Taking advantage of the dismantling of Forza Italia and the end of Berlusconi's leadership of the center-right coalition, Salvini has made the Lega the inevitable ally for any new coalition between the center-right parties. Moreover, building on the results obtained at the European election of 2014 showing an unprecedented capacity of the Lega to acquire new electoral consensus in areas traditionally less inclined to vote for the party, Salvini defined a new national strategy and reframed the LN's political discourse with a more evident nationalistic and Lepenist accent.

Salvini started a revolution not only for the LN but also, and more in general, for the Italian center-right. The new secretary tried to make the LN competitive outside the regional territories where it was traditionally stronger, transforming the Lega into a national party, representing a national (and not only northern) interest. In Salvini's new rhetoric, there is no room for an anti-Italian accent. If Bossi acquired visibility thanks to his vehement attacks on the *il Tricolore* (the Italian flag), Salvini tried to build a political discourse in which nationalism substituted secessionism and separatism. Salvini did not renounce its populist and anti-systemic style, but he preferred to focus on issues perceived as problematic in the entire Italian territory, such as Italian participation in the Euro and immigration.

Nowadays, the enemy is no longer Rome: it is Brussels and the European institutions that threaten national sovereignty and national interests²⁶.

²⁵ ISTITUTO CATTANEO, 9 maggio 2012: *Elezioni comunali 2012*.

²⁶ M. BRUNAZZO - M. GILBERT, *Insurgents against Brussels*.

This ideological revolution has mirrored the transformations of other right-wing parties in Europe. It also reflected the traditional capacity of the Lega to “listen to the voice of the people”. If, at the beginning of the 1990s, relations between the center and the peripheries were politically salient in many European states, today the fight against the austerity imposed by the EU and, more generally, the risks posed by globalization to the national economies and sovereignties are more rewarding in electoral terms.

4. *The LN and the political discourse about the EU*

Centò Bull explains the plasticity of the LN’s political offer as a case of “simulative politics”, that is to say “a form of political communication that ... articulates demands which are not supposed to be taken seriously and implemented, but which are nevertheless constantly rearticulated with politicians being criticized—as part of the performance—for not implementing them”²⁷. The LN’s EU policy is an interesting example.

Three periods can be distinguished in the LN’s discourse about European integration. The first goes from its foundation at the end of the 1980s to Italy’s entry into the common currency in 1998. During this period, the LN’s position toward the EU was largely in favor of EU integration. As Huyseune²⁸ points out, in this period the LN considered the post-Westphalian nation-state to be definitely outmoded. The end of the Cold War opened up new possibilities of self-determination for the European territories and regions. Globalization and EU integration pushed for the marginalization of centralized nation-states. In other words, the EU created the condition for a stronger Padania in a weaker Italian state. According to the LN, the problem was once again Italy. With its highly bureaucratic institutions and its territorial imbalances, Italy obstructed the development of Padania, the only fully Europeanized area in the country: the level of economic well-being was one of the highest in Europe and the entrepreneurial skills well known even outside Europe. Moreover, Padanians shared with the peoples living north of the Alps the

²⁷ I. BLÜHDORN, *Sustaining the Unsustainable*, pp. 267-268, quoted in A. CENTÒ BULL, *Addressing Contradictory Needs*, p. 431.

²⁸ M. HUYSEUNE, *A Eurosceptic Vision*.

same labor ethic²⁹ and, therefore, it was much more similar to Northern and Central Europe than to Southern Italy, which, on the contrary, was closer to Africa and to the Mediterranean countries³⁰.

In this period, the LN supported the idea of stronger EU regulations against corruption (useful for the Southern Italian regions while undermining Padania's economic development). It was also in favor of stronger EU institutions, considered a constraint to Italy state's power. Moreover, the LN was in favor of Italy's entry in the first group of countries adopting the common currency: the "convergence criteria regarding deficit and debt reduction would help decrease wasteful state expenditures while preventing competitive devaluations (which promote inflation) from being pursued by Rome"³¹.

Things changed when the EU refused to recognize Padania as an independent state after the secessionist turn of the LN and when Italy entered the Economic and Monetary Union. As Bossi stated in the federal assembly in Milan in March 1998,

"[T]he idea born in the postwar years to abjure new wars between European states is now giving birth to a monster that will breed neither democracy nor stability nor economic benefits for all. It can't bring about democracy since its parliament won't legislate: it will be a Europe of big capital. The people—artisans, entrepreneurs, ordinary citizens— will not be included either now or in the future because a genuine European polity is not going to be born ... No matter how you look at it, this Europe is undeniably a mere defense of the European market, that is to say an act of protectionism, and like all protectionist measures it will favor big business, the great enterprises who have the nation-state as their interlocutor. These are the same powers who currently thrive thanks to the money of the states they dominate, and they are making monetary union in order to strengthen their hold over the nation-state"³².

Moreover,

"By entering Europe, Italy will no longer possess the tool of monetary policy. In other words, if it doesn't have enough cash it won't just be able to print off government bonds, and won't be able to help the economy by devaluation, but since it will only have fiscal powers left to work with, it will have to find the cash it needs by filching it

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³⁰ B. GIORDANO, *The Politics of the Northern League*.

³¹ R.S. CHARI - S. ILTANEN - S. KRITZINGER, *Examining and Explaining the Northern League's 'U-Turn' from Europe*, p. 428.

³² U. BOSSI, *Discorso*.

straight from the pockets of the people, which obviously means increasing the burden of taxation”³³.

The year 1998, in other words, marked the beginning of the LN’s Euroskeptical narrative. However, contrary to its self-definition as the harshest opponent of Community policies and integration, the LN’s political action remained nuanced. For example, the LN still claimed not to be against “Europe per se”, but against the allegedly undemocratic nature of the “continental super-state”: “from a purely theoretical point of view Europe might be the right way (*sintesi ideale*) to fully achieve the federal model of unity between Europe’s peoples. Wrongly, the idea that the LN is to be considered one of the so-called Euroskeptical political movements is common sense”³⁴. In addition, the LN voted in Parliament to adopt both the Nice and Lisbon treaties, under the pressure of its allies together with the parliamentary center-left opposition. As these episodes show, the LN endorsed Euroscepticism when the EU attracted popular resentment, but was open to compromise in times of low salience of EU issues³⁵.

However, the end of Berlusconi’s government in October/November 2011 and, more importantly, the appointment of the ex-European commissioner Mario Monti as prime minister offered the LN the possibility of becoming the main party opposing European integration in the Italian parliament. However, even in this case, the position of the LN was initially schizophrenic: on one hand, the party leader at the time, Roberto Maroni, denounced the “financial powers that destroyed the life of families, companies, and public accounts”, and claimed “fierce opposition” to the “technocrat” Mario Monti; on the other hand, he assured the LN’s support for the approval of the stability law and the other measures imposed by the European Central Bank. In an interview with the national newspaper “La Repubblica”, Maroni declared, “We will respect the choices of the President of the Republic: in Parliament and will vote in favor of the Stability Law, but we won’t give our vote of confidence to the new government”³⁶.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ R. MARRACCINI, *L’Europa che vogliamo*, p. 60.

³⁵ J. BARTLETT - J. BIRDWELL - D. McDONNELL, *Populism in Europe*.

³⁶ R. SALA, *No dei lumbard a Monti*.

From that moment onwards, the LN's Euroskeptical stances grew progressively. In the 2013 general election, the LN proposed the development of a "Europe of the peoples", based on a number of macro-regions³⁷ and called for a referendum to decide whether to stay in, or withdraw from, the Eurozone. All of this, however, was framed without the party officially defining itself as "anti-EU"³⁸. Quite the opposite: the LN declared itself to be in favor of a different Europe, less technocratic and more transparent and democratic: "We ask that the peoples of Europe should be allowed to express their opinion on the Euro and on the future of Europe. We believe in a different Europe, alternative to the one envisaged by Monti and the European Central Bank"³⁹. At the same time, 2013 the LN's electoral program suggested pro-integration reforms of the EU political system⁴⁰:

- going beyond the austerity policies of the EU;
- rapid action to strengthen political, economic, banking and fiscal union;
- action to give the BCE the role of lender of last resort, on the model of the American Federal Reserve;
- introduction of Euro bonds and project bonds to create welfare and development in Europe;
- not counting spending on public investment for the purposes of the EU's stability pact;
- direct popular election of the president of the European Commission and increased legislative powers for the European Parliament;
- creation of a European sovereign ratings agency;
- central role for Italy in the EU, in the Atlantic alliance, in the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue, and in relations with Eastern Europe;
- Italy to take the lead in Europe and in the world in defending freedom, democracy, human rights, and religious freedom.

³⁷ R. DEHOUSSE, *Europe at the Polls*.

³⁸ P. CASTELLI GATTINARA - C. FROIO, *Opposition in the EU*.

³⁹ "La Stampa", September 9, 2012, quoted in P. CASTELLI GATTINARA - C. FROIO, *Opposition in the EU*, p. 18.

⁴⁰ LEGA NORD, *Programma elezioni politiche 2013*, p. 3.

After the unsatisfactory results of the 2013 election (only 4.1% of the votes), Euroskepticism became much more pronounced and explicit. It is plausible that this shift was also a consequence to the challenges posed by the M5S. Moreover, it is possible that the LN tried to gain consensus from the disillusion of the Italian electorate after several years of economic crisis and inconclusive political negotiations⁴¹. However, it is clear that, under the leadership of the new federal secretary (and member of the European Parliament) Matteo Salvini, the LN launched a number of anti-EU campaigns, including the No Euro Day on November 23, 2013. The EU was openly defined a “dictatorship” and the LN proposed the reform of “all EU treaties”. On the occasion of the 2014 European Parliament election, the LN announced its complete opposition to the common currency, defining it as “a crime against humanity”, on the grounds of which the “EU-criminals, thieves, and murderer bureaucrats” have justified “coups d’état” and “genocides of families and entrepreneurs” across the continent⁴².

Euro difficulties have been considered as caused by the EU itself: for this reason, the LN has committed itself to the project of “dismantling Brussels”. In addition to that, the party has undertaken close talks with the Front National of Marine Le Pen and the Dutch Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV), and it has joined the Eurosceptic coalition European Alliance for Freedom in the European People’s Party (EPP). Independence from Rome is nowadays not sufficient: Italy (and eventually Padania) has to be independent from Brussels, too. Matteo Salvini, the leader of a party long identified by its wish to dismantle the Italian state, has ironically become one of the most vocal backers of Italian national sovereignty⁴³.

5. Conclusion

The Lega has for a long time been defined as a populist movement. Cas Mudde’s famous definition of populism perfectly “fits” the Lega. In his view, populism is:

⁴¹ M. BRUNAZZO - V. DELLA SALA, *Italy between ‘trasformismo’ and Transformation*.

⁴² P. CASTELLI GATTINARA - C. FROIO, *Opposition in the EU*, p. 19.

⁴³ G. SPINA, *Svolta nazionale della Lega*.

“[An] ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”⁴⁴.

Albertazzi and McDonnell (among the most important experts of the LN’s history) offer another carefully crafted definition of populism that fits Bossi and Salvini’s movement precisely:

“An ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous ‘others’ who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice”⁴⁵.

However, there is one key aspect of populism that the definitions of Mudde or Albertazzi and McDonnell do not consider: that fact that populism is somehow independent from the content of the message itself. In fact, Bossi’s LN was the fiercest defendant of Northern Italy’s interests; Salvini is now one of the leader of the Italian *movimento sovranista* (sovereignist movement). Bossi was in favor of a “different Europe”, Salvini supports the idea of dismantling the EU. Brunazzo and Gilbert openly state,

“Few people who follow Italian politics closely would dispute that something important has changed and that, under Salvini’s leadership, the Lega has morphed into a force whose populism is harder-edged and—perhaps—dangerous for the stability of Italian democracy”⁴⁶.

The LN has already offered a lot of food for thought to political scientists and scholars of populism. It is plausible that this will continue in the future.

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⁴⁴ C. MUDDE, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, p. 543.

⁴⁵ D. ALBERTAZZI - D. McDONNELL, *The Lega Nord in the Second Berlusconi Government*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ M. BRUNAZZO - M. GILBERT, *Insurgents against Brussels*.

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Berlusconi as a Circumstantial Populist

by *Giovanni Orsina*

1. *Introduction*

Students of populism consider Silvio Berlusconi to be a populist leader. And rightly so. To be sure, the superabundant scholarly literature on populism provides us with innumerable definitions and descriptions of the phenomenon¹. Berlusconi's political story, furthermore, has been fraught with ambiguities and contradictions, has lasted for a long time, and has changed much over time². Yet features that scholars unanimously consider essential to populism have undoubtedly played a crucial role in the unfolding of that story. Berlusconi has not been a reluctant populist, either. With his flamboyant, egocentric, consensus-hungry personality, he has clearly enjoyed being center stage, telling people what they wanted to be told, and presenting himself as the "true" representative of ordinary Italians, as opposed to self-serving and self-referential professional politicians. His hostility to the waste of time and resources that is required by political mediation, moreover, and his advocacy of a lean, light-handed, minimal state allowing indi-

¹ I will not even try to summarize the long and rich scholarly debate on populism. Neither will I choose a precise definition of populism among the very many available, or propose my own definition. My aim in this essay is that of a historian, not a political scientist or theorist: grasping a clearer idiographic understanding of Berlusconi in its interaction with its historical environment. Many of the features that Berlusconiism developed in order to confront the environmental challenges—emphasis on leadership; simplified language; overpromising; counterposition between good people and corrupt elites—are generally considered relevant to populism. From my standpoint, this is more than enough to justify my using the word in this article. Political scientists or theorists more interested in conceptualization are free to use my idiographic description of Berlusconiism to reassess with greater precision, and according to their premises, where, when, and to what extent Berlusconi was really a populist.

² I have considered Berlusconiism in greater detail in G. ORSINA, *Berlusconiism and Italy*.

vidual desire and entrepreneurial spirit the maximum possible leeway seem to genuinely belong to his personal political “philosophy”. Finally, Berlusconi’s resources have been crucial in allowing him to play the populist card: an exceptional entrepreneurial biography, lending credibility to his offer of managerial solutions to the country’s problems; a substantial patrimony, granting him undisputed control over his party; and—of course—a media empire.

Beside the “subjective” reasons mentioned above, however, the emergence and success of Berlusconi’s populism was also a function of its “objective” circumstances. Furthermore, it is possible to argue that given the historical conjuncture of 1992-1994, adopting populist means and content was the only political option available to Berlusconi. If that is the case, if Berlusconi’s populism can (also) be considered an answer to an historical challenge, then understanding the questions that it aimed to address is crucial for its full comprehension. Starting from this premise, the following pages will first briefly analyze, in the second section, the momentous changes that befell the political domain in all democracies since the mid-1960s, and why those changes were deeper and more far-reaching in Italy than elsewhere. The third section will then present two hypotheses on the Italian political and institutional crisis of the early 1990s (*Tangentopoli*), seen as the conclusion of the processes that had begun to unfold a quarter century earlier. The fourth and final section will place the forms and contents of Berlusconi’s populism within the historical framework outlined in the two previous sections.

2. *The transformation of the political*

Since the late 1960s, politics has gradually lost the ability to control history. Or better: it has gradually lost the ability to convince people that it has the ability to control history. Yet, if history is not heading in the “right” direction, it is only to politics that people can ask to “do something”. As a consequence, whenever history’s course is not promptly and satisfyingly corrected, the blame falls squarely on politics. History provides us with countless examples of power without responsibility. Our current predicament—responsibility without power—is a much less frequent occurrence. This is by no means just an Italian phenomenon. On the contrary, it can be detected in most, if not all, democracies.

In Italy, however, it is exceptionally conspicuous³. Six reasons will be presented below why it has occurred, and why in Italy to a greater extent than elsewhere.

a. We want it all⁴

There had been a postwar compromise between democratic politics and depoliticization according to which, on the one hand, democratic politics should be kept out of both the private sphere and a large depoliticized section of the public sphere; on the other, the expression of the people's will should be disciplined and mediated. But in the 1960s, this began to crumble. Western public opinions started asking for more democracy: "more" in the sense of both "deeper", i.e. truer to its universal promise of self-determination, and "larger"—that is, able to colonize arenas from which it had previously been excluded. This is certainly not the place for even beginning to analyze such a wide and far-reaching historical transformation⁵. For the sake of my argument, though, I must at least point out two of its features. The first is that the demands that individual citizens began making of democracy in the 1960s were connected to their existential expectations, which, starting from that decade, underwent a momentous process of change. "One study compared more than 11,000 teens aged 14 to 16 who filled out a long questionnaire in either 1951 or 1989", notes a book on the US that is significantly entitled *The Narcissism Epidemic*. "Out of more than 400 items, the one that showed the largest change over time was 'I am an important person.' Only 12% of teens agreed with this statement in the 1950s, but by the late '80s more than 80% of girls

³ See Tab. 3, comparing the vulnerability of European party systems to populism, in G. BALDINI, *Populismo e democrazia rappresentativa*. Italy comes on top, together with Belgium, before 2000; and it is considered the most vulnerable European country after 2000.

⁴ *Vogliamo tutto* [We Want It All] is the title of a novel by Nanni Balestrini, which is considered the most significant literary testimony of the "hot" Autumn of Italian workers' unrest in 1969.

⁵ The most relevant description of that phenomenon contemporary to its unfolding is M.J. CROZIER - S.P. HUNTINGTON - J. WATANUKI, *The Crisis of Democracy*. For later scholarship, see for instance: C.S. MAIER (ed.), *Changing Boundaries of the Political*; Ph. CHASSAIGNE, *Les années 1970*; Th. BORSTELMANN, *The 1970s*.

and 77% of boys said they were important”⁶. I will get back to this point in the third section when discussing the changing relationship between politics and time.

The second consideration is that in Italy, the pressure on democracy that started mounting at the end of the 1960s was even greater than elsewhere. More than from the intensity of the events of 1968/69, this is shown by both the protraction and the gravity of protest and unrest throughout most of the 1970s⁷. A sociological explanation of the discrepancy between Italy and the rest of Western Europe will point at the social impact of the postwar economic miracle, which was even more dramatic south of the Alps than north of them. A political and ideological explanation (by no means incompatible with the sociological argument) would instead look at the uncommon strength of revolutionary traditions and paligenetic mentalities in unified Italy; at the way in which those traditions and mentalities had been disciplined yet nurtured by fascism; at their consolidation and even expansion, in an antifascist mold, in the years of the *Resistenza*; and at their robust presence across the political spectrum during the 1950s and 1960s—much more robust, obviously, in the parties that were closer to the edges of that spectrum, but not irrelevant in the centrist, governing parties either.

b. Enlarging democracy

The historical pressure for a “larger” democracy was partly eased, during the 1970s, by yielding to it. That is, by bringing under at least partial public control vast swaths of that social territory that politics and the state had previously left unattended. The story is well known: the growth of the state and public expenditure, the expansion of welfare and social rights, the politicization and redefinition of individual rights pertaining to the formerly “private” spheres of family life and sexuality, are all part of it. In Italy too, as well as in the rest of Western Europe, the boundaries of the political were enlarged in the 1970s. Given the feebleness of the Italian political system, however, the growth of the state quashed monetary stability first, and public finances afterwards,

⁶ J.M. TWENGE - W.K. CAMPBELL, *The Narcissism Epidemic*, chap. 2. For critiques of narcissism dating back to the 1970s, see T. WOLFE’s renowned *The Me Decade and the Third Great Awakening* and C. LASCH, *The Culture of Narcissism*.

⁷ Cf. A. VENTRONE, “*Vogliamo tutto*”.

to a greater extent than elsewhere. In 1990—to take just one example—the Italian ratio between public expenditure and GDP was at European levels, whereas that between public debt and GDP was 100% as opposed to a continental average of 60%⁸.

c. Deepening democracy

The pressure for the deepening of democracy was also partly eased by yielding to it. The widespread desire of citizens to control decision-makers more closely and to have a greater say in the public sphere led to more or less successful attempts at decentralization, to the more frequent use of the referendum, and to the direct election of the European parliament. In Italy, the regional system was completed and citizens were granted the possibility to call for referendums in 1970. In order to address the same need to widen and consolidate the bases of Italian democracy, the Communist Party was also more deeply involved in both the political decision-making process and the public spoils system, with the so-called *consociativismo*. In Italy more than elsewhere, though, the multiplication of policy-making centers enjoying electoral legitimacy had the paradoxical effect of making public institutions weaker, slower, and less effective in addressing citizens' demands. Very soon, for example, the referendum started being used by the tiny but hyperactive Radical Party not to complement representative democracy, but to expose its—notably: the established parties'—oligarchic and self-referential character and distance from the “real” country. This undoubtedly contributed to making the Italian political system more open and pluralistic. Yet it also increased its internal complexity and overall fragility. Citizens voted more often, but the conviction that their voting was irrelevant became ever stronger: hardly a recipe for strengthening the prestige and legitimacy of democratic institutions⁹.

d. Processes of depoliticization

The decreasing ability of democratic politics to control history is also connected to the processes of depoliticization—that is, the transfer of

⁸ Cf. M. SALVATI, *Occasioni mancate*; P. CRAVERI, *L'arte del non governo*.

⁹ Cf. G. DE ROSA - G. MONINA (eds), *Sistema politico e istituzioni*; P. CRAVERI, *L'arte del non governo*.

powers from political and elective institutions to either civil society and the market, or non-elective and (supposedly) non-political public institutions. This transfer has been a consequence of deregulation and privatizations, bureaucratic growth, and the increasing juridification of citizen-state relationships. The expansion of the judiciary, in its turn, has been stimulated and hastened by the growing relevance, both national and international, of the discourse of individual rights. To take just one example of this retreat of the political, the part of the US federal budget over which politics exerted discretionary power “shrank from 50 percent of total expenditures in 1969 to 24% in 1976”. A similar tendency can be detected in Europe, too¹⁰. Depoliticization has often been consciously pursued in order to ease the growing pressures on democracy. In this case, not by yielding to those pressures, as we saw before under points (b) and (c), but by damming them with “there-is-no-alternative” technocratic, judicial, and economic walls, as part of a strategy to re-discipline the democratic electorate by increasing its awareness of the limits imposed by reality. Finally, it goes without saying that depoliticizing initiatives were closely connected with the ever deeper integration of democratic nation-states with each other within supranational institutions¹¹.

Possibly the most far-reaching depoliticizing exercise that has ever happened in Italy occurred in February and March 1981, with the so-called “divorce” between the Treasury and the Bank of Italy. On that occasion, in order to lower inflation and oblige politicians to curb state expenditure, the Treasury gave the Bank discretionary power to decide whether to finance public debt—whereas the previous arrangements had the Bank automatically purchase government bonds that were not absorbed by the market, thereby capping interest rates. The divorce deprived politics of the possibility of pulling not just the monetary lever, but even the fiscal one: the skyrocketing of debt service since 1982—which in 1991 constituted more than 10% of the GDP—would in a few years reduce the discretionary space in economic policy almost to nought. Such a momentous decision was made by Treasury Minister Beniamino Andreatta and the governor of the Bank of Italy Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, with an exchange of letters, without even a discussion and

¹⁰ J. PEN, *Expanding Budgets in a Stagnating Economy*, p. 335.

¹¹ Cf. A. ROBERTS, *The Logic of Discipline*.

deliberation of the Council of Ministers, let alone Parliament or public opinion¹². The divorce, however, was by no means the only avenue to depoliticization in Italy. At the beginning of the 1980s—just to mention another example among many—scholars also began to notice that the Constitutional Court was often exceeding its competences, and entering political territory, in order to compensate for the delays and inertia of representative institutions¹³.

e. The crisis of representation

In the 1970s, traditional political parties and elective institutions began to meet with serious troubles in organizing and representing ever more fragmented, individualized, and protean societies. This also is a well-known story, and there are many possible examples of its unfolding: the weakening of the party system in the 1970s and the emergence of the Greens as a significant new force in the early 1980s in Germany; the success of the Liberal Party in the British elections in February 1974, which saw the aggregate vote for the two major parties fall to 75% from nearly 90% four years before; the far-reaching sociological transformation of the French Socialist Party in the 1970s and of the Gaullists in the following decade; the 1973 landslide elections in Denmark and the end of the four decade-long social-democratic era in Sweden in 1976; and the waning of popular confidence in elective institutions in the US.

Italian political parties had consolidated their dominant position in the institutional and political system at the beginning of the 1960s, with the formation of a new, center-left governing majority including the Socialists. At the end of that decade, though, their ties with public opinion began to grow weaker: in four years, between 1968 and 1972, the percentage of Italians that felt “very close” to a political party diminished from 35% to less than 25%—and fell again below 20% in 1975¹⁴. In the 1978 referendum on the abolition of public financing of parties, 43% of the electors voted yes despite most of the parties being against it.

¹² See G. GARAVINI - F. PETRINI, *Il “divorzio” tra Tesoro e Banca d’Italia*; P. CRAVERI, *L’arte del non governo*.

¹³ P. BARILE - E. CHELI - S. GRASSI (eds), *Corte costituzionale*.

¹⁴ M. MARAFFI, *Per che cosa si è votato il 13 maggio?*, pp. 315 ff.

Furthermore, whereas in other democracies the growing dissatisfaction with traditional parties and elective institution could find a “relief valve” of sorts in the alternation of different political forces in power, in Italy the presence of the largest Western Communist Party—and, although to a lesser extent, of a not irrelevant neo-Fascist party—made that option unviable. Governing formulas did change in Italy in the 1970s, notably with the short-lived experience of a centrist government including the liberals in 1972/73, and above all with the majorities of national solidarity—first with the abstention, then with the positive vote of the Communists—in 1976-79. Yet those changes did not even come close to giving Italians the sense of a real political regeneration. In any case, once the 1980s arrived, all experimentation came to a halt and the political system got stuck on the five-party governing majority (*pentapartito*) as its only possible option.

f. The competitive self-delegitimation of the political

Starting with the late 1970s, Italian parties took to wielding critiques of the political, institutional, and party systems against each other. Those critiques presented themselves in three different forms. In the first place, parties criticized the excessive presence, weight, and power of the party system itself—the so-called *partitocrazia* (partyocracy). They argued that Italian civil society was healthy and dynamic, that parties were suffocating it, and that it should be given more space to breathe. Just to cite one example among many: in his speech at the congress of his party in 1979, Valerio Zanone, secretary-general of the Liberal Party from 1976 to 1985 and a minister several times in the 1980s, emphasized the virtues of civil society and contended that the malfunctioning state was mostly responsible for the Italian crisis. Ten years later, he argued that the Liberal Party had a vital interest “to give a concrete signal of its difference” from the other parties in the way it used power¹⁵. Secondly, parties implicitly delegitimized Republican institutions by arguing that they did not work and should be reformed. In the fall of 1979, Socialist Secretary-General Bettino Craxi argued in favor of a “great” constitutional reform. In 1983, a bicameral commission to study that reform was created. Another bicameral commission was to follow ten

¹⁵ V. ZANONE, *La libertà degli '80*, p. 19; *Il compito liberale in Italia*, p. 97.

years later. This lengthy political and cultural debate, however, led to nothing other than minor institutional changes¹⁶.

The third instrument by which political actors undermined their own legitimacy was the so-called *questione morale*. In the 1970s, Communist Secretary-General Enrico Berlinguer devised an ambitious strategy for his party: by acting as a bridge between East and West, the PCI could promote the reform of both blocs. This would allow the party to avoid making a choice between a Soviet bloc whose shortcomings had by then become undeniable, but which remained essential to communist identity; and a Western bloc that the communists had never ceased to consider unacceptably capitalist and imperialist. When this strategy foundered at the end of the 1970s with the collapse of national solidarity at home and the outbreak of the “second” Cold War abroad, Italian communists found themselves short of political options, and reacted by playing the card of morality: both outside Italy, by insisting on pacifism, multilateralism, anti-imperialism; and in the domestic arena, where they emphasized their own honesty, as opposed to the alleged corruption of the governing forces¹⁷.

All the parties and politicians that I have just mentioned had sound political reasons to behave as they did. The Liberals, a very small party placed in an overcrowded political zone, aimed at increasing their visibility by stressing their difference from larger political forces¹⁸. Craxi wanted his Socialist Party to break the duopoly of the Communists and the Christian Democrats. Berlinguer was desperately looking for a way out of an epochal impasse. Yet, however reasonable their motives, they collectively sawed off the branch they were sitting on. The self-delegitimation of the political establishment, once again, was no Italian prerogative. Suffice it to think of German President Richard von Weizsäcker’s attack on party politics in 1992¹⁹. Yet, to my knowledge, in

¹⁶ Alfio Mastropaolo has devoted great attention to the self-delegitimation of Italian parties in the 1980s, through both the myth of civil society, and the argument in favor of institutional reforms; see A. MASTROPAOLO, *Antipolitica; Italie: quand la politique invente la société civile; La mucca pazza della democrazia; A Democracy Bereft of Parties*.

¹⁷ See S. PONS, *Berlinguer e la fine del comunismo*; A. GUISSO, *Paradigmi della cultura politica comunista*.

¹⁸ Cf. G. ORSINA, *Il luogo storico del Partito liberale italiano*.

¹⁹ See W. RUDZIO, *The Federal Presidency*, p. 59.

no other democratic country was that exercise so zealous, far-reaching, multifaceted, and long-lasting.

3. *Tangentopoli*

The political earthquake that occurred in Italy in 1992/93 is a crucial causal factor in the emergence of Berlusconi as a political leader: had the governing parties not been wiped out by the judicial prosecutions, the immense electoral space that the Cavaliere so skilfully colonized would never have become available. Moreover, as we shall see in greater detail in the next paragraph, if Berlusconi used populist “instruments”, this is also because in the crisis of the early Nineties, more traditional political resources had been destroyed. That being said, a comprehensive analysis of how the events of 1992/93 led to Berlusconi is far beyond the scope of this essay²⁰. My much more limited argument here is that the populist “content” of Berlusconiism is best understood if we consider the—so to speak—psychological atmosphere that surrounded *Tangentopoli*. That is, the collective emotions that made the judicial prosecutions possible and dramatically amplified their political effects—and which, in their turn, were shaped and enhanced by those prosecutions and their effects. Analyzing collective emotions is never an easy task. The Italian political crisis of 1992/93, moreover, is relatively recent, its memory is by no means pacified, and most of its features have not yet undergone careful scholarly consideration. Given these premises, I shall tread carefully, proposing two hypotheses, a “minimum” and a “maximum”, on how to interpret those emotions.

The minimum hypothesis is that what happened in 1992/93 was not just the collapse of a specific political class or regime, but a crisis of the political domain as such. The story that I have told in the previous section has this crisis as its “natural” conclusion. Since the late 1960s, the growing pressure for more democracy led to its being both deepened and enlarged. Yet, at the same time, democratic institutions met with increasing troubles on both ends, input and output. On the input end,

²⁰ On 1992/93 and its aftermath, see L. CAFAGNA, *La grande slavina*; S. COLARIZI - M. GERVASONI, *La tela di Penelope; L'Italia contemporanea dagli anni Ottanta a oggi*; A. DE BERNARDI, *Un paese in bilico*; P. IGNAZI, *Vent'anni dopo; Italy 1990-2014; Berlusconi's Impact and Legacy*; M. TARCHI, *Italia populista; Tra prima e seconda repubblica*.

because those institutions were not supple and fast enough to “contain” their respective societies. On the output end, because the deepening of democracy had fragmented democracy’s institutional framework and multiplied its decision-making centers; and because of the either unintended or consciously pursued processes of depoliticization. As a result, citizens found themselves voting more, in democracies that could do less.

In Italy, for the reasons that I have explained above, those phenomena were even more serious than elsewhere. Furthermore, politicians themselves contributed to convincing Italians that politics is a problem and not a solution, and to bringing into politics discourses that belong to other domains, such as the *questione morale*. In 1992/93, Italians did nothing else but first connect all the dots, and then prolong the line up to its logical conclusion. And that conclusion was: not only had a specific political class failed and had to be substituted; not only had a specific set of constitutional and electoral arrangements failed and had to be reformed; but politics as a specialized domain of human activity, with its own peculiar rules and logic, was useless at best, harmful at worst, and ought to be both significantly rolled back as to the amount of territory that it controlled and colonized by other, more virtuous domains as to its internal workings. The growing importance of non-elective public institutions—the constitutional court and the judiciary more generally, the Bank of Italy, the independent authorities; the devolution of ever more relevant functions to Brussels; the self-sufficiency of a thriving and progressive civil society: all this would guarantee that Italy is much better off with less politics.

The maximum hypothesis is that in the early nineties, Italians turned politics into a scapegoat. They did not just take to believing that the political domain could be safely and profitably shrunk, if not erased altogether. They convinced themselves that politics was responsible for all that did not work in Italy, and that its sacrifice would finally set things right. As in the minimum hypothesis, in this case by “politics” I also mean both that specific political class and the political dimension in the abstract. In the historical contingency of 1992/93, the magic was to be worked by the political elimination of the most prominent party leaders of the time—the Socialist Bettino Craxi in the first place²¹.

²¹ I have more closely considered Craxi’s role in *Tangentopoli* in G. ORSINA, 30 aprile 1993.

Yet the scapegoating of politics took on more general implications, too; and this meant that, in the future, the same mechanism could be used again, against other political classes. The sheer scale of the political emotions that ran through Italy in 1992/93—the intensity of the desire to get rid of the governing class at any cost—can be taken as a hint that a psychological mechanism was at work, which overgrew the bare events of the crisis²². The widespread feeling at the time that with the downfall of the Soviet bloc and the deepening of European integration, a historical era was coming to an end, traditional rules did not hold any longer, and Italy would soon be required to pay the price for its public profligacy suggests that in the early nineties, Italy may have gone through what René Girard calls a sacrificial crisis: a period of uncertainty caused by momentous historical change that creates an impending threat of violence, and makes the sacrifice of a scapegoat necessary for the reconstruction of the social fabric²³. Elias Canetti's meditations on crowds and power also suggest that in 1992/93 a "reversal crowd" may have been born: a rebellion of the Italians who until then had been prevented from voting the governing parties out of power by the fear of communism and who, once the Cold War was finally over, seized the opportunity to pay those parties back for their arrogance. In Canetti's vocabulary, the opportunity to throw back at them all the "stings of command" that the governing parties had stuck into the Italians over decades²⁴.

Both the minimum and maximum hypotheses imply immediacy. In two different ways, according to two different meanings of the word. The minimum hypothesis implies immediacy as absence of mediation: the conviction that public power and civil society can be directly connected with each other, without any political intermediation whatsoever. The maximum hypothesis implies immediacy as absence of temporal delay: once the scapegoat is sacrificed, all problems will instantly disappear.

²² Cf. P.P. GIGLIOLI - S. CAVICCHIOLI - G. FELE, *Rituali di degradazione*.

²³ R. GIRARD, *Violence and the Sacred*; R. GIRARD, *The Scapegoat*.

²⁴ E. CANETTI, *Crowds and Power*. Girard's scapegoat and Canetti's reversal crowd are two different concepts, stemming from and drawing their meaning and credibility from two different, and very articulate, reflections on human action. Girard can help explain why *Tangentopoli* happened in that very moment; Canetti why it unfolded the way it did; both why it elicited such an emotional outburst directed against the political class. I have elaborated further on this point in G. ORSINA, *Le spine del potere*.

This second form of immediacy is also connected with the withering away of the temporality of the political that is integral to the historical transformation summarily described in the previous paragraph. That transformation, in the first place, implied a process of fragmentation and individualization of society that brought about the depoliticization of time. The community and its institutional representatives do not control time any longer: they just provide a common framework of reference for its measurement, but time belongs to individuals²⁵. Secondly, those individuals have developed a narcissistic mentality that leads to a “here and now” psychological attitude. Christopher Lasch wrote in 1979:

“To live for the moment is the prevailing passion, to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future. It is the waning of the sense of historical time—in particular, the erosion of any strong concern for posterity—that distinguishes the spiritual crisis of the seventies from earlier outbreaks of millenarian religion, to which it bears a superficial resemblance”²⁶.

The refusal of the rules and limitations of tradition that goes with the desire to allow individuals the maximum possible leeway—freedom to be narcissistic included—disconnects the present from the past, thereby also preventing the future from being connected to the present²⁷. Even though this kind of source must be taken with a pinch of salt, it is of some relevance that the frequency of the word “progress” in the books digitized by google enters an era of steep and unabated decline precisely in the 1960s: 1962 in French (*progrès*), 1964 in Spanish (*progreso*), 1965 in Italian (*progresso*), 1976 in German (*Fortschritt*). Only in English has the downfall that began in 1964 been less precipitous, and in the mid-1990s the curve flattened out to horizontal²⁸. “Progress”, it goes without saying, is the word that more than any other has provided a

²⁵ Cf. C.S. MAIER, *The Politics of Time*; see also D.T. RODGERS, *Age of Fracture*, chap. 7: “Wrinkles in Time”.

²⁶ C. LASCH, *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 5; see also T. WOLFE, *The Me Decade*.

²⁷ Cf. M. GAUCHET, *L'avenement de la démocratie*, chap. 3: “Passé, présent, avenir: le devenir écartelé”.

²⁸ This is the link related to English: https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=progress&year_start=1800&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=10&share=&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cprogress%3B%2C0. From this page, the reader can easily search in the other languages. The reader will also be able to chart the staggering growth of the discourse of human rights since the mid-1960s.

political connection between present and future since the last decades of the nineteenth century. Finally, the processes of depoliticization have contributed to the divorce between time and politics, too. Depoliticization through the judiciary has made political time less relevant: judicial decisions are (or at least, they should be) self-contained, are not (and should not be) tied to each other in a program that unfolds in time. If, on the contrary, they are not self-contained and do belong to a program, then time is back—but in that case it is judicial institutions that control it and not political ones. Temporal immediacy, furthermore, is a relevant component of the discourse and politics of individual rights: once something is recognized as a “right”, it must be granted instantly and absolutely. In the end, depoliticization through technocratic bodies or the market does not deny time, but rather entrusts it to non-political hands, either visible or invisible.

4. *Berlusconi's Populism*

Berlusconi's populism has consisted in the first place in his using political means that are commonly associated with populist politics: leadership, media, and “man on the street” language. The importance of leadership in Berlusconiism is impossible to exaggerate. Berlusconi's own visibility and popularity as a tycoon and president of AC Milan have been crucial to his political success. His biography of top entrepreneur matched perfectly with his free-market and managerial ideology—he has truly been, in Enrico Caniglia's felicitous definition, a “program-person”²⁹. It was not by chance that in 2006, half of the voters for his party, Forza Italia, declared in an opinion poll that leadership was their main electoral motive, whereas that motive was chosen by just one seventh of those who voted for the left-wing alliance³⁰. Although many of his would-be dauphins have repeatedly tried to dethrone him, he has always managed to retain absolute, proprietary control over his party and to hegemonize the right-wing coalition, also thanks to his media empire and financial resources. The leader, of course, could never have gotten in direct contact with his followers without television. And would never have been able to win their attention, had he not known how to avail

²⁹ E. CANIGLIA, *Berlusconi, Perot e Collor come political outsider*.

³⁰ G. ORSINA, *Berlusconiism and Italy*, p. 96.

himself of television: that is, had he not used a simple and clear language that all viewers could easily understand³¹.

As I noted before, nobody in their right mind would dare argue that Berlusconi has been a reluctant populist—that he has not enjoyed using television to propose his own charismatic leadership in plain language to all Italians. Yet it is also true that he had neither alternatives nor the time to create them. In just a few months in 1992/93, the conspicuous structures of political mediation that had existed for decades in the center, center-left, and center-right of the Italian political system—networks, organizations, personnel—all but disappeared. To be sure, Berlusconi was able to create a coalition with the forces that had survived *Tangentopoli* and were not on the left—the post-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano and the Lega Nord—but this was clearly not enough if he wished to win the elections. In that historical conjuncture, leadership and the media were his only option. Moreover, when given the opportunity, Berlusconi did not shy away from also resorting to non-populist instruments of political mediation. In 1993/94 he used the widespread territorial web of his firm as an “ersatz party”. In 1996-2001, when in opposition, he accepted the idea that Forza Italia should be provided with stronger organizational and territorial roots, and that it should take in personnel with previous political experience in the old governing parties³². The Cavaliere, however, has never allowed the instruments of political mediation to jeopardize his own leadership. Once again, his behavior stemmed from both conviction and contingencies: he genuinely believed (and still believes) that political mediation is a waste of time and resources; but he also knew that as long as that mediation was underdeveloped, his leadership would remain indispensable. If we wish to understand the Berlusconi phenomenon on the whole, we cannot forget his opportunism, which has been at least as important as his “native” populism.

Berlusconi’s populism has also been a matter of content, not just means. As it is obvious, means and content have often been entangled with one another: we have already noted, for example, that because

³¹ With regard to Berlusconi’s language see A. AMADORI, *Mi consenta*; A. BENEDETTI, *Il linguaggio e la retorica della nuova politica italiana*; S. BOLASCO - N. GALLI DE’ PARATESI - L. GIULIANO, *Parole in libertà*.

³² Cf. E. POLI, *Forza Italia*; A. MARINO, *Forza Italia*.

of his biography, Berlusconi's leadership has been loaded with political substance from the very start. As is the case with the populist means, moreover, the content has undoubtedly been congenial to his deeply held values and convictions. Yet populist contents have also addressed the historical questions that we have summarily analyzed in the previous paragraphs from their more distant roots in the 1960s to their full epiphany in the early 1990s. Placing the Berlusconi phenomenon in its historical context helps us grasp a clearer understanding of his success; of the political options that he had—whatever his genuine desires—and of the behavior of his political opponents.

At the end of the previous section, we identified immediacy, in both its meanings, as one of *Tangentopoli's* crucial legacies: the refusal of political mediation on the one hand, and of temporal delay on the other. Berlusconism's populist contents address this dual demand of immediacy. The conviction that a fundamentally good people is betrayed by a corrupt political elite is the essential trait of populism, which Berlusconism undoubtedly shares. Its version of this trait, however, besides pointing toward the substitution of the old and failed political mediators with new and supposedly more faithful ones, also argues for the drastic reduction of political mediation *per se*. The Berlusconian people holds a weak collective identity. Berlusconism does not lack an idea of Italy, however underdeveloped, and nurtures the pride to be Italian. Patriotism, if not nationalism, can be counted among its features. Yet individualism runs much stronger in its ideological veins: it conceives of the people primarily as a group of individuals. This group of individuals, in the first place, ought to be left alone by the state: Berlusconism refers explicitly to the Anglo-Saxon examples of the 1980s when it argues for deregulation, privatizations, and tax-cuts. Secondly, those individuals—although they are allowed to have different political opinions, aggregate and disaggregate according to them, and clash over them—should not be exposed to an excess of politics: too much politics would overrule their common humanity, create unduly deep fissures among them, and cause political dissent to escalate to detrimental heights. Those individuals, in the third place, must be governed by their “natural” elite: that is, by those who have demonstrated their worth in economic, social, and cultural pursuits, rather than by those who have devoted their lives to an “artificial” activity such as politics. Which means, by the way, that Berlusconi's

populism is not hostile to elites in general, but it is specifically directed against political elites³³.

Once these three steps have been taken—less state, less politics, and a new, non-political governing class—political mediation is in fact reduced almost to nought. The first step minimizes the territory that politics is able to control. The second limits the ability of politics to redefine collective identities and mobilize people into collective action. The third denies the specificity and autonomy of the political sphere, and argues that those who govern need entrepreneurial and managerial rather than political skills. Overall, the argument provides a clear and coherent answer to the crisis of the political that began in the late 1960s and reached its climax in the early 1990s. And it is made even more credible by its being fully consistent with the discourse on the virtues of civil society that has become ever more relevant in Italy since the end of the 1970s. Small wonder, then, that Berlusconi won the elections in 1994. And small wonder that he adopted a populist ideological outlook in the specific version that I have described so far: what alternatives did he have if most Italians were by then firmly convinced that political mediation is harmful, and that all solutions to Italy's plight should be sought in the reduction of its role and scope³⁴?

There is a clear and solid connection between the minimum hypothesis on *Tangentopoli* that I have presented in the previous paragraph—in 1992/93, Italy lived through a crisis of political mediation as such, rather than merely of a specific political class or regime—and Berlusconi's peculiar brand of populism, conceiving of the people as a virtuous conglomerate of individuals that needs not only better, but less political mediation. The connection between my maximum hypothesis on *Tangentopoli*—in 1992/93, Italians turned politics into a scapegoat—and Berlusconi's populist offer of temporal immediacy, on the contrary, is nothing more than a further hypothesis. The importance of scapegoats

³³ I have considered these issues in greater depth and detail in G. ORSINA, *Berlusconism and Italy*, chap. 3: "Berlusconism", pp. 61-88.

³⁴ When I argue that Berlusconi has provided a clear, coherent, and credible answer to the crisis of the political that had reached its climax with *Tangentopoli*, and that this is one of the chief reasons for his success, I am describing a fact, not giving a value judgment. I also believe that the attempt to do without political mediation has wrought havoc upon Italy in the last twenty years. I have provided an overall assessment of the Berlusconi phenomenon in my *Berlusconism and Italy*.

in the populist mindset is well known. Normally, however, scapegoating is simultaneous with the populist political initiative: populists blame a present scapegoat—migrants, the elites, Europe—for whatever troubles the people are suffering, and then argue that the scapegoat's sacrifice will immediately set things right. In our case, on the contrary, the scapegoat's denunciation and sacrifice precede the emergence of the populist leader: when the Cavaliere won his first election in 1994, the governing parties had already been destroyed by the judicial prosecutions supported by the media and the vast majority of public opinion.

How can populist politics be related to the previous sacrifice of a scapegoat, then? The two phenomena can be connected to each other if we assume that the sacrifice has created more problems than it solved, and that populism is somehow addressing them. Elias Canetti gives us a clue as to the presence and quality of those, so to speak, "secondary" problems:

"The crowd advances towards victim and execution in order to rid itself once and for all of its own deaths. But what actually happens to it is the opposite of this. Through the execution, though only after it, it feels more menaced than ever by death; it disintegrates and disperses in a kind of flight. The greater the victim, the greater the fear"³⁵.

Adapting Canetti's insight to our case, we can postulate that Italians were somehow aware of both the magnitude and the unfairness of what they were doing—not only silently witnessing, but actively supporting the destruction, by non-political means, of the governing class that they had voted for decades—and that, afterwards, they were "obliged" to believe in the sudden rebirth of Italy because nothing less than a thorough regeneration could retrospectively justify the scapegoat's sacrifice. Paraphrasing Canetti: the greater the victim, the greater the sense of guilt for its execution, the greater the results that must be obtained for the sacrifice to be vindicated. This premise helps elucidate Berlusconi's populist offer of temporal immediacy—his promise of simple, fast, and painless solutions to Italy's problems—as well as its electoral success. Once again, Berlusconi's charisma and biography go a long way toward explaining this trait of his populism. The withering away of the temporal dimension of politics that I have described in the previous paragraphs has contributed, too. However, it is possible that Italians have also approved of Berlusconi's "magical" features because the promise of

³⁵ E. CANETTI, *Crowds and Power*, pp. 49-50.

miracles soothed the anxiety that the scapegoating had generated by demonstrating that the sacrifice of *Tangentopoli* had been worthwhile.

This essay cannot even begin to consider the populist features of post-1994 Italian politics outside the Berlusconi camp. Yet the fact that immediacy was also promised by political parties other than *Forza Italia* lends force to my argument that Berlusconi's populist features were, at least in part, reactive rather than native. On the left, most of the pre-existing structures of political mediation survived *Tangentopoli*—the post-communist apparatus and political class, notably, but also those of the left-wing factions of the Democrazia Cristiana. This rendered all arguments against political mediation that came from those quarters both inexpedient and scarcely credible. Since the 1980s, though, the myth of civil society and the case for less politics started to be relevant in progressive political and cultural milieus, too³⁶. *Tangentopoli* reinforced those features. This made the post-1994 left sensitive to two discourses, justicialism and moralism, intertwined with each other, both of which implied the downsizing of political mediation. According to the justicialist discourse, the logic of political action should be largely if not entirely subsumed into the logic of legality—the respect of which should be guaranteed by judges and, even more, prosecutors. The many magistrates that turned into politicians after 1994 provided that discourse with a tangible complement. The moralist discourse answered the crisis of political mediation by arguing for better, not less, politics. Its notion of good politics, however, is more ethical than political. As a consequence, its attempt to give relevance and dignity back to politics eventually leads to a further reduction of the autonomous space for political mediation. Temporal immediacy, furthermore, is present in both discourses: if either illegality or immorality are the roots of all Italy's evils, then the ascent into power of either a perfectly legal elite or a perfectly moral one or both is enough to set things right at once³⁷.

Since 1994, therefore, the refusal of political mediation and the promise of temporal immediacy have been present—although in different forms and to different extents—both in the Berlusconi center-right and in

³⁶ Cf. for instance D. SARESELLA, *Tra politica e antipolitica*.

³⁷ Cf. L. RICOLFI, *Perché siamo antipatici?*; M. TARCHI, *Italia populista*, chap. 8: "L'altro populismo. Da Di Pietro ai girotondi", pp. 305-332; G. ORSINA, *Antifascism, Anticomunism, Antipolitics*.

the anti-Berlusconian center-left. To be sure, the sheer fact that the two coalitions were competing with each other prevented the political dimension from collapsing entirely. The strongly polarized political emotions that Berlusconi generated were instrumental in creating or safeguarding ties, however brittle, between the political class and the electorate. Competition obliged both coalitions to emphasize their respective political values, to articulate their political offer, to limit their promises, and to look after their structures of political mediation. Even Berlusconi, as we noted, had to tend to his party's organization and personnel in the late 1990s when in opposition. At the same time, though, the center-right and center-left also continued to avail themselves of anti-political discursive resources because they needed to increase their chances in the political competition. Their intense factionalism prevented the bipartisan implementation of much-needed institutional reforms that could have kept anti-politics in check. And the competitive promise of temporal immediacy further increased the impatience of the Italian public opinion. This helps explain why the Italian sovereign debt crisis of 2011 was perceived as signaling the failure not only of Berlusconi, who was then in government, but of the entire political system that had come out of *Tangentopoli*. And why, once more, the foundering of a specific political system was generalized into the further and final demonstration that political mediation is not only useless but positively ruinous—a conviction that became much stronger than it was even in the early 1990s, because it could build on that precedent. Small wonder, then, that what we have described as Berlusconi's populist immediacy, in both meanings of the word, has become a common feature of all the political phenomena that have emerged since 2011, although in very different forms and to differing extents: Mario Monti's technocratic project, Beppe Grillo's Movimento 5 stelle, and Matteo Renzi's government and party leadership.

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Gianfranco Fini

From Neofascist “Dauphin” to anti-Fascist “Traitor”

by *Lutz Klinkhammer*

1. Introduction

“History is what is more than five years old,” a provocative contemporary observer once said about the periodization of our most recent past. In the case of Gianfranco Fini case, this hits the bull’s eye. After reaching the peak of his power, since 2011 this former prominent politician has become history. In fact, I believe Fini’s rise and fall are the best examples of how an Italian politician politically liquidates himself as soon as he takes an anti-populist stand. A decade ago, it was completely different: in 2009, the newspaper “L’Espresso” wrote a central article about him, where Fini was almost depicted as “Vice President of the Italian Republic”¹, and it was not intended ironically. On the contrary, it described what a lot of people hoped at that time: that Fini, as “chastened” from his Fascist past and as elected president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies and representative statesman, could have now triggered the fall of Silvio Berlusconi. However, it was quite clear that an endeavor aimed at bringing down the rich and mighty prime minister was an all-or-nothing game. When it failed on the occasion of a vote of confidence in Parliament in December 2010, Fini’s political career was over. And just at that moment, a corruption scandal involving his family arose.

If we look at the last twenty-five years of Italian politics, we find Fini’s career and initial steps, and then more interesting questions arise: why didn’t Fini become the Italian Le Pen? Why isn’t there a comprehensive radical right-wing party in Italy comparable to the Front National²?

¹ The explicit expression used by M. DAMILANO, *Fini strategie*.

² The Lega Nord is still a regional party with a strong asymmetric presence in Northern Italy with respect to Southern Italy.

This is my answer: among other things, it was because Fini split and weakened the Italian right with his anti-populist turn.

2. *The newcomer*

When Fini started his career, this situation was anything but certain³. It is therefore necessary to look back at 1989 and consider the central role played at that time by Bettino Craxi, head of the Socialist Party and prime minister. In fact, on December 22, 1987, he invited the thirty-five year-old newly elected head of the Neofascist Party, Gianfranco Fini, to a political meeting, face to face. This fact caused ripples in public opinion, because since the exclusion of Benito Mussolini, the Socialist Party wanted nothing in common with fascism, a model to which the Italian Social Movement (Movimento Sociale Italiano, MSI) idealistically referred. For many years, Craxi's political agenda had advocated a "major reform" concerning changes in national institutions and even in the constitution. He suggested transforming the Italian democracy, considered by many observers to be stuck in byzantine parliamentary procedures, through a presidential system. The fact the MSI party, still intellectually committed to the Fascist ideal of the leader, would enthusiastically welcome such a turn was a certainty. For the first time, a younger generation (represented by Fini) that had not been personally involved in the Second World War or in the Italian civil war, which took place between 1943 and 1945, made it to the top. Even though in 1987 Fini's party officially rejected the ruling "system" and strove for an alternative, it was ready to take part in the changes in order to foster further enhancements. After the meeting with Fini, Craxi defined the MSI in his statement to the press as a party, which "has its seat in a free parliament resulting from free elections". So the MSI was no longer viewed as a pariah: the old idea of a "constitutional arch"—intended as a group of parties with a common political ground, based on the constitution, including the Italian Communist Party (Partito Comunista Italiano, PCI) but not the MSI—was set aside. Fini went back to this issue in his press release and triumphantly said, "As far as reforms are concerned, it would be impossible and politically foolish to exclude the MSI a priori." After the MSI was asked to define the present meaning

³ P. IGNAZI, *Postfascisti?* and P. IGNAZI, *Il polo escluso*.

of fascism, Fini answered in a way that would almost reveal his future political moves: “I find the fascist salute rather pathetic, I don’t like the term *camerata* (comrade) and I don’t use it. I never wore black shirts and I don’t shave my hair off, but I believe in an ethical conception of life, as many Catholics do.” To the journalists’ remarks claiming that the Catholic Formigoni had taken a similar stand, Fini replied, “Really? I don’t think it’s a bad thing”⁴.

With this meeting Craxi implicitly issued a political seal of approval to the MSI and called into question the basis of Italian politics since 1963, eventually oriented towards the left (towards an “historic compromise”, namely an approach between Christian Democrats [Democrazia Cristiana, DC] and Communists), rather than towards the right. The policy of *sdoganamento* (of legitimation, i.e. to discharge Fascists from their “quarantine”) improved later on with Silvio Berlusconi in order to avoid the exclusion of Neofascists from the political arena and to assert their ability to co-govern, marked their own beginning here. The historian Renzo De Felice took advantage of the conversation between Craxi and Fini and defined antifascism as having been “overcome”, thus causing ripples in Italian public opinion similar to Ernst Nolte, whose stands within the *Historikerstreit* (“historians’ quarrel”) a public debate by eminent historians about the Nazi past in Western Germany were driven by a similar idea of the “normalization” of the dictatorial past⁵.

Craxi’s breach of taboo was considered as an attack not only on the governing DC, but also in particular on the Communists, an attack that was deliberately provoked by Craxi as he attempted to secure votes for his Italian Socialist Party (Partito Socialista Italiano, PSI) and tried to hit the post-war legitimation of the strongest Communist party in Western Europe, which stemmed from a constant reference to the opposition against the historical Fascism. For the PCI, it was a matter of identity to defend the Italian Republic established by the cross-party anti-Fascist opposition (“born out of the Resistance”), its constitution and political culture, the latter since 1963 marked by antifascism.

Because of Craxi’s demand for a strong president and a strong state, political satire marked him especially in reference to the Fascist dicta-

⁴ “la Repubblica”, January 3, 1988, p. 5.

⁵ W. SCHIEDER, *Zeitgeschichtliche Verschränkungen* and W. SCHIEDER, *Faschismus als Vergangenheit*.

torship, with a lot of allusions to Mussolini. Over the years, Giorgio Forattini willingly depicted Craxi wearing Mussolini's black boots, so characteristic for the Fascist dictator that they had been laid in his coffin along with him.

The "normalization" of the Fascist past (similar to the normalization supported in the Federal Republic of Germany by many politicians as well as journalists in the 1980s and clearly visible in the *Historikerstreit*, was originally the Trojan horse of Craxi's Socialists against both the PCI and the DC. The political struggle against the successor parties of the PCI was continued much more radically and sharply by Craxi's pupil, Silvio Berlusconi, during his premiership by using his striking-message strategy within an Italian public opinion now deeply influenced by television as a political medium.

The attempts to find a new constellation of parties or to achieve electoral law reform in order to bring about radical changes in the post-war democracy might have been a short episode in the Italian domestic policy if from 1989 on, the developing national and international politics in Italy had not overlapped. After the fall of the Communist regimes in the Eastern Bloc, and accelerated by the *Tangentopoli* (Bribesville) investigations, the five major political parties in Italy imploded before the very eyes of the Italian public between the elections held in April 1992 and March 1994. Those parties had set and marked the Italian political scenario for three decades. The eternal opposition party in National Parliament, the PCI, took a further step towards its transformation into a social democratic party when it became the Democratic Party of the Left (Partito Democratico della Sinistra, PDS) and broke away from the old Communists (who launched the Communist Refoundation Party/Partito della Rifondazione Comunista, from which a small group named Italian Communists/Partito dei Comunisti Italiani once again separated). Due to its significance, Giovanni Orsina considers this collapse of the political parties very similar to the crises which took place on July 25 and September 8, 1943⁶. Now, in 1993, nurtured by this profound new crisis, the MSI and its leader Gianfranco Fini began to rise. The election successes turned out to be spectacular: in December 1993, the Neofascists won 23% of the city council mandates in Rome, and in 1994 during the regional elections in Latium they gained 26% of

⁶ G. ORSINA, *Siamo tutti figli di Tangentopoli*.

all votes. In 1993, as the leading candidate of the rightist coalition for the office of mayor of Rome, Fini got 47% of the votes and lost the election only by a narrow margin against Francesco Rutelli. In order to “normalize” his past, in December 1993 Fini laid a wreath for the victims of the Ardeatine Massacre. But in March 1994, Fini pleased his party members when he said that he considered Mussolini to be the greatest statesman of the twentieth century⁷. During the election campaign, Berlusconi’s statement in favor of Fini was a clear sign of a new political mood towards the MSI. But its party leader caught the historical moment as well: thus it was under Fini that the Neofascist MSI accepted the long path to a petty bourgeois catch-all party called National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, AN), established in January 1994 in Rome. It was proclaimed a “national, liberal-democratic, European alliance, entirely consistent with the great values of Western culture” and Fini was acclaimed its leader. On the occasion of the founding congress held in Fiuggi in January 1995, Fini dissolved the old MSI in order to distance himself from its Neofascist origins. The grassroots hesitated to join this direction. As a parallel to what happened to the communist left, even the Neofascist right formed a splinter party, tied strongly to the Neofascist tradition, called Social Movement – Tricolor Flame (Movimento Sociale – Fiamma Tricolore), mainly represented by the so-called “left wing” of the former MSI.

Jean-Marie Le Pen did not appreciate the turn of Fiuggi at all, because on that occasion Fini stated he intended to be politically oriented towards Chirac. On the contrary, Le Pen referred to the heritage of former MSI leader Giorgio Almirante as something to preserve⁸. On the agenda set in Fiuggi, there was also the decision to reject the current political system and to strive for a so-called “Second Republic”:

“The First Republic preferred the parasitic bourgeoisie, founded on political clientelism, bribes, and based upon power distribution according to the political stands of the parties ... The Second Republic must provide a significant role for the bourgeoisie ... it must re-establish the market rules and combine them with the principle of solidarity. It must become the ruler of the national deficit ...”⁹.

⁷ In an interview with Alberto Statera, “La Stampa”, April 1, 1994, p. 5.

⁸ U. MUNZI, *Le Pen contro Fini*.

⁹ Speech by G. FINI at the XVII Congresso del Movimento Sociale Italiano, Fiuggi, January 26, 1995. The new situation evaluated by a critical observer on the left: N. TRANFAGLIA, *Le contraddizioni di Fini*.

Behind these attacks on the past, on the so-called “First Republic” blamed as corrupt, with its roots perniciously stemming from the Italian Resistance, there was a highly topical and domestic confrontation in the struggle for political legitimation¹⁰. A new “bipolar” interpretative pattern¹¹ was supposed to break the monopoly of the anti-Fascist culture in order to insert into Italian mainstream culture the apology of the Fascist “losers”, but the truth of the matter is that it aimed at promoting a cultural upheaval, so that the new ideology of “anti-anti-fascism”¹² could be politically accepted. The anti-Fascist culture of the former “constitutional arch” resembled a collapsing dam.

Only the Italian President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, thanks to clever maneuvers during his presidency (1992-1999), was able to hinder an iteration of Berlusconi’s premiership. First, in the transition years up to 1996, several “experts” considered politically neutral, such as the governors of the Central Bank Carlo Azeglio Ciampi and Lamberto Dini, were appointed to form a new government. Then, in 1996, a center-left alliance won the elections, and for the first time the post-Communists got their representatives in the national government. In the following thirteenth legislative session of the Italian Republic, the debate on the new interpretation of the past became fiercer. A liberal conservative intellectual, Sergio Romano, defined this struggle as a “war of memories”¹³. He reached his peak between 2000 and 2001 during the election campaign.

The “retroactive defascistization” of Fascism (this expression was coined by Emilio Gentile)¹⁴, which pushed Berlusconi to be involved in spectacular public statements and in verbal attacks addressed at a demonized enemy—the latter obviously to be excluded from the identitarian populist society—served to conjure up an identity-establishing community, as historic Fascism did by choosing the worship of the *duce* and (cruel)

¹⁰ C. BALDASSINI, *L'ombra di Mussolini*; A. MASTROROCOCO, *Memoria e battaglia politica*.

¹¹ L. BALDISSARA, *Auf dem Weg zu einer bipolaren Geschichtsschreibung?*

¹² S. LUPO, *Antifascismo, anticomunismo e anti-antifascismo*; S. LUZZATTO, *La crisi dell'antifascismo*.

¹³ S. ROMANO, '900; S. ROMANO, *La guerra delle memorie*; a profound historiographical analysis in F. FOCARDI, *La guerra della memoria*.

¹⁴ E. GENTILE, *Dai revisionisti bugie sul regime*, Gentile was interviewed by the journalist Simonetta Fiori.

exclusion mechanisms. For Berlusconi, Fascism had an inclusive role model function in the verbal political discourse. It was clear to him that the role model Italy had been following since the change of government in 1963, that is to say Antifascism, could only be levered out by rehabilitating historical Fascism. Therefore, he differed from Fini, who instead wanted to overcome Fascism as a political category, as he stated clearly at the Fiuggi party congress.

3. *Berlusconi's ally*

In the political arena, this struggle ended on May 13, 2001, with the overwhelming victory of the center-right coalition spearheaded by Silvio Berlusconi (an alliance formed by Forza Italia, Lega Nord, and National Alliance), which led to the creation of one of the strongest governments of the Italian Republic since its establishment. Besides Fini as vice-chairman, another four ministers, Alemanno, Gasparri, Matteoli, and Tremaglia, became the representatives of National Alliance. With the election victory of the right-wing coalition, the outcome of the struggle regarding the interpretation of the past also appeared determined. The rehabilitation of Fascism (as the legitimization of Neofascism) was moving forward: in many cities the inscriptions celebrating the Fascist regime which had been erased in 1943 or were fading from time, were now carefully restored. The streets were named after Fascist institutions and party mandarins¹⁵. During the fourteenth legislative session, it was clear that only Fini himself believed in his new interpretation of overcoming the past and that the National Alliance had a strong leading group, which had grown up with the memory of the historic Fascism and its principles. The Tricolour Flame, with the meaningful acronym “MSI” in the midst (standing for Movimento Sociale Italiano [Italian Social Movement]), but for some it might also stand for “Mussolini sempre immortale” [Mussolini always immortal]) remained as the symbol of the party logo chosen by National Alliance.

The presence of that party in the government of an EU country marked a clear break with a tradition lasting for decades in all member states, where the Neofascist forces were marginalized and always part of the

¹⁵ A. MATTIOLI, “*Viva Mussolini!*”.

opposition. In February the forthcoming elections, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder stirred up a hornets' nest when he dared claim to the German weekly "DIE ZEIT" that the European Union had to intervene if the Italian Neofascists were now (in the forthcoming elections), after the short episode of 1994, to return to the government. When he confirmed that the Italian Fascist right wing and Haider's party in Austria had to be treated the same way (i.e. with a political protest and diplomatic "boycott" at the EU level)¹⁶, Gianfranco Fini said Schröder's statements were "grave and ridiculous". Even Massimo D'Alema, the first member of the former Italian Communist Party to become prime minister in 1998/1999, felt formally compelled to reject Schröder's stand. All parties joined forces in a closely-knit national alliance, working particularly well in Italy when criticism comes from outside, especially from the know-all Germans who had dared judge the Italians morally. Even President Ciampi felt bound to step into the breach and to claim a quality seal of democracy for all Italian parties, especially to National Alliance¹⁷. After this declaration by the highest Italian authority, the public transformation process of the Fascist right wing into an approved political actor could be considered completed.

After the European member countries refused to accept the above-mentioned turn of the Neofascist party into the ring of the constitutional parties, it was time for such an acknowledgment to be sought in a more unassailable place: Israel. In November 2003, Gianfranco Fini visited Israel as deputy prime minister and leader of the second largest party of the governing coalition. Before leaving the country, he provokingly talked about Italy's national policy. In fact, with his progressive proposal, which would grant the right to vote in Italian municipal elections not only to EU citizens but also to the non-EU citizens who lived in Italy and had a valid residence permit, he seemed to succeed in surpassing the left-wing parties.

Israel welcomed Fini's dissociation from Mussolini and from Fascism (the latter being part of an era marked by "absolute evil"), with great satisfaction along with his condemnation of Italy's racial laws, and his acknowledgment of antifascism. By visiting Yad Vashem, Fini was

¹⁶ M. GEHLER, *Präventivschlag als Fehlschlag*.

¹⁷ "Secolo d'Italia", February 18, 2000, p. 1; "La Stampa", February 20, 2000, p. 6; "Corriere della Sera", February 18, 2000, p. 1; "Il Giorno", February 18, 2000, p. 5.

able to show to the world that he and his party, National Alliance, had once and for all bid farewell, in front of the Israeli government, to the Fascist regime and its anti-Semitism: “Nothing can justify the murderers of yesterday”, neither the murderers “nor those who could have saved an innocent but didn’t,” explained Fini. “In the future we must bemoan the shameful pages of our past. This is necessary in order to understand the reasons why in 1938 due to ignorance, indifference, complicity, and roguishness, the majority of Italians did not react to the horrible racial laws imposed by Fascism.” When asked if the Republic of Salò could be considered as a shameful page of Italy’s history, Fini answered with a “Yes, of course”¹⁸.

Consequently, a sense of absolute horror reigned among the grass-roots. Alessandra Mussolini, the granddaughter of the *Duce*, left the parliamentary group of National Alliance in protest and founded her own splinter party called Freedom of Action (*Libertà d’Azione*), later renamed Social Action (*Azione Sociale*), going to elections together with other right wing movements under the name *Alternativa Sociale*). As far as prominent regional leaders of National Alliance were concerned, a marked sense of disapproval was in the air. However, none of the second-rank leaders, in political jargon called “Colonels”, was at that time so unwise as to leave “General” Fini and his party. An inner-party opposition was announced, which was unusual for a party still oriented towards a hierarchical structure. There were also counteractions by those who did not conform to the new interpretation of the party leader. Antonio Serena, member of parliament for National Alliance who, a few days before Fini’s journey to Israel, provided all of his colleagues with a videotape on behalf of an association called Freedom of Man. The German SS Captain Erich Priebke, sentenced in 1997 to life imprisonment in Italy for his involvement in the Ardeatine massacre, appeared in the videotape as a victim of a Jewish conspiracy aimed at securing millions in subsidies for the Simon Wiesenthal Center. Fini quickly expelled the representative from the parliamentary group and from the party. A year after his visit to Israel, Fini became foreign minister. Furthermore, in 2006, he announced the upcoming modification of the party logo: the flame and the acronym M.S.I had to

¹⁸ “la Repubblica”, November 24, 2003: *Fini in Israele: “Il fascismo fu parte del male assoluto”*. This position had been anticipated in an interview he gave to Haaretz in September 2002.

disappear from the party logo. It seemed to appear for the last time on the ballot paper during the European elections in June 2009. However, the merging of National Alliance and Forza Italia into a single political group called *Il popolo della Libertà* (The People of Freedom) in the spring of 2009 made the logo issue obsolete, although hardcore Fascist splinter parties still use it today in different forms. Paradoxically, the statements by Fini turned out to be a corrective against the policy concerning the past which was pursued by his coalition colleagues and party members of the right wing, a policy consisting of the uncritical rehabilitation of not only the two decades of fascist dictatorship, but of “the subsequent Nazi-Fascist Salò-Republic” as well.

Craxi's issue regarding an institutional reform was subsequently used as a political lever by his political heir Berlusconi as prime minister. After being rolled back, but only for a short period of time, due to the premiership of Romano Prodi (2006-2008), Berlusconi tried again to implement a major reform after his renewed victory in 2008 in order to gain immunity and continue his career as (hopefully more powerful) President of the Republic. In the end, he did not succeed because of strong civil forces aiming at preventing a Gaullist transformation of the Italian Republic¹⁹. There were also institutional bastions on which the Italian President Napolitano could rely at this point, in particular the legal authorities in Milan. Since 2008, in this tense situation, Gianfranco Fini (although he had been chosen by Berlusconi in January 2007 to be his successor) paradoxically turned out to be the strongest defender of the (so-called “First”) Republic against Berlusconi's presidential attitudes, especially since Fini's election in April 2008 as President of the Italian Parliament, one of the three most important institutional roles in Italian politics, often seen in public as a duty which requires a nonpartisan attitude.

4. *Fini's anti-populist turn*

Since his participation in government in 2001, Fini clearly disassociated himself from his Neofascist past. In an interview with the Israeli newspaper “Haaretz” in September 2002, he publicly backtracked on

¹⁹ Under Matteo Renzi's presidency (2014-2016), the question of a huge institutional reform was more current than ever, but stopped by the Referendum in December 2016.

his former statements regarding Mussolini and Fascism. And in March 2009, he explained to the international press in Rome that it would have been schizophrenic if he once again reaffirmed his old stand considering Mussolini the “greatest statesman of the twentieth century”²⁰. With his statements regarding the commemoration of April 25 in 2008 and his appreciation of antifascism as a value for all Italians (on the occasion of National Alliance’s celebration for the youth organization held on September 14, 2008 in Rome)²¹, this transformation process came to an end²². He went from being a political outsider to the President of the Italian Parliament, thus becoming the second most important politician in the center-right political milieu as well as an advocate for parliamentarianism and party democracy. It continued to be no secret that Fini was the only one in his political party to believe in such a transformation. Therefore, the new mayor of Rome, Gianni Alemanno, who was still committed to the Fascist heritage and to the political legacy of his father-in-law, Pino Rauti, explained to the “Sunday Times” at Pentecost in 2008 that for Italy, Fascism had signified an important step towards modernization. Mussolini’s regime had fostered the draining of the Pontine Marshes and created infrastructure in the country²³. And Minister of Defence Ignazio La Russa, like Alemanno a member of the former MSI, praised “the young people of Salò” during the commemorations on the occasion of the sixty-fifth anniversary of the Nazi occupation of Italy on September 8. Only a few days later, obviously as a response, Fini chose to praise Antifascism—also as a value for the Italian political right, although the right-wing milieu flatly refused it. In fact, Fini was insulted by his own original party and considered a “traitor” to Fascist ideals and his “original family”. In that period, many critical attacks

²⁰ A. GARIBALDI, *Fini: Mussolini il più grande?*

²¹ “la Repubblica”, September 13, 2008. According to “la Repubblica” Fini had stated: “the Italian right wing and the young have to firmly declare without ambiguity that they identify with some constitutional values such as freedom, equality, solidarity also referred as social justice. Since these three values lead the Italian politics, it’s necessary to reiterate that the right wing identifies with them. In Italy it was hard, because there was no right wing able to assert our firm belief in anti-Fascist values”.

²² This transformation process involved Fini’s private life as well, because of the relationship with Elisabetta Tulliani whom he married in 2008, after having divorced from his wife Daniela Di Sotto in June 2007. On December 2, 2007, his daughter Carolina was born, followed by Martina on October 10, 2009.

²³ Capponi, in “Corriere della Sera”, May 12, 2008.

and caricatures awfully described him as the new Italian “Badoglio”. Fini’s new antifascism was also not undisputed by the members of Forza Italia. Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi himself had contributed to the strategy concerning the rehabilitation of Fascism when he explained in August 2003 that Fascism had been a “benign dictatorship”²⁴.

Fini replied indirectly in May 2009 to Berlusconi’s repeated attacks against the Parliament and to his foray concerning a drastic reduction in the number of MPs, saying the Parliament was the decision-making body of Italian politics. It was an apparently banal observation, but for Berlusconi’s populist idea of media democracy with showgirls as candidates for the EU parliament and cabinet decrees converted into laws in Parliament often by votes of confidence, it was not the least obvious. During the campaign for the elections of April 2008, Fini again distanced himself from Berlusconi’s semi-presidential ideas²⁵. In fact, in November 2008 Fini spoke about the danger of “Caesarism” in the case of the creation of the united party of the right wing. During a lunch with Berlusconi at Montecitorio on January 16, 2009, Fini asked the prime minister to not abuse the emergency decrees, a tool of governance invalidating the power of parliament²⁶. Since April 2008 during the elections, in polemic contrast to other trends inside his party, Fini stressed that the People of Freedom party did not arise from Piazza San Babila (where the devotees of Neofascism met) and neither from a prayer kneeler nor under a party tent, but from the ballot boxes! This statement distanced Fini not only from the old Neofascists and from the Christian Democrats, but at the same time also from Forza Italia and from the PD, the new

²⁴ G. LUZZI, *Berlusconi*; P. FRANCHI, *Cavaliere, ripassi un po’ di storia*.

²⁵ February 16, 2008, Interview published by the broadcasting company Rainews24.

²⁶ Fini’s expression about a “risk of Caesarism” dated November 26, 2008, and the article in “la Repubblica” used the expressions uttered by Fini three times in order to underline the distance to Berlusconi, see. *I precedenti*, in “la Repubblica”, February 11, 2009. In March 2009, Francesco Merlo reported in “la Repubblica” on the expression that Berlusconi had considered Fini in private meetings “very close to being a traitor” (“quasi un traditore”), but Berlusconi protested against this alleged quotation (“Il Cavaliere: mai detto Gianfranco traditore. Merlo: l’ha fatto in privato e lui lo sa”, in “la Repubblica”, March 26, 2009). And in Sicily, at the concluding ceremony of the “Parliament of Legality”, Fini said to the young Sicilians, “The Mafia is a dictatorship which destroys the dignity of the individuals and the communities. You have to rebel against it with legality” (“la Repubblica”, March 31, 2009, *Fini tra i giovani antimafia. No al voto in cambio di posti*).

center-left-wing party. With the immigration act (the so-called “Bossi-Fini Act”) and Fini’s approval of homosexual unions in December 2006, as well as his (anti-Catholic) commitment to bioethical issues²⁷, Fini gave the non-Catholic center-left faction a clear sign for rapprochement. At this point, Fini, like the conservative President Ciampi since 1999, was considered by many members of the center-left-oriented middle-classes and by many anticlerics and left-wing liberals as the new sheet anchor for Italian democracy. Even Nicola Tranfaglia, a historian and MP bound to the Italian left, hoped for a new turn in 2010. He stated, “In Italy thanks to Gianfranco Fini’s leadership, there might be a modern and democratic right wing party which differs from Berlusconi’s, and one day it might be a real alternative to the reformist left”²⁸. Although these considerations remained only wishful thinking, it is interesting to see that Fini was considered a “hero’, at least by a part of the radical-chic left because of his rebellion to the still very mighty Cavaliere”²⁹.

Moreover, there is the interesting correspondence between Gianfranco Fini and Piero Ignazi from the summer of 2009, published in the journal “il Mulino”, where Ignazi defines Berlusconi’s system as “a Peronist marsh marked by a state of ongoing Fideist mobilization serving to worship the leader.” Although Fini dutifully considered this an overstatement, he confessed that Berlusconi’s (and Fini’s) PdL was left to “a populist and charismatic danger” and it could not be 35% populistically structured, but rather it should show its “appreciation for government”. Fini’s expectations that the PdL could be converted from its transitional phase to structuredness “in order to flee from the populist temptation” (Fini’s quote) was considered by Ignazi as wishful thinking³⁰. As far as we know today, the wise political scientist was right. Fini is history. But Berlusconi, who is meant in this dialogue between

²⁷ *Riforme e bioetica, le sfide di Fini*, in “la Repubblica”, March 29, 2009, pp. 2-5: Fini was reported on with the phrase “la legge sul fine-vita è da Stato etico”, and Berlusconi, with the new united center-right party, now had the obligation to guarantee pluralism and democracy. *Gasparri e Quagliariello contro Fini: “Non accettiamo lezioni di laicità”*, in “la Repubblica”, August 27, 2009.

²⁸ N. TRANFAGLIA, *Populismo autoritario*.

²⁹ A. LONGO, *Lo sconforto di Gianfranco*.

³⁰ *Gianfranco Fini e Piero Ignazi discutono del future della destra*, in “il mulino”, 58, 2009, 444, doi:10.1402/29934.

Fini and Ignazi with the reference to populism, still has considerable influence in Italy today.

In 2009, though, for a huge segment of Italians it was time to pin their hopes on the new “statesman”, Fini, who could have driven out the populist Berlusconi seeing that he was surrounded by dozens of scandals and trials. In August 2009 according to “L’Espresso”, in a period of fifteen months Fini had been able to “re-invent” himself, from being Berlusconi’s dinner guest, waiting for a succession that would never take place, to an “authoritative institutional reserve”, a metamorphosis that seemed to have been promoted by Italian President Giorgio Napolitano. In a very short time, Fini had become the reference point of a “transversal group in the Italian Parliament, which encompasses both left-wing and right-wing MPs and concocts joint projects, from the citizenship law to the patient’s last will”³¹.

There was, however, a deeper problem behind Fini’s public shift to political positions appreciated more by the left than by the right: a loss of political power, caused by Fini’s absence from government on one hand and the levelling of the Alleanza Nazionale in the party of the United Right: on March 23, 2009, ninety years after the foundation of the Fasci di Combattimento in Milan, Fini concluded the party convention, which approved the end of Alleanza Nazionale and its merger with the PdL³².

The climax was reached in summer 2009, when Fini was criticizing his party colleagues regarding the proposal for the so-called “salva Luana” decree, the question of a self-defined end of life in dignity³³. And Fini (along with five other ministers of Berlusconi’s government: Tremonti, Frattini, Carfagna, Meloni, and Matteoli) went to Genova to the Festa Nazionale of the opposition Democratic Party, speaking about citizenship for immigrants, a question that in 2017 has still not been resolved³⁴.

³¹ M. DAMILANO, *Fini strategie*. Both projects quoted here are still waiting for a parliamentary solution.

³² “la Repubblica”, March 23, 2009: *Fini scioglie An: nel Pdl ma no al pensiero unico* (articles by Bei, Berizzi, De Marchis, Luzi).

³³ G. MOLASCHI, *Senatori cattolici del Pdl contro Gianfranco Fini*.

³⁴ “la Repubblica”, August 20, 2009, *Tutti i big, Fini e 5 ministri alla festa del Pd*; W. VALLI, *Il popolo del Pd sdogana Fini: “Lui è rispettabile, Silvio no”*, “la Repubblica”, August 26, 2009; *Fini: l’Italia sia patria per chi viene da lontano*, in “la Repubblica”,

Against Berlusconi's populist and semi-presidential attitudes, Gianfranco Fini's communicative parliamentarism, flanked by a verbal commitment to antifascism, was perceived as a civil sheet anchor. However, due to the money-based power originating from the media mogul, Fini failed. The former was in need of an important political office, which guaranteed immunity in order to avoid ending up being devoured by the ongoing trials against him (he was accused of bribing judges, of sex with a minor, and more). The conflict between Berlusconi and Fini broke out publicly in spring 2010, in particular in April during the PdL's board meeting when Fini accused Berlusconi of attempting to throw him out of the party as a rebel. In June, the group of MPs around Fini tried to create obstacles to Berlusconi's draft of a law aimed at controlling the media (the "legge bavaglio"). In the end, Berlusconi and Fini found a compromise and the Democratic Party became skeptical about Fini's alleged role as the "defender of legality"³⁵. On July 29, 2010, in a meeting of the PdL's political executive board, Fini, who was absent, was strongly criticized (he felt practically excluded from the party) because of his "lack of coherence with the principles of the PdL". Fini explained that he had claimed only the right to an internal debate and to express different opinions from the party leader³⁶. Only a few days later, the media reported about an apartment in Monte Carlo inhabited by Fini's brother-in-law and sold by Alleanza Nazionale at a ridiculously low price. It was obvious that somebody was prompting an efficient campaign against Fini³⁷. The game now became more politically

August 21, 2009 (obviously a provocation for the center-right party. Minister Calderoli answered sarcastically, "Fini dica qualcosa di destra").

³⁵ F. BEL, *Gianfranco alla fine evita la rottura*.

³⁶ Fini in his public speech at Mirabello, September 6, 2010, when he announced the new political entity named "Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia".

³⁷ The apartment owned by the late Contessa Colleoni was bequeathed in her will to the "National Alliance" and sold by the party in 2008 to an offshore company managed by the Tulliani family ("la Repubblica", May 30, 2017, p. 13: *Caso Tulliani, sequestrato un milione a Fini*; A. LONGO, *Lo sconforto di Gianfranco*). The Berlusconi press still stresses this aspect very strongly today: Amedeo Labocetta: "Gianfranco Fini? Fu il mandante dell'acquisto della casa di Montecarlo", Libero March 22, 2017 <http://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/sfoglio/12336767/amedeo-labocetta-gianfranco-fini-mandante-acquisto-casa-montecarlo.html>. But even worse is the accusation of Fini's alleged connections to Sicilian businessmen Francesco Corallo, the "king of the slot machines" ("la Repubblica", May 30, 2017, p. 13, A. LONGO, *Lo sconforto di Gianfranco*), accused

dangerous. Fini felt compelled to leave the PdL, and at the end of the summer of 2010, he announced a new political group called Future and Freedom for Italy (Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia, FLI). This new liberty from Berlusconi created for Fini the risk of splitting the Alleanza Nazionale wing in the midst of the PdL and of losing a segment of his adherents, especially the traditional Neofascists. The final chord was the next vote of confidence, which Berlusconi would have to survive in Parliament. At this time, Fini seemed the only one still capable of overthrowing Berlusconi. The unspoken conflict in the PdL and the unspoken hopes in the PD culminated in December 2010 in the attempt to get rid of Berlusconi on the occasion of the vote of confidence. Berlusconi's career was said to be on the brink. Each vote was now important, no MP could call in sick. During the days before the vote, the focus was on the presence of the old senators-for-life, but also on the vote of some single MPs from small and "independent" parties such as the South Tyrolean People's Party (Südtiroler Volkspartei, SVP), which might turn out to be decisive. But on December 14, 2010, the attempt by parliamentary maneuvers to overthrow the populist Berlusconi, who was still hoping for a salvific further career leap as president of the republic, failed. In the end, Berlusconi, the clever businessperson known for his "unselfishness", had enough votes behind him. Even the parliamentary representatives of the South Tyrolean People's Party, who had always claimed to preserve traditional and conservative values, voted for him (in spite of his many sex-related scandals and legal proceedings concerning the bribing of judges). This might have occurred because the government had offered to them to resolve an issue regarding an important political symbol, i.e. to decide autonomously about the fate of the hated bas-relief created by Pifrader and other Fascist monuments still present in Bolzano, which were reminders of the Fascist Italianization of South Tyrol. After the vote, only Berlusconi's Minister of Education Bondi, had to pay the bill: when he kept his word and

of tax fraud of several billion euros). On December 14, 2016, the *Giornale Radio Rai 3* reported news about international VAT fraud with Online Games and Videolotteries (Slot Machines), a crime for which Sergio and Giancarlo Tulliani, the father and brother, respectively, of Fini's wife Elisabetta Tulliani, had been investigated. The inquiries already started as early as 2006 when the prosecutor Dr. Smiroldo discovered the connection between games of chance and organized crime. It was only in 2016 that these investigations led to the arrest of Corallo whose father had been convicted in Italy for association with the mafia. Fini's brother-in-law seems to be on the run in Dubai.

renounced the national control of the Fascist heritage in Bolzano, he was attacked by the Neofascist right wing in the PdL and resigned his office. For Berlusconi, he was nothing more than another insignificant pawn, but in political terms Fini could never recover from Berlusconi's ultimate victory in Parliament³⁸. Since then, Fini has become history.

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“Alternative für Deutschland”

The Belated Arrival of Right-wing Populism in the Federal Republic

by *Frank Decker*

1. *Introduction*

For most of its history, the Federal Republic of Germany has proven to be a blank space on the map of European right-wing populism. While some right-wing populist and extremist parties have occasionally been successful at the ballot box since the mid-1980s in Germany as well, those triumphs were primarily limited to the regional realm of state elections without leading to the permanent establishment of a right-wing populist party at the national level¹. The rise of the euro(pe)skeptic Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) has changed this. Having come up just short of crossing the five percent threshold in the 2013 federal elections, the newcomers achieved their first remarkable electoral success in the European elections in May of 2014, winning 7.1% of the vote a little over a year after the party's founding. Even better electoral showings were obtained by the AfD in subsequent regional elections in the eastern German states of Saxony, Brandenburg, and Thuringia in late summer. Support was more limited in state elections in Hamburg (6.1%) and Bremen (5.5%), which nonetheless allowed the party to enter its first state parliaments in the western part of the country as well.

While the arrival of this new kind of right-wing populism within the German party system represents an adjustment that places it more in line with its (western) European neighbors and their respective established right-wing populist parties, the question remains why this phenomenon had failed to materialize and establish organizational structures in

Translation by Philipp Adorf

¹ F. DECKER, *Warum der parteiförmige Rechtspopulismus in Deutschland so erfolglos ist*.

Germany until recently. Work in the comparative field has demonstrated that certain societal crisis constellations—what the American historian Lawrence Goodwyn² refers to as “populist moments”—are usually a prerequisite for the spawning of such parties and movements. In the case of the AfD, the euro and financial crisis played that role. It opened the window of opportunity for a new Eurosceptic party whose primary policy demands—a controlled dissolution of the monetary union and the rejection of a further deepening of the process of European integration—lent themselves to the attachment of a broader right-wing populist platform.

A closer inspection of the party’s origins reveals its ability to draw on an already existing network of social and political structures in this task. The party therefore did not have to start from scratch after its official establishment in April of 2013³. Some of its predecessors both at the party and mass levels were: The Bund freier Bürger, a Eurosceptic party founded in the wake of the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 and disbanded once again in 2000, the Hayek-Gesellschaft, the Initiative Neue Soziale Marktwirtschaft, the Bündnis Bürgerwille, the Wahlalternative 2013, and the fundamentalist-Christian campaign network Zivile Koalition set up by Beatrix von Storch. The latter serves to illustrate that from the outset, the AfD’s political path was built upon a fusion of economically liberal and socially conservative/nationalist positions.

New parties either emerge from within society or after a split from an existing party. The latter also applies to the AfD with certain reservations. Many of its former and current leading figures used to call the center-right camp (CDU and FDP) their home, albeit failing to ever make it past its “second row”. For example, Bernd Lucke, the party’s most well-known face until his departure in July 2015 and a member of the triumvirate that founded the party along with Alexander Gauland and Konrad Adam, turned his back on the CDU because of its policies during the Eurozone crisis, while Gauland pointed to his negative experiences as part of the Berliner Kreis—an alliance of conservative members within the CDU that was openly opposed by party leader Angela Merkel and her then secretary-general Hermann

² L. GOODWYN, *Democratic Promise*.

³ D. BEBNOWSKI, *Die Alternative für Deutschland*, pp. 19 ff.

Gröhe (Gauland had been a member of the CDU for forty years and was head of the Hessian state chancellery between 1987 and 1991). For his part, the former president of the Federation of German Industries (Bundesverband der deutschen Industrie) Hans-Olaf Henkel found his way into the AfD from the FDP via a short excursion to the Free Voters (Freie Wähler).

Such tendencies to part ways with the CDU and FDP are easy to understand if the changes undergone by both parties over the past decade and a half are kept in mind. The FDP failed to pick up the Eurosceptic mantle after party members narrowly lent support to the government's Eurozone rescue policies in an internal party referendum. In other issue areas as well, the party lacked the ability to provide a counterweight to the Christian Democrats by staking out independent positions (for example on tax policy)⁴. Under the leadership of Angela Merkel, the CDU has for its part adopted a more social democratic position on economic policy matters by completely renouncing the liberal reform agenda that Merkel herself was initially still championing. At the same time, the party has also kept on moving to the center on socio-cultural matters, discarding long-held family policy and social issue preferences, ranging from the recognition of same-sex civil unions to the introduction of a gender quota in the boardrooms of German companies and supporting a modern immigration law—changes that place the party firmly in line with the contemporary zeitgeist. Through their programmatic course of action, both center-right parties thereby created an opening that the AfD has been able to successfully exploit.

Attempts to identify the roots and reasons behind the party's success invariably also have to incorporate the "Sarrazin-debate". Using his book *Deutschland schafft sich ab*⁵ to advance several propositions concerning the supposed failure of immigration and integration policies, SPD politician and former member of the Executive Board of the Deutsche Bundesbank Thilo Sarrazin launched a national debate that held the country captive for several weeks during the summer of 2010—a debate which played an instrumental role in paving the way for the entry of right-wing populism into the discursive space. Sarrazin continued in

⁴ F. DECKER, *Follow-up to the Grand Coalition*, pp. 31 ff.

⁵ T. SARRAZIN, *Deutschland schafft sich ab*.

this role as he also employed its programmatic formula in books on the Eurozone crisis and political correctness. He can therefore be considered to be a kind of *spiritus rector* of the AfD, and the question arises as to why he has remained a member of the SPD instead of joining the right-wing populists.

2. *Ideological placement and political objectives*

In the case of the AfD, the categorization as a right-wing populist party has been a point of contention from the very beginning, also among scholars. From the party's point of view, its rigorous attempts to cast off the label are only too understandable. After entering the European Parliament, the AfD did its utmost, for example, to be admitted into the conservative parliamentary group primarily made up of British Tory MEPs and representatives from the Polish Law and Justice Party—all of this against the expressed wishes of Angela Merkel, who even approached David Cameron to make the case against allowing the AfD into their parliamentary group. The AfD wanted to avoid any sort of association with parties such as UKIP and their general euroskeptic stance, let alone the hard core of European right-wing populism (the Front National, Lega Nord, FPÖ, Vlaams Belang, Partij voor de Vrijheid).

The problematic nature of the right-wing populist label is rooted in its role as not just a mere analytical category of study but also its additional frequent injections into political debates with strong connotations⁶. The latter cannot be a sufficient reason though to avoid its study usage. Some observers want to avoid labeling the AfD as right-wing populist by citing feuds regarding the party's personnel as well as internal debates about the future path of the party as evidence of it consisting of three fundamentally incompatible currents: an economically liberal one, a national-conservative one, and a right-wing populist one⁷. This approach is based upon a misconception, since these currents are not just compatible with one another but are, to a certain extent, even intertwined. In combination, they constitute the programmatic and electoral “winning formula” of new right-wing parties into which Euroskeptic positions can be effortlessly integrated. In this relationship, populism

⁶ F. DECKER, *Der neue Rechtspopulismus*, pp. 21 ff.

⁷ A. WERNER, *Vor der Zerreißprobe*, pp. 85.

serves as the overarching theme. It stands for the anti-establishment orientation of the party, already illustrated by the “Alternative” in its name along with its self-conception as speaking for the “real” people or at least the silent majority among them. Evidence of this can be found in numerous comments made on the campaign trail by AfD politicians, showcasing a political stance that is glossed over, either intentionally or unintentionally, in the party’s rather moderate election manifestos. Moreover, the AfD shares the demand by the European right-wing populist mainstream for more direct democratic participation on the basis of what the party refers to as the “Swiss model”, a call rooted in the general criticism of the contemporary political system.

The party’s economically liberal and conservative positions do not contradict each other either. They have been fused into a brand of national populism, which seeks to defend the wealth and economic standing of the nation and its inhabitants while also putting a premium on competition. In the process of this, a final product is created that emphasizes the superiority of the German national economic model over that of other nations and cultures. Economic problems faced by the Eurozone’s southern perimeter play into hands of this line of arguing, as their misery can easily be presented as the negative counterpart to a supposedly virtuous Germany. The same applies to the AfD’s preferred concept of a meritocratic society that is juxtaposed to the existing welfare state, the former exemplified by an immigration policy solely guided by the economic benefits offered by would-be migrants. This approach can be found in both Christian-conservative as well as ordoliberal ideas on social and political order⁸.

On economic issues, its liberal positions place it roughly in line with the FDP while its posture on social issues is notably to the right of the CDU and slightly less so when compared to the CSU. The strong emphasis on a free market distinguishes the AfD from the solid core of Europe’s populist radical right, which tends to espouse protectionist positions that are therefore economically leftist today. The conservative-authoritarian social policy positions for which right-wing populists advocate can, on the other hand, also attract leftist voters whose own policy preferences on these issues are frequently to the right of the social democratic and socialist parties they generally favor (working class authoritarianism).

⁸ D. BEBNOWSKI - L.J. FÖRSTER, *Wettbewerbspopulismus*.

Answering whether the AfD is a part of the moderate or radical arm of the right-wing populist movement presents a more complicated challenge. Europe is home to both, as illustrated by the examples of the Front National on one side and the Norwegian Progress Party on the other. Fierce fights for the control over the AfD between both sides constituted a central part of the party's internal debates from the outset. While the economic wing around Bernd Lucke and Hans-Olaf Henkel emphasized the topic of the euro and preferred an economically liberal orientation for the AfD, the “national-conservative” wing headed by Frauke Petry and Alexander Gauland sought to play up “identity politics”, favoring a more aggressively populist appeal to voters. Along with immigration, family and gender policies also took up a relatively prominent space⁹. This constitutes a distinguishing feature compared to most other right-wing populist parties in Europe, with some of them—such as the Dutch PVV—even espousing liberal positions on socio-cultural matters¹⁰.

Due to the initial dominance of the economic liberal wing within party leadership ranks, the AfD's official programmatic agenda—drawn up in the political guidelines and party manifestos for the German and European elections—continues to bear its handwriting¹¹. Electoral campaigns nonetheless revealed quite a different tone right away. This applied in particular to eastern Germany, where the topic of national identity, coupled with xenophobic positions and a rigorous anti-establishment rhetoric, promised greater electoral windfalls than in the west of the country. The fact that Lucke and fellow proponents of a more moderate path willingly allowed themselves to be drawn into this downward spiral of radicalization essentially indicts them as coconspirators in the AfD's continuous shift towards more radical positions.

The 2013 federal elections already revealed that opposition by voters to immigration was a stronger impetus for supporting the AfD than the Eurosceptic positions that had been at the heart of the party's mani-

⁹ I. BEHRMANN, *D-Mark, Familie, Vaterland*.

¹⁰ This for example applies to gay rights. On such topics, a liberal stance primarily serves to buttress the main ideological pillar of right-wing populism: its disapproving attitude towards Islam.

¹¹ S.T. FRANZMANN, *Die Wahlprogrammatik der AfD*.

festo¹². With the European elections, when asked about the topic that determined their electoral choice, AfD voters mentioned immigration just as frequently as a stable currency (40% and 41%, respectively). Among all voters, this split stood at 13% and 29%, respectively. Other studies have shown AfD voters to be strongly motivated by feelings of protest rooted in their disenchantment with the current state of Germany's democracy. Almost half of them agree with the proposition that "Germany needs a strong leader that can quickly decide on everything"¹³. The prevalence of right-wing positions among the AfD's electorate is also illustrated by its readiness to voice support for Dresden's "Pegida" movement (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes, or Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West). Although AfD officials distanced themselves from the movement—to notably varying degrees¹⁴—due to its xenophobic and extremist tendencies, 76% of AfD voters expressed an understanding for the protests. Just 22% of the entire electorate held such a position; even among non-voters, the share of Pegida sympathizers came in substantially lower at 36% (data from Infratest dimap).

The fact that the balance of power slowly but surely shifted away from the economically liberal wing to the national-conservative one as all signs additionally pointed in the direction of a further radicalization in the wake of the European elections of 2014 was in no small part related to the decreasing salience of the Eurozone crisis, a topic that had served as the AfD's *raison d'être*. The common currency crisis that had initially lent itself to being exploited and capitalized upon was eventually largely confined to Greece. The option of a "Grexit" would even be raised at the highest levels of government as it was no longer deemed to represent a threat of contagion to other crisis-struck countries or the EU in general. The AfD's central demand had therefore been incorporated into the German government's official policy—personified by the Christian Democratic Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble. Even on the campaign trail before Hamburg's state elections (in January and February 2015), the topic of Greece merely played a supporting role despite the fact that a change in government in Athens had brought

¹² R. SCHMITT-BECK, *Euro-Kritik*.

¹³ N. BERBUIR - M. LEWANDOWSKY - J. SIRI, *The AfD and its Sympathisers*, pp. 168 f.

¹⁴ L. GEIGES - M. STINE MARG - W. FRANZ, *Pegida*, pp. 151 ff.

the subject of rescue packages to the fore once again. Owing to the terrorist threat posed by the Islamic State and the increasing inflow of asylum seekers and refugees, the central right-wing populist concern of (national) identity began to play an ever larger and more prominent role. It therefore came as little surprise that the party eventually placed central emphasis on this particular issue, since it also stood at the center of the newly established Pegida movement.

3. Internal development and party split

Past internal differences in opinion within the AfD regarding the emphasis and specific thematic use of right-wing populist ideas are nothing out of the ordinary. Battles between different currents over the right path are a central component of any political party. Only those with strong wings can soar! The image may seem somewhat outdated, but it nonetheless serves as a reminder that parties wishing to reach a broad segment of the electorate also require a certain programmatic breadth. There is a limit to this nonetheless. On one hand, parties have the task of bringing together different positions to forge sensible compromises on policies and create an overarching concept that sets out the strategic path of the party. On another, it is necessary for infighting brought about by such policy differences to not descend into power struggles between party leaders, with everything possible also being done to preserve the image of a united party, essential in the struggle for electoral support. Lucke's AfD failed on both counts. It was incapable of establishing a stable programmatic formula and a common approach in its appeals to voters because the favored policy positions of the party's national-conservative wing inevitably diluted the boundaries between it and the country's extreme right fringe. Moreover, a distinct lack of experience and professionalism among both the upper echelons of the party and its rank and file made it impossible to conduct policy discussions in a peaceful and conciliatory manner.

It is difficult to assess whether the party could have traveled down a different road. Part of the problem could undoubtedly be found in the person of Bernd Lucke, who was neither willing nor able to bridge ideological divides in order to keep the party united. The AfD's founder was not just completely committed to the party's moderate economically liberal wing; he also practiced an authoritarian leadership style that placed

virtually no value on incorporating other positions and was therefore criticized as high-handed. As a slightly wonkish analytical leader, he also lacked personal charisma. The significance of this absence should by no means be overstated, though. As can be seen across Europe, charismatic leaders are no longer as prevalent at the top of right-wing populist parties as might be assumed. Such a leadership style is generally more present during a party's nascence. The subsequent period of consolidation has frequently seen parties emancipate themselves from their dependence on particular leading figures (and their charismatic traits) while adopting the organizational structure of mainstream parties.

The strict legal framework with which parties have to contend in the Federal Republic of Germany in any case leaves no alternative to an institutionalization. German right-wing populists lack the capacity to establish a party that is run by a single dominant leader because the country's constitution and the Political Parties Act (*Parteiengesetz*) place rigorous democratic requirements on a party's "internal organization". The fact that the participatory rights provided to the party's rank and file obstruct the task of building a party organization in a controlled manner is illustrated by the publicly waged battles over the direction and personnel makeup of the AfD that preceded its split. Internal democratic stipulations therefore present a bigger impediment to the AfD's success than Germany's electoral law or its party financing provisions. This problem is exacerbated by the party's plebiscitary understanding of democracy which logically also has to be applied to its internal organization. A corollary of this is the party's decision to frequently ask members rather than delegates to cast a ballot on a variety of matters. Its model of having two or even three party leaders that stand on an equal footing is furthermore an organizational element that has thus far only been employed by leftist parties in Germany (the Greens and the Left Party).

The AfD's rightward move was reinforced and helped by the fact that the first elections to follow the successful results at the federal and European level were held in eastern German states in the late summer of 2014. The party's results there exceeded their performance in the west, with branches in the states interpreting that as evidence that their decision to move the AfD's central focus away from the euro and towards a more extensive right-wing populist platform constituted the correct course of action. Large numbers of former members of the Republikaner, the

Schill-Party, and Die Freiheit (German Freedom Party) joined the AfD, often rising through its ranks to enter various executive committees in the states. Internal quarrels befell the branches in virtually all the states, prompting the federal leadership to expand its own powers and jurisdiction, which, in turn, merely served to further enrage the base¹⁵.

By early 2015, it had become abundantly clear that the AfD's leadership, which was made up primarily of representatives of its moderate wing, had lost the backing of the party's membership base and other officials. Lucke attempted to regain control over the party by changing its charter, proposing a reduction in the number of party chairs from three to one (himself) after a short transitional period. The approval of the modification at the Bremen party conference in late January 2015 would prove to be a pyrrhic victory as it neither brought about an end to the then ever more bitterly contested internal power struggles nor prevented the election of Frauke Petry as party leader at the Essen party conference in early July 2015. In a last-ditch effort, Lucke tried to stave off his dismissal by assembling his supporters in a new splinter group—Weckruf 2015 (Wake-Up Call 2015)—ahead of the party conference, a move that foreshadowed the eventual party split. By the end of the August, around a fifth of the party's 21,000 members would leave the AfD, as most members of its economic liberal wing, such as Hans-Olaf Henkel, Ulrike Trebesius, Bernd Kölmel, and Joachim Starbatty, joined the Lucke-led exodus. Members of the Weckruf group overwhelmingly supported the establishment of a new Euroskeptic party under Lucke's leadership with the newly founded Alliance for Progress and Renewal (Allianz für Fortschritt und Aufbruch, ALFA)¹⁶ immediately appearing on the political stage in July 2015.

The prospects for this newcomer were rather dim from the outset. The March 2016 state elections in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, and Saxony-Anhalt saw it failing to garner more than 1% of the vote anywhere. Where could it have scored political points anyway? Chief among a number of challenges that the former AfD members had to contend with was the simple fact that its primary mobilization tool—criticism of the common currency—had disappeared from the headlines

¹⁵ O. NIEDERMAYER, *Eine neue Konkurrentin im Parteiensystem?*, pp. 201 ff.

¹⁶ Due to a lawsuit, the name later had to be changed into Liberal-Konservative Reformer (Liberal-Conservative Reformers).

long before the refugee crisis even began to dominate the national political agenda in September 2015. Despite voicing similar anxieties concerning refugees and migrants, it was incapable of siphoning votes off of the larger and significantly more vociferous AfD on the topic, as the FDP moreover also joined the chorus of Merkel critics who objected to her refugee policy.

4. Reaching new electoral heights due to the refugee crisis

The crisis proved to be an unexpected gift for the AfD. If it had been the case that infighting caused its polling numbers to plunge throughout the first half of 2015, the crisis now catapulted it to previously unseen heights. The party grew into a mouthpiece and nearly sole medium of protest for a population deeply unsettled by uncontrolled streams of migrants. The Islamic terrorist attacks in Paris as well as the sexual assaults perpetrated mainly by North Africans on New Year's Eve in Cologne also played into the party's hands, as did conflicts within the government about reforming the country's asylum laws and the sometimes staunch criticism levied against the chancellor from within her own party. In state elections in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate in March 2016, the AfD garnered 15.1 and 12.6% of the vote, respectively, in the process securing its first double-digit results in a western state. In Saxony-Anhalt, it managed to receive the highest share of the vote ever obtained by a right-wing populist or extremist party in state elections as it won 24.2% of the vote.

As election analyses illustrate, a quarter of the AfD's electorate in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate and even a third in Saxony-Anhalt was made up of voters who had not taken part in previous elections (data from Infratest dimap). It therefore came to represent the primary beneficiary of the increasing politicization precipitated by the refugee crisis that drove up turnout by around ten-percentage points in all three states. Once voter defections from existing parties are taken into account, it emerges that just under half of the AfD's voters in both Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate and more than half in Saxony-Anhalt used to call the left-of-center camp home. The same effect had been present in previous state elections in the east of the country. The fact that the placement of the AfD on the right side of the political spectrum only partially reflects the structure of its electorate is

highlighted by its above average support among both the working class and the unemployed. In Baden-Württemberg, AfD candidates managed to win direct mandates in the former SPD strongholds of Mannheim and Pforzheim, while in Rhineland-Palatinate its best result could be found in the industrial city of Ludwigshafen with almost 19% of the vote. Below average levels were obtained among civil servants and white collar workers.

Other social features by and large correspond with the right-wing populist electorates found in other European countries. Men make up a disproportionately large share, and younger voters are somewhat overrepresented. Comparatively low levels of support are found among the over 60-year olds who continue to represent the most important demographic bastion of the catch-all parties. With regard to education and income, AfD voters occupy lower status segments of the population, which in this case resembles the composition found among the German catch-all parties. Instead of the objective affiliation with any particular social class, policy preferences, and a general mindset serve as the primary explanation for the affinity towards right-wing populism.

The motivations driving AfD voters can possibly best be characterized through the dual term of insecurity/anxiety. Insecurity refers more to the social situation, meaning apprehensions about a deprivation in wealth, while anxiety aims to describe emotions of cultural alienation, the loss of a familiar social order and its moorings¹⁷. Both motives are combined to form the desire of limiting government services and benefits to one's own, native population—migrants that supposedly lack any sort of affiliation with the national community are to be excluded (“welfare chauvinism”). The fact that a fear of foreigners is not necessarily at its most pronounced in those areas home to the highest shares of foreigners is not a new finding and neither is the spread of a far right mindset to the heart of society¹⁸. By fomenting protest against a refugee policy that is supported by all other parties (aside from the CSU), the AfD is bringing such latent convictions to the surface. At the same time, it profits from defections by non-extremist policy-based voters from the middle-class/center-right camp who feel abandoned by a CDU that has moved to the left.

¹⁷ L. GEIGES - M. STINE MARG - W. FRANZ, *Pegida*.

¹⁸ A. ZICK - A. KLEIN, *Fragile Mitte – Feindselige Zustände*.

Threats and problems facing the AfD are primarily of an internal nature. They are related to the following points:

Feuds regarding the programmatic direction: The defection of the moderate forces from the AfD has shifted the balance of power within the party in the direction of the national-conservative and decidedly right-wing populist players. Economically liberal positions nonetheless do continue to constitute a strong presence, particularly among branches in western states. At the federal level, they are represented by Petry's co-chairperson, Jörg Meuthen. Building on the policy guidelines agreed upon in 2013, the party program draft that was adopted in late April 2016 incorporated a number of demands that could be classified as market liberal (dissolution of the federal employment agency, introduction of a non-linear income tax, restoring banker's and tax discretion). It ran into the opposition mainly of Gauland, who wanted the AfD to chart a more populist path on economic and welfare matters with the intent of turning it into a "party of the common man", a moniker that could already be applied on the basis of its voter structure at that time. With the prevailing of this course of action that was particularly favored among branches in the eastern German states, the party's policy positions mirrored those of other Western and Central European right-wing populist parties.

Erosion of the boundary with the extreme right: The AfD's radicalization has had the effect of once again drawing in more supporters from the right-wing extremist camp. While not limited to the east of the country, this development is nonetheless particularly pronounced in the former GDR, where parts of the party openly express racist and anti-democratic positions¹⁹. The extent of how difficult it has become for the AfD to clearly distance itself from right-wing extremism is illustrated by its handling of the Thuringia state chairperson Björn Höcke. His proposed expulsion from the party, initiated by the federal executive committee in May 2015, was abandoned after the ousting of Lucke as party leader. Höcke, who maintains contacts with NPD associates of the New Right (Neue Rechte), and his radical positions are not merely an irritation for the liberal camp—they also annoy those members of the national-conservative wing who are worried about the party's reputation among middle-class voters. If future AfD election results fail to

¹⁹ A. HÄUSLER - R. RAINER, *Zwischen Euro-Kritik und rechtem Populismus*.

live up to expectations, which could quite easily be the case if current protest sentiments against the government's refugee policies subside, then the infighting between the moderate and radical camps may very well flare up again.

Conflicts regarding party personnel: Another burden on the AfD's public image are conflicts concerning the personal makeup of the party and the vying for influence of the actors in question. Such problems are, on one hand, the inevitable result of its various parliamentary factions whose members are ill equipped for their political work due to a lack of experience and professionalism. Departures and defections of elected officials are highly likely. The other cause can be found among a party leadership that has shown a distinct lack of team spirit. Frauke Petry, whose selection had initially been met with high hopes by her party, has for quite some time now been the subject of criticism for a leadership style defined by going it alone as well as for making comments that are not first run by other party officials and frequently not thought-through²⁰. This fall from grace has occurred despite the fact that her non-affiliation with either the moderate or radical wing made her appear to be the perfect person to bridge internal party divides.

5. Conclusion: On the path toward a six-party system?

When Jürgen Möllemann and Guido Westerwelle launched their Projekt 18 in the early 2000s, they were motivated by the justified question as to why the electoral results of the German FDP lagged behind those of its sister parties in Scandinavia and the Benelux-countries. Part of the answer could be found in the rather narrow programmatic profile. While liberal parties in neighboring countries had adopted more or less conservative positions on socio-cultural questions that reflected the security concerns and modernization fears of their electorates, the FDP continued to remain steadfast in its desire to preserve outdated liberal positions on civil liberties²¹. Along with a consistent anti-establishment orientation, a promising right-wing populist strategy would above all

²⁰ Petry's comments in a newspaper interview that refugees crossing the border could be fired upon as a last resort caused widespread outrage. Criticism was also levied against her from within the party, forcing her to later recant the statement.

²¹ F. DECKER, *Noch eine Chance für die Liberalen?*

have required placing the immigration problem front and center. After completely cutting its nationalist roots in the 1970s, the prospects for such a course alteration were rather slim. The populism of Projekt 18 therefore remained “ideologically halved”, focusing entirely on economic liberalism and a popularization of its outreach to voters.

A more auspicious opportunity to appeal to voters on the right was presented by the topic of the euro. The liberals could have made the case that criticism of the monetary union and even calls for its dissolution should not be misinterpreted as a general anti-European position. Supporters can be found in the left camp as well of the argument that the euro is driving apart the EU, while they deem a purported solution found in a common economic policy to be neither realistic nor desirable²². It is pointless to speculate whether euro critics coalescing around Frank Schäffler would have gotten their way had the FDP remained in opposition after the 2009 election. In this case the AfD would likely have never emerged.

A right-wing liberal force, as intended by the protagonists of the moderate wing led by Bernd Lucke, would have constituted a dangerous and potentially lethal competitor for the FDP. On the one hand, this would have called into question the FDP’s claim to representing the sole decidedly market-liberal advocate in the federal republic’s political system, an assertion rightfully made by pointing to the CDU’s “social democratization” on economic issues since 2005. On the other hand, the AfD would have profited from the widespread popularity of its Eurosceptic and socially conservative positions among both the FDP’s voters and its members. The radicalization of the AfD therefore represents good news for the FDP on two fronts: it is now not only in a position to defend or regain its unique position on economic policy matters, it can also hope that the AfD’s shift to the right serves as a deterrent to its own voters.

Whether the right-wing populists can hope to establish themselves next to or in place of the FDP is far from certain despite their current wave of success brought about by the refugee crisis. From a supply side or actors’ perspective, the rightward move appears to have, if anything, dimmed the party’s prospects. Taking into account the issue preferences

²² W. STREECK, *Gekaufte Zeit*, pp. 237 ff.

that drive voters to the polls would admittedly make the exodus of the moderate wing appear to be manageable. This only applies to party branches in the east of the country, which, in contrast to their western counterparts, did not have to contend with such large numbers of member departures in the wake of the split, since by that point it had long become a home for the far-right fringe. The challenge of distancing itself from the extreme right will nonetheless inevitably come to the fore here, as well.

The history of the AfD, which thus far is a short one, has once again illustrated why upstarts on the German (far) right continue to face challenges that exceed those found in other European countries²³. First of all, the potential danger of succumbing to one's own organizational incompetence is always dangling over such parties. At the same time, though, it is exacerbated by the environment and restrictive conditions with which German political newcomers are confronted. The "main problem" can be found in the stigmatization of right-wing extremism as a result of the Nazi legacy. Parties such as the AfD that present a moderate image are used by members of the extreme right as a vehicle to overcome this stigmatization. Internal conflicts concerning how to best address an influx of these unwelcome supporters are unavoidable and serve to damage the party's public standing while threatening to sooner or later ruin its internal cohesion.

The AfD's prospects look significantly brighter when attention is placed on the demand side. Considering the immense challenges and pressure to change, which German society will face in future years and decades as a result of immigration, it would be highly surprising if a party critical of a migrant influx such as the AfD were incapable of exploiting these developments for its own electoral profits. Even after a decrease in the number of refugees entering the country, the party will therefore have plenty of thematic opportunities at its disposal. This is furthermore the case as its conservative positions on socio-cultural issues fill other gaps in the party system that have emerged as the CDU has increasingly lost its capability of integrating substantial segments of the political right.

Since voters on the left are also susceptible to these kinds of positions, the success of right-wing populists at the ballot box contributes to a

²³ F. DECKER, *Warum der parteiförmige Rechtspopulismus in Deutschland so erfolglos ist*.

general rightward shift of the party system's axis. On the one hand, this is bad news for Germany's social democrats, as it puts a further dent in their chances of ever regaining the chancellery from the CDU. At the same time, it hurts the Christian Democratic sister parties, which can have no interest in any sort of cooperation with the right-wing populists as long as they are incapable of credibly distancing themselves from the extreme right fringe. The AfD's presence increases both the polarization and the segmentation of the country's party system. In terms of possible coalitions, it appears that along with a Grand Coalition, the only other viable option is a three party alliance between the Christian Democrats, the Free Democrats, and the Greens—a partnership that would with virtual certainty provide the AfD with additional opportunities. There are therefore few signs that would indicate that the latest right-wing populist incarnation in the party system will—as has been the case with its predecessors—turn out to be a mere passing episode. At least in the medium term, representatives of the establishment will have to come to terms with the AfD.

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Angela Merkel and Romano Prodi: Antithesis of Populism?

by *Manfred Görtemaker*

1. *Introduction*

In history and social sciences, populism is defined as a style of politics that accentuates “common sense”, while denying the ruling elites the capability or even the willingness to defend public interests¹. Populism is therefore a form of political rhetoric that is characterized by polarization, personalization, moralizing, and usually also by anti-intellectualism. Populist movements maintain that they alone represent the interests of the ordinary person. They use existing clichés, stereotypes, and prejudices, and they prefer to work with subjects that are suitable for stirring up strong emotions among citizens. Thus, the agitation of populists frequently works with simplicity and with presumably easy solutions, referring to existing needs of major parts of society. Simple but convincing slogans serve the goal of winning attention and, if possible, of achieving power. Simultaneously, populists accuse their political adversaries of not recognizing problems and of having lost sight of the good of the people. They stress the benefits of direct democracy and reject representative forms of government, while not having a value system and an ideology of their own, but rather being oriented toward day-to-day political issues in a highly opportunistic way².

The American political scientist Marc F. Plattner of the National Endowment for Democracy therefore views populism as a majority-oriented understanding of democracy beyond liberalism and constitutionalism:

“Populists want what they take to be the will of the majority—often as channeled through a charismatic populist leader—to prevail, and to do so with as little hindrance

¹ K. PRIESTER, *Wesensmerkmale des Populismus*.

² In general terms, see S. VAN KESSEL, *Populist Parties in Europe*.

or delay as possible. For this reason, they have little patience with liberalism's emphasis on procedural niceties and protections for individual rights"³.

Currently in Europe, right-wing movements are the dominant factor of populism⁴. However, leftist parties, by applying pacifist, anti-capitalist, and anti-globalist argumentation, can also show typical characteristics of populism. In contrast to right-wing populism, which usually tends to support the exclusion of certain individuals or groups from society, leftist populism is almost always aimed at the inclusion of underprivileged social elements by increasing participation and redistribution⁵.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and former Italian Prime Minister and President of the European Commission Romano Prodi, however, are usually considered as "antitheses" of any form of populism. Their soberness and pragmatism are distinctly different from the behavior of those politicians who, with the assistance of the ever-present media, strive for the great stage. They appear to be shy and seem to prefer working in silence over the spotlight of television cameras—away from the public eye. In fact, neither of them was born for politics: the physicist Angela Merkel was first pulled into the laboratories of scientific research, while the legal scholar and economist Romano Prodi started his career in the lecture halls of a university. Even after finding their way into politics, pompous public appearances were anything but their first choice. As politicians, therefore, they were rather atypical, indeed unusable—this was at least first said about Angela Merkel. Nevertheless, both Merkel and Prodi ventured surprisingly successfully to step into politics and, due to their personal qualities, were both surrounded with the nimbus of being anti-populist, indeed embodiments of the "antithesis of populism"—suitable for furnishing politics with a greater degree of well-founded values and, above all, greater credibility.

But are these characterizations correct? Is it not true that all democratic politicians, at least to a certain degree, must also be "populists"? And how do Merkel and Prodi fit into the pattern of "anti-populism", which has been attributed to them so often?

³ M.F. PLATTNER, *Populism, Pluralism and Liberal Democracy*, p. 88.

⁴ See C. MUDDE, *Populist Radical Right Parties*; T. PAUWELS, *Populism in Western Europe*.

⁵ See, for example, G. VOERMAN, *Linkspopulismus*. Also see L. MARCH, *From Vanguard of the Proletariat to Vox Populi*.

2. *The case of Angela Merkel*

“Moving ahead with your head through the wall will not be feasible, because in the end the wall will always win,” Angela Merkel declared 2007 during a major labor dispute between the Union of Locomotive Engineers (Gewerkschaft Deutscher Lokomotivführer, GDL) and the Deutsche Bahn, thus characterizing her own behavior as well as her relationship with politics. As a result, journalist Nikolaus Blome with the German magazine “Der Spiegel” once called her a “hesitation artist”, while Judy Dempsey, the Berlin correspondent of the “International Herald Tribune”, thought of her as a “phenomenon” and “Deutschlandfunk” even spoke of an “Angela Merkel Code.” This, the German radio station argued, was like the “Riemann Surmise of Politics”—named after one of the most difficult mathematical problems, for which the Clay Mathematics Institute in Cambridge has put up a reward of one million dollars, if anyone could solve it⁶. In other words: to understand Angela Merkel as a politician seems nearly impossible.

a. A misfit to power: Accident or strategy?

Surely, Angelika Merkel was an outsider, if not a misfit, on her way to government power. In earlier days, nobody would have thought her capable of what she is doing today. Born in Hamburg and raised in the former German Democratic Republic, she first worked at the Central Institute for Physical Chemistry at the GDR Academy of Sciences in Berlin-Adlershof. The great political “change” of 1989/90 brought her into contact with Democratic Awakening (Demokratischer Aufbruch, DA), a political citizens’ movement in the GDR, which received merely 0.9% of the votes at the Volkskammerwahl, the first free parliamentary election ever held in the GDR, on March 18, 1990⁷. Thanks to the unexpected 40.8% for the Eastern CDU—an ally of DA in the Alliance for Germany (Allianz für Deutschland)—however, Merkel suddenly, and surprisingly, belonged to the election winners. She was appointed deputy speaker of the last GDR government under Prime Minister Lothar de Maizière and, after the merger of the DA with the

⁶ N. BLOME, *Angela Merkel*; J. DEMPSEY, *Das Phänomen Merkel*; *Der Angela-Merkel-Code*.

⁷ Details in R.G. REUTH - G. LACHMANN, *Das erste Leben der Angela M.*

Christian Democratic Party (Christlich Demokratische Union, CDU) on August 4, 1990, she all of a sudden found herself a member of the CDU although, as her biographer Gerd Langguth has recounted, friends and acquaintances from the 1970s and 1980s had expected her to be ideologically closer to the environmental movement and the Green Party than to the conservative CDU⁸.

After German reunification on October 3, 1990, Merkel received a prominent position as assistant head of a department in the Press and Information Agency of the federal government. She then ran successfully for the German Bundestag and soon thereafter was summoned by Chancellor Helmut Kohl into his cabinet as Minister for Women and Youth. This was a rather small ministry with limited competences and practically no real power, but it offered Merkel the opportunity, as a woman with an Eastern biography and without any political incrimination, to get elected as deputy chair of the CDU. From 1994 until 1998, she served as Federal Minister for the Environment. She was also appointed general secretary of the CDU after her party lost the election in September 1998 and Wolfgang Schäuble assumed the federal leadership of the CDU from Helmut Kohl. During the funding scandal that disrupted the party in 1999-2000, Merkel finally profiled herself against Kohl and even took over the presidency of the CDU on April 10, 2000, after Schäuble had come under criticism as well. Yet her lack of backing within the party could be seen during her candidacy for the office of chancellor before the federal elections in September 2002, when the Bavarian Premier Edmund Stoiber was nominated as top candidate rather than Merkel. Many party members still viewed Merkel as “not fit for the chancellery”—an impression that was shared by a vast majority of the German people.

It was only after Stoiber had lost the election that Merkel applied her real skills in building her own position of power: internally, behind the scenes, unwaveringly, and almost brutally. She now laid claim not only to the chairmanship of the party but also to the position of faction leader of the CDU/CSU in the Bundestag, pushing aside the previous leader Friedrich Merz during a controversial meeting of the CDU presidium⁹.

⁸ G. LANGGUTH, *Angela Merkel*. Also see E. ROLL, *Die Kanzlerin*, pp. 144 ff.

⁹ The decision had already been made in the afternoon on election day, September 22, 2002, in a conversation between Stoiber and Merkel in the Berlin headquarters of

From then on she was the leader of the opposition and a direct rival of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, whom she followed as head of government after the election of September 18, 2005. Thus, Merkel eventually achieved what for so long no one had believed her being capable of: “Kohl’s gal,” as she was once called, managed to climb the ladder of political power until she finally reached the office of chancellor—with some luck, but thoroughly through her own energy, and contrary to the image that had adhered to her.

Many qualities of Merkel’s leadership already became visible in the early stages of her career: persistence and professional competence, but above all a political instinct, the capacity to evaluate and assess political combinations and ratios correctly, and the ability to take advantage of opportunities whenever they presented themselves¹⁰. As chancellor, after November 22, 2005, she continued to exert those qualities and practiced an objective and businesslike style of leadership which differed soothingly from the often blustering, egocentric style of her predecessor, Gerhard Schröder, and was appreciated both domestically and abroad. However, the content of her policy was less inspiring, focusing on a reform of the German federalist system, a cutback of bureaucracy, research and innovation, energy policy, family policy, the labor market, and health reform—all topics that had to be dealt with, but were hardly suitable for inspiring enthusiasm. Looking back, therefore, Merkel’s most significant achievement during her first term in office was the acceptance and continuation, without any compromising, of her predecessor’s policy of the *Agenda 2010* that had been worked out by the then head of the Chancellery, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who is now President of the Federal Republic. This far-reaching program for labor reforms had been highly controversial within the SPD and eventually divided the party, while Merkel increasingly benefitted from the positive effects of the reform program as the German economy, after a long losing streak with ultimately more than five million people unemployed, did better year after year. Although she had done little, if nothing, to contribute to the program, Merkel in fact received much of the credit¹¹.

the CDU when both agreed that Merkel would take up the position of faction leader regardless of the outcome of the election, see E. ROLL, *Die Kanzlerin*, pp. 317 ff.

¹⁰ See A. MURSWIECK, *Angela Merkel als Regierungschefin*.

¹¹ See, for example, K. BRENKE - K.F. ZIMMERMANN, *Reformagenda 2010*; U. BLUM et al., *Agenda 2010*; K.F. ZIMMERMANN (ed.), *Fünf Jahre Agenda 2010*.

She did not even suffer from the poor results of the CDU and CSU in the federal elections of 2009, when the two parties combined received only 33.8% of the votes, which was the worst result since 1949. She continued with her course, focusing mainly on resolving the economic crisis. And when, in the autumn of 2010, the number of unemployed fell below the three million mark, this once again was interpreted as a result of Merkel's policy, fortifying her position of power, since it was believed that she had once again demonstrated her capacity for level-headed and successful leadership. The question was frequently raised, though, as to how she made her decisions: did she seek or avoid conflicts? Did she manage them cunningly as well as quietly, or in a way that was simply unusual for others? Or did she not decide at all—preferring things to develop by themselves? Whatever the case, Merkel seemed to possess the ability to attain settlements and simultaneously strengthen her own position, even under the most difficult circumstances, such as in a coalition with the small Free Democratic Party (Freie Demokratische Partei, FDP) or in a grand coalition with the Social Democratic Party (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD)¹². Merkel herself once explained her waiting attitude, which in the end mostly led to decisive action, with a laconic comparison: “I belong to the type of people who, in a gym class, stood on a three-meter diving board the whole period and jumped only in the forty-fifth minute, that is, at the very last moment”¹³.

b. Decisions on an ethical basis

However, the alleged waiting, indeed hesitant, attitude in Merkel's decision-making was only one side of her government practice. The other side was marked by ethically justified determination that could be seen clearly when, in March 2011, she first suspended compulsory military service, which had existed for fifty-five years, and then, a few days after the nuclear catastrophe at Fukushima in Japan, took a fundamental turn in the atomic and energy policy of the Federal Republic, accelerating Germany's exit from nuclear power. Both decisions were made without outer need, let alone external compulsion. The suspension

¹² See R. WILLNER, *Wie Angela Merkel regiert*.

¹³ Quoted in “Welt am Sonntag”, December 31, 2000.

of the draft system, prompted by an ad-hoc alliance of the CSU with Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, the FDP with Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle and the Green Party, was popular, but it meant a lasting weakening of the Bundeswehr at a time when the army was needed more than ever and was burdened with an ever increasing number of foreign missions. Similarly, the hasty exit from nuclear energy was largely inspired by ethical motivations. It was a personal choice of Merkel's and could also be interpreted as an approximation to positions of environmental protection agencies whose ideas obviously coincided with Merkel's own imagination¹⁴. Merkel's ideological proximity to the Green Party, which she had already demonstrated during her early years in politics in the GDR, was underlined also by this development.

Without going into further details, it can be said that on both occasions, the suspension of the draft system as well as the early exit from nuclear energy, Merkel revealed a new tendency of decision-making: a situational readiness to make far-reaching adjustments that are in accordance with Merkel's own convictions, which are deeply rooted in East German Protestantism and do not necessarily follow current popular trends or reflect economically sensible advice¹⁵. Due to the fact that Merkel's values have little in common with those of the old "Bonn folks", they are difficult to calculate for the traditional elites and therefore often come as a surprise. Particularly within Merkel's own party, her decisions not infrequently make for irritations, even cluelessness, as deputies and voters of the CDU/CSU have difficulties understanding which party the chancellor actually represents. In fact, some of her decisions seemed to have less in common with the principles of the CDU/CSU than with the ideological premises of the DA opposition movement in the GDR, which led her into politics in 1989.

The growing unrest, which could increasingly be noticed within the CDU/CSU in view of this development since 2011, was only covered up by the lack of personal alternatives and the economic success of the Federal Republic, which made Merkel's replacement appear unnecessary, even risky. In any case, very much to the displeasure of the conservative wing of the Union, but also to the irritation and dislike of the SPD and the Greens whose traditional political themes had been coopted by the

¹⁴ In general, see W. STERNSTEIN, "*Atomkraft – nein danke*".

¹⁵ See in particular V. RESING, *Angela Merkel*.

chancellor, her behavior demonstrated a “trend toward non-partisanship”, as the newspaper “Die Welt” wrote on January 8, 2012. Merkel, the “floating chancellor” had in fact become the “all-party chancellor”¹⁶.

c. The refugee crisis and European populism

This impression even intensified when Merkel, after the federal election of September 22, 2013, formed a grand coalition with the SPD and could govern in a less contested manner than ever before. “She stands for vacating any position, if she has developed new insights,” the Berlin “Tagesspiegel” remarked in 2013 with regard to her leadership qualities. She had in fact proven repeatedly that she was capable of any change of course—and that she was even prepared to violate her own party’s traditional conservative principles. “Something must change in order to keep everything as it is,” Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa wrote in his novel *Il Gattopardo*. For Merkel, the contrary seems to be true: she appears to be steadfast and consistent, but has transformed Germany more than most had considered possible. Some therefore speak of a “lethocratic, lull style of government” and of “flexible conservatism”¹⁷.

Yet this policy was not without risks. While still receiving much applause for her attempt to resolve the Ukraine crisis by establishing an armistice with the Minsk Protocol (“Minsk I”) in September 2014, the Greek issue as well as the refugee crisis, both in 2015, caused her grave concern¹⁸. During a memorable session of the CDU/CSU faction in the Bundestag on July 16, 2015, when the appropriation of a billion euro aid package for Greece was debated, considerable resistance could be noticed for the first time. Since Greece, the critics argued, had already received two aid packages amounting to 223 billion euros without using them properly, another package of 86 billion euros was now laced up—309 billion altogether: a staggering total. And Germany would be liable for nearly 100 billion. Thus on August 19, 2015, when the Bundestag voted on the third bailout for Greece, 133 deputies voted against it, more than half of them from the CDU—apart from 18 abstentions and 46 deputies who preferred not to vote at all. Thus,

¹⁶ *Das historische Kunststück*.

¹⁷ J. WOLLENHAUPT, *Merkels konservative Utopie*.

¹⁸ See M. STAACK, *Der Ukraine-Konflikt*; R. SAKWA, *Frontline Ukraine*.

nearly two hundred deputies of the Bundestag did not follow Merkel despite the fact that she was heading a grand coalition.

Then, only two weeks later, at the end of August and the beginning of September 2015, the refugee crisis began. Merkel decided to allow the refugees who were stuck in Budapest to enter Germany, thus giving an indication that the country would be willing to accept even more. Even though this decision was welcomed abroad as proof of a new, responsible Germany, concerns in Germany itself quickly grew, as the IT system EASY (Initial Distribution of Asylum Seekers) registered 1.091.894 asylum seekers in Germany for 2015 alone. Even when this number, due to errors and duplicate entries, later had to be corrected¹⁹, the figures were so immense that many people were afraid that the problems and challenges for state and society connected with the refugee issue could hardly be handled. Although Merkel's statement "We can do it" in this situation became a familiar quotation, her policy split public opinion: with a "welcome culture" on the one hand and growing hostility toward foreigners, even xenophobia, and an increase of right-wing populism on the other²⁰.

Thus, it was hardly surprising that the criticism of Merkel within the CDU, which had already been noticeably articulated during the Greek crisis, continued to grow. Once again, she had to listen to sharp critique from her own ranks during another session of the CDU/CSU faction on September 9, 2015, for as much as three hours. When she defended her decision vis-à-vis the faction, the rest of her party remained dead silent, while her critics, when they took the floor, received cheers. Nevertheless, on the same day, during a general debate in the Bundestag, she stressed, "The integration of refugees is a priority"²¹. Two days later, she stated in an interview with the "Rheinische Post" that for victims of political

¹⁹ The Federal Minister of the Interior Thomas de Maizière finally spoke of 890.000 asylum-seekers in 2015, out of which 20,000 had been unaccompanied minors. See "Spiegel Online", September 30, 2016.

²⁰ On August 31, 2015, Merkel verbally declared, "Germany is a strong country. The motive dealing with these issues must be: We have done so much—we can do it!" in *Mitschrift, Sommerpressekonferenz von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel*. Merkel repeated this sentence several times, for instance at the CDU party convention on December 14, 2015.

²¹ Also in the Bundestag, Merkel stressed on the same day, September 9, "The integration of refugees is a priority", in "n-tv", September 9, 2015.

persecution, the basic right to asylum “knows no upper limit”²². And on September 15, in an interview with the “Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung” which received great attention, she even went so far as to say, “When we now even begin to apologize for showing a friendly face in emergency situations, then this is no longer my country”²³.

Thus, Merkel seemed to be unimpressed by the public criticism of her refugee policy, which she refused to change as she was obviously convinced that it was right both politically and ethically. She even stayed on course when her personal approval ratings decreased. After an opinion poll at the beginning of October 2015 had shown that 48% of Germans thought Merkel’s handling of the refugee crisis to be wrong, which was supported by only 39%, she still defended her course obstinately, almost stubbornly. “Opinion polls are not my yardstick,” she told the tabloid “Bild” on October 12, 2015. Her norm was the resolution of problems, to which she was fully committed. “For me”, she said, “it is a matter of the basic humanity of our country that we first meet a refugee, like any other human being, with friendliness”²⁴.

Such remarks once again demonstrated Merkel’s basic attitude, which rested upon a firm ethical base and could not be unsettled even by populist movements, like the Pegida demonstrations in Dresden or the campaigns of the newly founded party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD). Yet Merkel’s formerly controversial position was also eased somewhat by the fact that in 2016, no more than 280,000 asylum seekers entered Germany, after the so-called “Balkan route” had actually been closed—not by Germany but by the states in the region—and after the European Union had concluded an agreement with Turkey for the resolution of the refugee issue in March 2016. However, this positive picture was heavily clouded by the refusal of most of the countries of the EU to take in refugees in considerable numbers and to participate in coping with the political, social, and financial consequences of the refugee crisis. Thus, the refugee crisis also turned into a crisis of the EU, particularly since populism now reached an alarming extent, while the British decision to leave the

²² “Merkel: Asyl kennt keine Grenze”, in “Rheinische Post Online”, September 11, 2015.

²³ G. BANNAS, *Das Gegenteil einer Entschuldigung*, in “FAZ.net”, September 15, 2015.

²⁴ “Bild-Zeitung”, October 12, 2015.

Union following the referendum of June 23, 2016, seemed to call into question the European project as a whole²⁵.

d. Merkel's fight against populism

No later than with the Brexit decision, the problems that had already impaired Merkel's policy since 2011 reached a new dimension: the suspension of military conscription, the exit from the nuclear consensus, the behavior in the Greek financial crisis, and the uncontrolled opening of the German borders for the admission of refugees. The implications of these problems had been invisible to many for a long time and had been eclipsed by positive economic data and Merkel's outstanding record in national and international public opinion. Yet by maintaining, "We can do it", she had not just bolstered courage and spirit, but also formulated a claim that was difficult to redeem. And with her lone decision to open the borders without prior consultation with the European partners, Merkel had applied pressure to the other states of the EU, which in turn had evoked denial, indeed outright rejection, and revived resentment against an all too powerful Germany in the center of Europe. Even such reservations as had been expressed by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1989/90 against a renewed German predominance in Europe after reunification now unmistakably resurfaced again²⁶. Not a few of the prophecies that Thatcher then dared to express have since that time become a reality.

²⁵ See especially M. RHODES, *Brexit*. Also see G. RATH, *Brexitannia*.

²⁶ In her memoirs, Margaret Thatcher once again summed up her arguments against German reunification. She writes that the reunification "created a German state so large and dominant that it cannot be fitted into the new architecture of Europe." The unification would lead to three unwelcome developments: "The rush to European federalism as a way of tying down Gulliver; the maintenance of a Franco-German bloc for the same purpose; and the gradual withdrawal of the US from Europe on the assumption that a German-led federal Europe will be both stable and capable of looking after its own defence". And providently she warned, "I will hazard the forecast that a federal Europe would be both unstable internally and an obstacle to harmonious arrangements—in trade, politics and defence—with America externally; that the Franco-German bloc would increasingly mean a German bloc ... with France as very much a junior partner; and that as a result America would first bring its legions home, and subsequently find itself at odds with the new European player in world politics", in M. THATCHER, *The Downing Street Years*, p. 814.

Yet for Merkel the refugee issue, the growth of populism, and the British decision to leave the EU were no cause to change her views on Europe. In particular, she did not allow herself to make a populist turn of her own, but understood populism almost as a challenge to intensify her fight against positions, which—in her opinion—must lead to a re-nationalization of Europe. “Europe is unique,” she had already stated as early as May 1, 2008, when she was awarded the Charlemagne Prize in Aachen for her contribution to European integration. She called the “peace-work of European unification” a “gift of reconciliation”, even a “miracle”²⁷. Therefore, it would also be necessary in the future to engage “together for peace and freedom, for solidarity and tolerance, for democracy and the rule of law.” Europe had a “social responsibility—internally within our societies, but also externally in dealing with others”. These common values constituted the “sound compass” for policy and society²⁸. Within this framework, the European Union should not be understood as an alternative to or a replacement of national politics, but as a necessary addition”²⁹.

The refugee crisis and the growth of populism, particularly in countries that were close to Germany, such as France or Austria, or for which it felt a special historical responsibility, such as Poland, were an incentive for Merkel to cling to these basic convictions with even greater commitment than before. In her view, Europe was now at a crossroads where a “compass” was urgently needed—a term that Merkel claimed time and again as a basic instrument of leadership in her actual policy. With such convictions and conduct, she personified the opposite of a populist, indeed an “antithesis of populism”. To what extent she is also prepared to put her own position as chancellor at risk has been proven by her repeatedly in the aforementioned decisions of 2011 and 2015, especially during the Greek crisis and the refugee crisis, and also in advance of the recent general elections, which were held in Germany on September 24, 2017, to elect the members of the 19th Bundestag. Here, Merkel resisted the temptation to play into the hands of populism and preferred to hold on to her basic convictions—even if that meant a loss of electoral support. Indeed, the CDU/CSU won merely 33%

²⁷ A. MERKEL, *Machtworte*, pp. 175 ff.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

of the vote, which meant not just a drop of more than 8% compared with the previous election in 2013, but also the lowest share of the vote for the Union since 1949. In contrast, the populist AfD, which had previously been unrepresented in the Bundestag, became the third party with 12.6% of the vote.

It is therefore justified to speak of a “Merkel system”. Although her style of leadership is often criticized, not the least within her own party, she demonstrates remarkable perseverance: quiet, competent, and unexcited, but committed, personally modest, and without great attitudes. It remains to be seen whether this will also help her to master the many current crises in the European Union as well as in the wider range of international relations without responding to popular trends among the peoples of Europe and without having a vision of Europe’s future herself.

3. *The case of Romano Prodi*

What can now be said about Romano Prodi in comparison with Merkel? This is not the place to assess his personality and policy in the same way as was done with Merkel. But from a German perspective, certain similarities can be noticed which also present Prodi as an “antithesis of populism”.

As early as 1995, when the electoral alliance Ulivo led by Prodi reached a majority, many Italians hoped that fundamental changes would take place in their country. Prodi’s rigorous austerity program made Italy’s entry into the European currency union possible, and his pro-European policy was generally understood as a positive signal that Italy was about to modernize and to fit into the European concert. Actually, at the beginning Prodi—as an experienced economist from Emilia Romagna and former president of the IRI, the largest state holding company in Italy, which he redeveloped, restructured, and partly privatized—represented a stable financial policy of his country. Beyond that, as Laura Fasanaro and Leopoldo Nuti have shown, he was also a faithful European and a dedicated federalist who, probably somewhat unrealistically, even dreamed of the “United States of Europe” in the tradition of Count Coudenhove-Kalergi or Aristide Briand³⁰.

³⁰ L. FASANARO - L. NUTI, *Romano Prodi*.

To what extent Prodi was also perceived as a politician of reason and balance on the European stage was demonstrated by the fact that, after losing a vote of confidence in the Italian parliament and having to resign as prime minister in 1998, he was nominated by the heads of government of the EU as president of the European Commission—an office he took up as successor to Jacques Santer on September 15, 1999, and held until 2004. However, his “somewhat clumsy jovial friendliness”, which he transformed into his “political trademark”, did not always prove to be a guarantee for success³¹. It is true that within the EU Commission, as was the case before in his office as Italian prime minister, he was noticed for his pragmatism and steadfastness. However, he was also accused of a lack of leadership and decisiveness and of “pale visibility”. In his “good European” policy, he stood up for, above all, an enlargement of the EU, which was to become an increasingly federalist union, indeed a United States of Europe, including Turkey whose membership he thought to be in no way problematic³².

The accession negotiations, which under his leadership led to the admission of ten new states to the EU on May 1, 2004, demonstrated Prodi’s sober pragmatism as well as his commitment to Europe and might have resulted in his nomination for a second term, had he not expressed his interest in becoming Italian prime minister once again. Thus, the conservative José Manuel Barroso was nominated by the European Council as candidate for the office of president of the EU Commission and confirmed by the European Parliament on July 22, 2004. He remained in office for ten years, until October 2014, and thus had a lasting impact on the development of Europe at a time when Europe and the world underwent rapid changes.

It seems likely that Prodi could have become such a formative figure in Europe as well, had he not decided to return to Italy in 2004. There he was indeed nominated as top candidate of a center-left alliance, L’Unione, in a nationwide primary election in October 2005, receiving more than 70% of the votes, and he obtained a comfortable majority during the parliamentary elections in April 2006. Chancellor Merkel then hurried to let her Deputy Government Speaker Thomas Steg

³¹ K.-D. FRANKENBERGER, *Machtwechsel in Italien*.

³² *Ibid.*

declare that she hoped for a “stable new government in Italy, capable of acting”, and that she was looking forward to cooperating with the newly elected prime minister³³. Prodi, who in contrast to his predecessor, Silvio Berlusconi, exuded a high degree of credibility and predictability, indeed appeared to be a politician who pursued a similar style of government as Angela Merkel and seemed to be perfectly suitable for common action in Europe: competent and constructive, pragmatic and sober, with a basic pro-European understanding—and, like Merkel, entirely without putting on airs. Thus in a 2006 article, the “International Herald Tribune” called him “Mr. Serenity”³⁴.

However, Article 95 of the Italian constitution allocates only limited competences to the prime minister. The Presidente del Consiglio is more a *primus inter pares* than a real head of the executive branch. He is in fact helpless *vis-à-vis* the rivalry of cabinet members and has few options at his disposal for sanctions, as he cannot dismiss unpleasant ministers. Vice heads of government often see themselves as internal rivals, not as loyal aides. And unlike the German chancellor, Italian heads of government rarely have an effective power base within the party system. This was particularly true for Prodi, as the particularization and fragmentation of the Italian political order since 1994 hardly contributed to improving the situation, in which the defenders of a parliamentary legitimation of government competed with advocates of a personalized plebiscitary mandate. In his struggle against populist trends and individuals, Prodi was in a lost position from the very outset, due to his personal disposition, which excluded any form of populism. Thus, he could neither win the public struggle against his competitors nor could he withstand the internal clashes stemming from ideological heterogeneity within the L'Unione alliance and the diverse clientele groups that undermined his policy and counteracted its goals³⁵.

As early as February 2007, only nine months after his appointment, Prodi thus submitted his resignation as Italian prime minister after failing to receive a parliamentary majority for his policy to withdraw the Italian forces from Iraq, but leaving them in Afghanistan. Though

³³ B. HENGST - S. WEILAND, *Berlin weint Berlusconi keine Träne nach*.

³⁴ I. FISHER, *A Tenuous Time for Mr. Serenity*.

³⁵ See R. MARUHN, *Italien*.

President Giorgio Napolitano did not accept Prodi's resignation and even declared that he would neither dissolve the government nor arrange for new elections, Prodi now was decisively weakened. Although his center-left government could still continue its work for a while, the end was near when, in January 2008, Minister of Justice Clemente Mastella was forced to resign due to allegations of corruption. Mastella's party Union of Democrats for Europe (Unione Democratica per l'Europa, UDEUR) then left the Unione alliance and withdrew its support from the government, thus blessing Italy with another government crisis. On January 28, 2008, after losing a vote of confidence in the Senate, Prodi handed in his resignation; this time it was accepted by the president.

4. *Merkel and Prodi: A comparison*

Prodi's repeated failure can only be partly explained, however, by his lack of characteristics that could have made him a popular politician: personal charisma, compelling rhetoric, and a convincing political concept³⁶. More important were the well-known shortcomings of the Italian political system, which undermine the position of the head of government and do not force both party representatives and clientele politicians to compromise. With his basic attitudes—pro-European and anti-populist—Prodi was in many ways similar to Angela Merkel. Like her, he avoided ostentation and pageantry. Like her, he conscientiously and reliably completed his appointments and drafted a policy that lacked any demagogy. The contrast to the pompous appearances of Berlusconi and the noisy mass gatherings of Beppe Grillo could not have been more visible. If what Nicola Vendola once said about Grillo is true, that in his rallies “yelling had replaced ideas”, then the soberness of Prodi seemed to be a handicap more than an advantage.

A comparison between Prodi and Merkel, on the other hand, shows some remarkable common ground: an unexcited pragmatism, personal modesty, and the effort to subordinate the self to the substance of politics, but also a certain ineptitude in dealing with the media, which can be

³⁶ In a personal portrait, BBC Rome correspondent David Willey described Prodi, due to his lack of popularity and charisma, as early as in 1999 by using a term of his critics: “the Mortadella”—“after the rather bland sausage for which his city (Bologna) is famous”, in D. WILLEY, *Profile: Romano Prodi*.

a serious disadvantage in a society geared toward public presentation. In a joint government, they might have made a good political pair. Nevertheless, one crucial difference is obvious: while Merkel achieved great triumphs, Prodi remained largely unsuccessful in political terms, at least in Italy. Conversely, it probably would have been the same: in Germany, Prodi might have succeeded, while in Italy, Merkel would have been marginalized or, even more likely, would not have walked onto the stage of politics at all.

It is therefore essential to take the political systems of both countries into consideration in order to understand why the careers of Merkel and Prodi went so differently, despite the similarities in their style of political behavior and leadership. In Germany—with its institutions that provided stability, functioning political parties that were not afraid of reaching a consensus, and a government apparatus that worked for, not against, the chancellor—a leading figure such as Merkel was able to succeed, even though many, not least in her own party, initially suspected that she would be incapable of filling the position of chancellor, and even though she left no doubt that she would not pursue a populist course. In Italy, on the other hand, where after the collapse of the traditional party structure during the 1990's, the public was accustomed to populist leaders with great appearance and a charismatic aura, a solid but nondescript, inconspicuous figure like Prodi could not have a chance in the long run. It almost borders on a miracle that he could win an election at all. Yet to be truthful, he did not win, but rather forged alliances, which then quickly disintegrated in both of his terms.

Thus, Prodi ultimately became a victim of the Italian political system, which—at least for the time being—rewards plebiscitary figures while penalizing sober anti-populism. In other words: Prodi did not fail due to his intellectuality or his political concepts, but rather due to the Italian circumstances where not being a populist amounts to “political suicide”³⁷.

³⁷ This term was also used by Michael Gehler on the example of Gian Franco Fini who refurbished the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano under Giorgio Almirante in 1995, repositioning both its staff and program and renaming it Alleanza Nazionale in order to establish it more firmly in the political landscape of Italy. While Almirante had rejected the “ruling system” categorically, Fini, who earlier had called Benito Mussolini the “greatest statesman of the 20th century”, now tried to present himself as a “statesmanlike anti-populist”—and thus committed, as Gehler writes, “political suicide in Italy”; see M. GEHLER, *Populismus als Indikator für Demokratie*.

In Germany, on the other hand, Merkel could succeed because of a political system that was geared less toward public effects than toward administrative efficiency. The adroit media presence of a chancellor can be useful, even instrumental, as was the case with Konrad Adenauer, Willy Brandt, or Helmut Schmidt. As Merkel has demonstrated convincingly, though, it was not a precondition for successful government. If she also can succeed under more difficult circumstances, like those after the elections of September 2017, remains to be seen.

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III. European Political Parties, Their Response to the Populist Challenge, and Their Treatment of Populism

Between Collaboration and Demarcation

The European People's Party and the Populist Wave

by *Steven Van Hecke* and *Alex Andrione-Moylan*

I. INTRODUCTION

In 2010, Herman Van Rompuy, then President of the European Council, asserted that populism was the “greatest danger for Europe”, words which, in the years to come, would be echoed by much of the establishment both in Brussels and the member states¹. Indeed, since the aftermath of the latest economic and financial crisis, populism has dominated Europe’s zeitgeist and put the European Union (EU) in a defensive position. In essence, populism has come to encompass a set of diverse trends that have redefined the political and public debate over the European integration process. Despite the exponential rise in the use of this designation, the label, which is increasingly loaded in both political and normative terms, eludes univocal definitions, often preventing a nuanced understanding of this complex phenomenon. This lack of understanding certainly applies to political forces such as the European center-right.

In this chapter we will endeavor to explore populism in an unbiased manner, challenging prevailing assumptions on its relationship with contemporary liberal democracy, in order to provide a deeper analysis of the ostensibly contradictory nature of the relationship of the European People’s Party (EPP) with populist forces². In order to clarify the nature of the tensions raised by populism in the EU, a brief review of the extant literature will provide the foundations for a reappraisal of the challenges faced by the EPP and of the strategies that this political family has developed in dealing with a shifting political landscape.

¹ G. LAZARIDIS - G. CAMPANI, *Understanding the Populist Shift*, p. 194.

² With regard the choice of the party’s name, which referred to *Volksparteien* and not to populism, see S. VAN HECKE, *On the Road*, p. 156.

This will be achieved by empirically examining several instances of this relationship in order to capture prevailing patterns and diachronic shifts through an exercise of documentary analysis.

II. LIBERAL DEMOCRACY, EUROPE, THE EPP, AND THE “POPULIST THREAT”

1. *Populism and European integration*

As our focus is limited to the context of the EU, it is essential to begin by considering the role played by Euroskepticism with regard to populism in Europe. While the two are often conflated, they are not one and the same: Euroskeptical views are not *per se* a sign of populism. Populism predates the EU, but within the EU, Euroskepticism preceded populism. Initially, however, Euroskepticism referred to the first wave of widespread contestation towards European integration following the Maastricht Treaty (1992) that did not have an anti-elite rhetoric as its focus and tended to be reformist rather than Europhobic in its outlook³. In one essential regard, though, the rise of Euroskepticism—and thus of the politicization of the European project—did in fact contribute to the success of populism across the EU: by providing a new public sphere and political arena, in which “Brussels” would constitute the perfect archetype of an illegitimate, incompetent, and ultimately dispensable elite⁴. Such a strategy thus only gained traction fairly recently, owing its success to the financial and economic crisis of 2008/09, which would lead to the Greek government-debt crisis of 2010. As the Commission and the European Central Bank consolidated their role, alongside the International Monetary Fund, in imposing fiscal consolidation and debt repayment, Euroskepticism and populism clearly turned into mutually reinforcing phenomena⁵.

Whether populism is understood as an ideology, a discursive style, or a mobilization strategy, there is a consensus with regard to how “[all forms of populism without exception involve some kind of exaltation and appeal to ‘the people’ and all are in one sense or another anti-elit-

³ R. HARMSSEN, *Concluding Comment*, pp. 333 f.

⁴ See D. ALMEIDA, *Europeanized Eurosceptics?*

⁵ Y. STAVRAKAKIS, *The Return of ‘the People’*.

ist”, as noted by Margaret Canovan⁶. If one is to view this concept in a neutral manner, it is useful to consider how these two fundamental features also point us towards what populism is not⁷. First, populism is the polar opposite of elitism. Its narrative focuses on reversing the relationship between the people and the political class, claiming to provide a channel for unmediated and thus fully accountable power of the people. These are, in essence, some of the essential tenets of Cas Mudde’s understanding of populism as a “thin-centered” ideology: a mercurial set of ideas which, rather than providing comprehensive answers to political questions, amounts to a combination of incoherent and often contradictory views, all of which stem from a Manichean world-view⁸. Others, not without reason, have sought to nuance this definition by avoiding the dichotomy between populist and non-populist ideologies, highlighting how all political parties may, to differing degrees, demonstrate a populist communicative style. Deegan-Krause and Haughton identify six “populist claims” to gauge the intensity of this trait: (1) homogeneity of the people, (2) homogeneity of the elite, (3) glorification of the people, (4) denigration of the elite, (5) unmediated leadership, and (6) rejection of cooperation or compromise⁹. Below we shall delve into the specific challenges that these developments produced for the EPP.

2. *The EPP and the challenges of European democracy*

Within a multi-level polity such as the EU, European political parties provide a unique vantage point when examining developments that arise at the intersection between domestic and supranational politics. For reasons we shall discuss below, the EPP is of particular interest when analyzing the matter of populism in the EU. While populists see institutions, their checks and balances, and procedural democracy in general as obstacles to their aims, the EPP can be defined as elitist in the sense that it holds institutions and representative democracy in

⁶ M. CANOVAN, *Populism*, p. 294.

⁷ C. MUDDE - C.R. KALTWASSER, *Populism*, p. 494.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 497-499; C. MUDDE, *The Populist Zeitgeist*, p. 544.

⁹ K. DEEGAN-KRAUSE - T. HAUGHTON, *Toward a More Useful Conceptualization of Populism*, pp. 823 f.

very high regard, thus upholding the need for and the prerogatives of the political class¹⁰. Its vocally pro-European stance should also be interpreted from such a perspective, which relates to how Euroskepticism has found fertile ground within the populist world-view¹¹. In essence, the EPP is the voice of the establishment, which places it in sharp contrast to the ‘iconoclastic’ character of populist movements that seek discontinuity rather than stability. This feature of the EPP, on the other hand, is counter-balanced by its adherence to subsidiarity as an instrument to empower citizens, which translates into its commitment to pluralism, a further dimension that is firmly rooted in its Christian Democratic values¹². Incidentally, pluralism also constitutes the other ‘non-populism’ to which Canovan’s assertion points us: populism is based upon a monist world-view which denies the heterogeneity of society, either in terms of economic interests or as far as ethnic, cultural, and religious groups are concerned, adding a further dimension to the stark contrast between the EPP and populism¹³.

The relationship between the two is, however, far more complex than may appear, as it reflects the countervailing forces that paradoxically bind populism and liberal democracy to one another. Plattner, among others, has very effectively highlighted how liberal democracy is a regime in tension between the aspirations of majority rule, which is after all the basis of democracy itself, and the protection of individual liberty, which is the aim of pluralism: neither the absolute will of the majority nor the complete disaggregation of society’s interests is possible, thus frustrating both objectives¹⁴. Populism can thus be interpreted as a corrective to an excessively liberal and pluralistic view of democracy that neglects the grievances of “the majority” which, in times of crisis, are far more likely to mobilize otherwise disengaged and politically inactive sections of society¹⁵. From this perspective, despite the apparent conflict between the EPP and populism, defining the latter as a potential element of

¹⁰ F. HARTLEB, *After Their Establishment*, p. 27.

¹¹ See P. TAGGART, *Populism and Representative Politics*.

¹² European People’s Party, *Manifesto*, p. 2.

¹³ M.F. PLATTNER, *Populism, Pluralism, and Liberal Democracy*, pp. 88 f.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 83 f.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

democracy itself contributes to understanding how the EPP has come to combine both oppositional and conciliatory stances vis-à-vis populist parties, all while raising more than a few political dilemmas.

III. MAPPING OUT A DIVERSE SET OF STRATEGIES

1. *The Challenge of European Christian Democracy*

As we have outlined in the foregoing conceptual considerations, the relationship between the EPP and populism is indeed an ostensibly contradictory one, as it recasts a deeper tension that lies at the heart of all liberal democracies. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to examining how the EPP has managed the ebb and flow of conflict and proximity with populism by highlighting different strategies through a historical analysis, complemented whenever possible by our documentary research on the basis of almost one hundred official documents. The documents collected cover in particular the last five years and comprise all those that directly or indirectly address the issue of populism among the available press releases, resolutions, manifestos, and declarations released by the EPP and the EPP Group in the European Parliament, as well as the publications issued by affiliated research foundations (such as the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies as the EPP's official political foundation, and the EPP Group's European Ideas Network). The five main strategies that will be considered are: "indifference", which designates instances where the EPP's lack of activity indicates a limited salience of the issue; "denial", or the downplaying of populist tendencies of political parties; "collaboration" between the EPP and populist parties, either at the EU or national level; "demarcation", which refers to defining the confines of the EPP as a political family, both among its members, and *vis-à-vis* political opponents; and "confrontation", when there is no will to engage with populist parties and the aim is to defeat opposing views. Finally, it should be noted that all of these aspects of the EPP's behavior are to be considered both "internally", i.e. within the party's membership, and "externally", i.e. beyond the EPP and even the EU.

For decades, Christian Democratic parties and their leaders had been among the driving forces of the European project, a *status quo* that reflected the essential role played by the center-ground of politics since the postwar era within many Western European countries. This had

allowed the EPP to thrive by relying upon the political support of such political parties in the member states: that is to say that the EPP's influence over the then European Economic Community's institutions was the product of a distinct political landscape which, at the end of the twentieth century, was on the verge of momentous change¹⁶. On the one hand, the Christian Democrats were set to face an increasing challenge from right-wing parties, a trend which threatened to erode the group's clout in the European Parliament. On the other, further on the horizon lay the unknown territory of the Eastern Enlargement of the EU's membership, a development which would test the EPP's ability to garner support among new democracies that lacked a long-standing Christian Democratic tradition¹⁷. Both of these challenges would become far more acute as, with what had once been latent discontent over globalization and the (perceived) shortcomings of the EU, suddenly coalescing around the EU-wide crisis of 2009. This peak in the tension between pluralism and majoritarian rule across Europe opened up many member states, both new and old, to strengthened populist and Euroskeptical forces. As will become apparent from the following, the strategies developed by the EPP in order to manage such challenges are diverse and are indeed evidence of the multifaceted relationship outlined above.

2. *Fallout of the EPP's broadening strategy*

With "collaboration" here, we refer to those instances in which the EPP took what could be defined as a highly pragmatic approach to the complexities it faced, as far as maintaining and broadening its membership was concerned. This led to rapprochement with political forces, which had arisen beyond and to the right of the EPP tradition. This would engender a progressive realignment of the EPP, a shift ignited by pressures from then German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and conducted under the stewardship of EPP President and Group Chairman Wilfried Martens¹⁸. It should be noted, nonetheless, that in the 1980s

¹⁶ See S. VAN HECKE - E. GERARD (eds), *Christian Democratic Parties*.

¹⁷ P. FONTAINE, *Voyage to the Heart of Europe*, pp. 331 f.; S. VAN HECKE, *A Decade of Seized Opportunities*.

¹⁸ P. FONTAINE, *Voyage to the Heart of Europe*, pp. 323-328.

and 1990s, there was no immediate link between the realignment of the EPP and the rise of the populist challenge. Of course, populism predates the EPP, which was founded in 1976. However, it was not an issue in the first decades of the party's existence. The rapprochement with non-Christian Democratic parties was rather a mere reaction to the European Community's reaching out at the time towards countries that had never had Christian Democratic strongholds or where such forces had disappeared¹⁹. But this operation certainly brought the EPP much closer to populist politics.

In Italy, for instance, the collapse of the once dominant Christian Democracy (Democrazia Cristiana, DC) in the 1994 elections—defeated by the self-proclaimed *homo novus* of Italian politics, media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi and his center-right Forza Italia party—highlighted how the EPP's voter base was in decline. While it may well have constituted the first encounter of the EPP with what can be defined quite accurately as a populist party, founded on the personalization of politics and the permanent campaigning against the establishment in the name of “the people”, a further distinction should be made²⁰. This phase is in fact more significant in terms of how—by shifting the EPP's center of gravity towards the right—a decade later it would expose this party to a far closer, and thus more complex, relationship with populist parties.

Still, the entry of Forza Italia did not happen overnight²¹. Initially, many of the DC's successors attempted to become EPP members, but rather than meeting the EPP's electoral expectations, they were occupied with infighting over the Christian Democratic legacy, including at the European level. In early 1994, the Christian Democratic Center (Centro Cristiano Democratico, CCD), for instance, wanted to be the bridge-maker between Forza Italia and the EPP, resulting in a veto from the Italian People's Party (Partito Popolare Italiano, PPI) against the CCD's membership bid. Eventually, the CCD did become member, as did all of the other successors to the DC, nicely fitting into the EPP's strategy of reuniting the Italian Christian Democrats. After all, Berlusconi was internationally isolated and nobody within the EPP, not least Kohl,

¹⁹ S. VAN HECKE, *On the Road*.

²⁰ S. FABBRINI, *The Rise and Fall of Silvio Berlusconi*, pp. 154-155.

²¹ See W. MARTENS, *Europe: I Struggle, I Overcome*, pp. 139-147.

was willing to change this. When this resurrection strategy did not succeed, the EPP turned to Forza Italia. First of all, MEPs from the Forza Europa Group joined the EPP Group in July 1998. The latter feared that the establishment of an alternative, right-wing group called Union for Europe could harm the EPP's position, a scenario that should therefore be prevented at all costs. The so-called "bungalow agreement" laid out the new strategy, finally leading to Forza Italia's EPP membership by the end of 1999. This change of strategy was not without collateral damage. Romano Prodi, Italian Prime Minister at the time, left the EPP as soon as Berlusconi was invited to its party meetings, while more traditional left-wing Christian Democrats established the so-called "Athena Group" led by former Irish prime minister John Bruton. Interestingly, while the Athena Group was founded "to protect and to promote the basic programme of the EPP" against political forces like Berlusconi's, the EPP stressed that it was "not looking for new values but rather to modernize and adapt [its] ideological legacy to new situations, responding to these, using a new language, dealing with new challenges"²². In other words, the political context had changed and, thus, so had the political practice.

Another prominent instance of "collaboration" between Christian Democrats and populist forces, in this case on the far-right and in the context of a national government coalition, was met with far greater opposition. In 2000, the formation of the new Austrian government of the Austrian People's Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP) and Jörg Haider's Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) led to more than just protest and sanctions at the EU level²³. Also within the EPP, there was much turmoil surrounding the unprecedented entry of a member party into a coalition with an extreme-right party that was clearly anti-establishment²⁴. Spanish Prime Minister José Maria Aznar even demanded the immediate exclusion of the ÖVP. Eventually, the Italian, French, and francophone Belgian Christian Democrats submitted such a request amid strong protests by the German Christian Democrats and the Forza Italia delegates, among

²² S. VAN HECKE, *Christen-democraten en conservatieven in de Europese Volkspartij*, pp. 256 f.

²³ See M. GEHLER, *Präventivschlag als Fehlschlag*.

²⁴ See W. MARTENS, *Europe*, pp. 164-167.

others. As covert diplomacy was needed to get everyone on the same line, a summit of the leading EPP politicians in Lisbon on March 23 was cancelled, a unique event in the party's history. A compromise was reached when a committee of "three wise men" was given the mandate to monitor the Austrian political situation and report back to the EPP. The outcome of the report, issued a couple of weeks later, was clear: there was no reason not to rehabilitate the ÖVP within the EPP family. Governments in which member parties bear responsibility should be evaluated by their deeds, not by the antecedents of coalition partners. Interestingly, the report called upon the member parties' foundations to study the phenomenon of "rightist populist movements" as well as the link between mainstream left-wing parties and the extreme left. The EPP welcomed the re-entry of the ÖVP, stating that "[the] rejection of political alliances with extremes is one of the fundamental principles of the EPP"²⁵. The latter clearly did not satisfy a number of Christian Democrats from the Benelux countries, France, Italy, and Spain. Under the leadership of François Bayrou, then president of EPP member Union for French Democracy (Union pour la Démocratie Française, UDF), the Schuman Group was founded in order to protect the Christian Democratic origins of the EPP. As a rather small current within the EPP Group, which tried to coordinate its voting behavior, it never managed to influence the overall course of the party. On the contrary, the EPP triumphed following the so-called "ÖVP crisis" as, according to President Wilfried Martens, it "achieved a remarkable victory at the European Council, for it adopted the reporting formula used by our monitoring committee"²⁶. In other words, the EU decision was in line with the EPP's strategy of collaboration.

3. *Populism among the ranks of the EPP*

The aim here is to focus on the strategies that surround the presence of an increasingly populist party among the EPP's members. This appears to be met with a combination of denial of the allegations which—not without reason—are dismissed as politically motivated, and a degree of indifference when divergences are neither acknowledged nor addressed.

²⁵ *Resolution by the EPP Political Bureau.*

²⁶ W. MARTENS, *Europe*, p. 167.

As membership appears to be increasingly contested, demarcation emerges as a device for establishing red lines and ultimatums. This particular pattern captures the relationship of the EPP with populist parties, which at times is ambivalent, highlighting the tensions that arise when any such party is accepted into the fold. While there is perhaps only one instance that truly qualifies for this particular scenario, it is worth considering it some detail: Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party in Hungary. The extent and nature of the "revolution" sought by the once liberal student-led party only became apparent following its election victory in 2010 and the attainment of a supermajority in parliament. The government set about taking the necessary steps in order to make key changes to the country's constitution, without interference from institutions or parliament, and with the aim of weakening the system of checks and balances to the government, in particular by undermining the independence of the judiciary²⁷.

One particular measure, the forced retirement of 274 judges, sparked significant outrage across the EU, with the European Commission initiating an infringement procedure against Hungary as a result in January 2012. It was in this instance, and within the broader context outlined above, that the then President of the EPP Wilfried Martens and the Chairman of the EPP Group Joseph Daul released a joint statement in which, while expressing their unreserved support for the Commission's actions, they also sought to portray the new constitution as a positive achievement, implicitly denying allegations as to the threat it posed to the rule of law²⁸. A similar message was sent out with Daul's speech during a plenary session of the European Parliament only a few days later, noting in particular how "[t]he Members of the EPP Group respect freedom and democracy, as does the vast majority of this Parliament. Mr. Orbán will prove to us that he also stands by these principles and values", in a further expression of the EPP's confidence in the legitimacy of the government's action²⁹. This only increased the salience of the issue, with rival MEPs seizing upon the unusual circumstances to direct criticism against the EPP and the Hungarian government within the context of the negotiations with the Commission. In what was

²⁷ See M. BÁNKUTI - G. HALMAI - K. L. SCHEPPELE, *Hungary's Illiberal Turn*.

²⁸ EPP GROUP, *EPP Backs Proposals*.

²⁹ EPP GROUP, *Hungary: EU Law Comes First*.

becoming an increasingly politicized debate, a prominent Fidesz MEP, Kinga Gál, called for an end to the “groundless political hysteria” in a press release provocatively entitled *Sentencing before the End of the Trial is the Authoritarian Method*³⁰.

Meanwhile, at the end of 2011 the Hungarian government had also passed legislation in order to allow greater control over its monetary policy: lack of compliance with the Excessive Deficit Procedure (EDP) resulted in the Cohesion Fund suspension in March 2012. It was then that the EPP Chairman Daul sought to introduce a degree of “demarcation”, requesting Prime Minister Orbán to comply with the assessment of the European Commission and noting that the rule of law of the country was at stake, signaling how there were limitations to the EPP’s tolerance³¹. By March 2013, the Hungarian government had introduced corrective legislation, and in June of the same year, the EDP was also lifted by the European Commission. The debate, nevertheless, was reignited by an EP resolution on Hungary, which noted how there was a trend that would lead to a “clear risk of a serious breach of the values referred to in Article 2 of the TEU-A”. The EPP Group reverted to its “denial” strategy, with the vice chairman of the EPP Group, Manfred Weber, stressing that the assessment of Hungary was politically motivated and also questioning the legitimacy of setting up a monitoring operation³². With the EP elections looming, it would appear that the EPP kept its distance from the Orbán controversies, congratulating Fidesz on its electoral victory in April 2014, apparently oblivious to the OSCE/ODHIR report in which it was highlighted how the “governing party enjoyed an undue advantage because of restrictive campaign regulations, biased media coverage, and campaign activities that blurred the separation between political party and the state”³³. This is also an indication of how a further dimension of the EPP’s approach in such instances is also a degree of “indifference”, or a lack of public engagement on some of these matters.

³⁰ EPP GROUP, *Hungary: Sentencing before the End of the Trial*.

³¹ EPP GROUP, *Hungary: Rule of Law Must Prevail*.

³² EPP GROUP, *EP Report on Hungary*.

³³ OSCE, *Hungary Parliamentary Elections 6 April 2014*, p. 1.

The peak of the migration crisis in 2015 came with heightened anti-European rhetoric from the Hungarian Prime Minister. This materialized in a controversial public consultation in which economic migrants were defined as a threat, Brussels was criticized for its mismanagement of the crisis, and immigration was related to the rise in terrorist attacks. This added to the outcry that had followed a bid to open a debate over the reintroduction of the death penalty in Hungary: the EP responded with a resolution on these matters, supported by the EPP Group, which resorted once again to “demarcation”, indicating that a line had been crossed, all the while expressing the confidence that respect for the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights would endure³⁴. Still, the EPP’s reluctance in taking a firm position *vis-à-vis* Fidesz attracted increasing criticism, its stance appearing increasingly hypocritical and opportunistic while failing to influence the Hungarian government with its dialogue-based approach.

The most recent proof of this constituted a watershed moment in this fraught relationship: in 2017, new legislation was approved, which would require NGOs that receive foreign funding to make their records public, hampering both their activity and their ability to obtain funds. Furthermore, specific measures were targeted at the Central European University (CEU) funded by George Soros, such as placing restrictions on non-EU staff, with the aim of preventing the English-speaking institution from functioning effectively. Following the launch of a public consultation entitled “Let’s stop Brussels!”, the EPP could no longer ignore the increasing calls for the expulsion of Fidesz from within the EPP Group itself. And on April 29, 2017, Prime Minister Orbán was summoned by the Presidency of the EPP. The stance taken there was unmistakably one of “demarcation”, plainly stating that restrictions of basic freedoms and the disregard for rule of law were unacceptable and demanding compliance with the Commission’s requests, as well as an end to the escalating anti-EU rhetoric³⁵. While the EPP has declared that Orbán accepted its requests, for the time being this ultimatum has not had significant impact, with the latest controversy arising as a result of the anti-Semitic undertones of the campaign launched

³⁴ EPP GROUP, *Hungary: EPP Group Firmly Opposed to Death Penalty*.

³⁵ EUROPEAN PEOPLE’S PARTY, *Prime Minister Orbán*.

against Hungarian-American financier George Soros³⁶. These recent developments all combined, triggering renewed condemnation from the EP through a resolution, which was supported by less than half of EPP MEPs, give some indication of how—for the time being—the scales appear to be tipped in favor of Orbán³⁷.

The subject is undoubtedly a thorny one. It has been publicly addressed only in eight press releases over the past five years, with no academic publications by EPP foundations tackling the matter head-on: it would appear that the EPP has engaged with this issue rather sparingly, seeking perhaps to limit its salience. However, given the understanding of populism, which has been discussed above, the EPP's strategy of "denial", combined with the behind-the-scenes dialogue, should not be limited to a matter of political convenience. The fact remains that in the center-right of Hungarian politics, there is no other potential counterpart. The willingness of a party such as Fidesz to remain within a pro-European and establishment political family such as the EPP still provides a unique opportunity of engagement with a region in which the resilience of the rule of law and democracy is being tested. It is by no means a given that the exclusion of such forces would produce the desired outcome: engaging with populist parties and their claims is a dimension of also recognizing the legitimacy of the grievances held by their voters. On the other hand, one should not pretend that membership in the EPP has not provided Viktor Orbán with a shield of sorts, raising political dilemmas that are, inevitably, weighed against the electoral benefits that come with Fidesz's MEPs. It is in this sense that the debate over populism in the EU is also a normative one, in which labels are often attributed as a function of partisan interests as well as of broader political questions.

4. *Rebels at the edge of Europe*

If the instances considered above constitute rather prominent examples of how the EPP manages its proximity with populism, the evidence examined yields an unsurprising result. In the vast majority of cases,

³⁶ K. THAN, *Hungary's Anti-Soros Posters*.

³⁷ EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, *European Parliament Resolution of 17 May 2017*; VOTEWATCH EUROPE, *European Parliament Vote*.

the EPP's focus is, in its different guises, on distancing itself from populist parties and governments, condemning their practices, and seeking strategies to tackle this phenomenon. We refer here to "confrontation" activities directed at instances of populism that arise outside the EPP. The analysis of the content of the documents considered points us towards three distinguishable, if often overlapping, aims of this approach, all of which will be illustrated below. One such aim is to denounce democratic and rule of law backsliding or populist practices within member states; secondly, there are instances in which the objective is rather to identify political opponents, who are labeled as populist; finally, at times the aim is to highlight populism as an EU-wide challenge, an instance in which populism also coincides with anti-European tendencies more generally.

Reference to threats to the rule of law and democracy have been largely made with regard to developments in Central and Eastern Europe. In 2012 alone, the EPP Group issued eight press releases on the unfolding crisis in Romania under the Social Democrat Prime Minister Victor Ponta. In that instance, the EPP did not show the restraint that was reserved for Hungary in similar circumstances: there was no hesitation in defining the undermining of the judiciary's independence or the ousting of the country's president Traian Basescu as a "coup"³⁸. The Group also released a statement opening up to the possibility of invoking Art. 7 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) which provides the legal basis for the enforcement of EU values, a measure it had rejected with regard to Hungary³⁹. In 2013, the EPP Group raised similar concerns when the Slovak general prosecutor was unlawfully replaced by the Socialist government of Robert Fico, who had already triggered a statement from Group Chairman Daul condemning his discriminatory rhetoric aimed at ethnic minorities⁴⁰. In 2016, the by now all-too-common combination of reforms to undermine the judiciary and control the media was emerging in Poland, with EPP Group Vice Chairman Esteban González Pons warning that there was no place for authoritarianism in Europe⁴¹. The failure to address these issues was also

³⁸ EPP GROUP, *Romania*.

³⁹ EPP GROUP, *Having a Majority Does Not Legitimise a Breach of Law*.

⁴⁰ EPP GROUP, *EPP Group Concerned*; EPP GROUP, *Slovakia*.

⁴¹ EPP GROUP, *EPP Group Warns Warsaw*.

strongly condemned in 2017 by Group Chairman Weber, asserting that the Law and Justice party was “putting an end to the rule of law and democracy in Poland and leaving the European community of values”⁴². These examples offer some indication of how the stances of European political parties and their parliamentary groups are not neutral *vis-à-vis* “populist” challenges. The undermining of democracy, the rule of law, and European values are, at least to a certain degree, a matter of perspective, which is emphasized, denied, or ignored as the result of political interests and normative evaluations. This further contributes to a blurring of the lines between democracy and populism in a manner that fails to objectively acknowledge instances where populism has eroded the foundations of the liberal State but also prevents openly asserting that engaging with, rather than excluding, populist leaders may well constitute the lesser of two evils.

There are other instances in which political adversaries are identified as populist, with the aim of this form of “confrontation” to portray the EPP and its members as the antidote to the “populist threat”. One such example is the press release issued on Europe Day in 2012 in which the debate between fiscal consolidation and Keynesian economics was defined as one between pragmatists and populists⁴³. Boiko Borisov’s 2013 electoral victory in Bulgaria was hailed as a victory against “the relentless smear tactics and populist rhetoric of the Socialists”⁴⁴. Later that year, when Borisov was excluded from the ruling coalition, the EPP released a formal party resolution in which it considered populism to be “the publically announced intentions of the ruling party to abandon further and necessary reforms”⁴⁵. In quite a distinct setting, EPP President Daul defined the defiance of Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras’ “empty populist talk” welcoming the agreement on a new bailout deal in 2015⁴⁶. These assertions are overtly political and, if possible, perhaps even more vague, as populism becomes one and the same with the political other, where what is pre-eminent is the distance,

⁴² EPP GROUP, *PiS Government Has Crossed the Red Line*.

⁴³ EPP GROUP, *Europe Day*.

⁴⁴ EPP GROUP, *Bulgarian Elections*.

⁴⁵ EUROPEAN PEOPLE’S PARTY, *The Political Crisis*.

⁴⁶ EUROPEAN PEOPLE’S PARTY, *The New Deal*.

rather than the nature of the distinction. It should be highlighted that such cases are easily identified, as the designation of “populist” or “populism” is explicitly employed, while in most other cases, even if dealing with the same issue, these terms are avoided. This is proof of the challenge of discussing these matters in an unbiased manner: it is in this regard that some have pointedly noted how in the mainstream political discourse, it has turned into a “swearword” with which to dismiss political opponents⁴⁷.

Finally, in the remainder of the documents the polarization between populists and non-populists is somewhat diluted. When it comes to press releases and other similar documents, the dilution occurs in terms of the in-group of the non-populist front, by implicitly appealing to pro-Europeans more broadly, in less of a politicized fashion. This appears to emerge within the documents issued by the party—which are far fewer, compared to those issued by the EPP Group. An example is the press release issued on Europe Day in 2015, in which EPP President Daul asserted, “We must continue working together in unity to defend our shared values and democratic rights against populist and Euroskeptic forces,” the “we” including an audience well beyond the confines of the EPP, and a far cry from the rather dry reference to fiscal consolidation in the same context in 2012⁴⁸. The 2017 Europe Day speech reprised a similar tone, with Daul declaring that “the European project is the one that we can all embrace and Europe is the place that we can all call home”⁴⁹. The spirit at times translates into clear displays of unity which tend to be directed beyond the borders of the EU: in May 2017, EPP President Daul and the President of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), Hans Van Baalen, issued a joint statement on the electoral reform in Moldova, which was being pushed through parliament and which was set to benefit the ruling party⁵⁰. Such statements exemplify how recent “triumphs” of populism, such as Brexit and even the election of Donald Trump in the United States, have resulted in greater unity among mainstream, pro-European

⁴⁷ T. AALBERG et al., *Populist Political Communication*, p. 111.

⁴⁸ EUROPEAN PEOPLE’S PARTY, *EPP President*.

⁴⁹ EUROPEAN PEOPLE’S PARTY, *Europe’s Day*.

⁵⁰ EUROPEAN PEOPLE’S PARTY, *Joint Statement*.

Europarties. This deepens the divide between liberal democracy and its populist dimension, a divide that is, however, fictitious as we have illustrated, and one which could lead to missed opportunities in dealing with such matters.

IV. CONCLUSION

What we have outlined above is, perhaps inevitably, a highly nuanced picture, which does not, however, prevent us from drawing some meaningful conclusions. The awareness of the fundamentally contradictory nature of liberal-democratic regimes has allowed us to account for strategies that are, in essence, a manifestation of such tension, thus overcoming political and normative biases. The first aspect that should be remarked upon is how the salience of and engagement with these dynamics are both relatively recent: the challenges only came into focus in the aftermath of the economic crisis, while it could be argued that a lengthy era of “indifference” preceded this phase of heightened concern. Secondly, a geographical distinction is necessary: the vast majority of the EPP’s public engagement with the populist challenge has been directed towards Central and Eastern Europe. Among new and prospective members of the EU in this region, the mainstreaming of populist tendencies is such that it constitutes a direct threat to the EPP’s constituencies. And this threat also emerges within its own membership, as in the case of Hungary. On the other hand, among Western European member states, populism tends to be a more adversarial force, perhaps even more so where the EPP’s strongholds are still relatively in good shape, thus limiting the need for the EPP’s involvement.

Another significant feature is that, while some of the EPP’s efforts have been directed at distancing itself from democratic and rule of law backsliding, i.e. through “demarcation”, in many instances its strategies have been equally aimed at managing and even accommodating an inevitable *status quo*. Both the political imperative and the EPP’s commitment to inclusivity and dialogue that lie at the base of developing “collaboration” strategies with populist parties also imply the proximity to a world-view that, as is apparent from Deegan-Krause’s six populist claims, contrasts quite deeply with the EPP’s tradition. The result is a balancing act that combines fending off attacks from opponents (denial) with efforts aimed at identifying common ground (collaboration) or, alternatively, at

circumscribing the extent of the EPP's tolerance (demarcation). Furthermore, it would appear that as of late, the latter strategy has prevailed, and as the overall salience of populism has grown, the politicization of the debate has been somewhat contained, with a cross-party consensus emerging on the need to address common challenges. Ultimately, the key to decoding this complex relationship is to acknowledge how, beyond normative and political hostilities, populism is deeply embedded in contemporary liberal democracies. The challenge faced by the EPP and other European political families is therefore not merely one of an external threat. If engaged with, it is one that leads to questioning the faith in the liberal order and the EPP's own position in the EU's political landscape, as well as its core values and principles.

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Social Democracy and the Challenge of Populism

by *Giovanni Bernardini*

Reflecting on the “history of the present” is certainly a useful and commendable operation from a civil perspective even more than academic, and so those whose vocation is historical research should not avoid it¹. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind the risks that go with it. For the theme confronted in this volume, these risks are rooted in the variability, on a timescale of as little as a few years, of the distinguishing features attributed to populism in each specific case in the political scenario. These include the linguistic register, self representation, and more or less structured political programmes. In journalistic language and elsewhere, the term “populism” has often been used in a rather vague way, bundling together extremely diverse geopolitical experiences that sometimes neither resemble each other nor share underlying origins². Even more obvious is how much the intended reference of the word “populism” has mutated over time, even within a few decades or just years, to the extent that it is legitimate to ask whether its frequent, almost obsessive use in certain historical periods does not say more about the momentary trepidations of those who use it, than the inferred shared nature of those it indicates.

In the light of these observations, this brief contribution will strive to delineate certain aspects of the confrontation with current populism by one of the most influential and deeply rooted European political families, social democracy, with specific reference to the three countries under examination in the volume. An overall assessment is provided of the way in which the social democratic leadership and parties have

Translation by Gavin Taylor

¹ M. TORRI, *La storia del presente*.

² S. GHERGHINA - S. SOARE, *Populism*.

defined and deal with the theme of populism in public communications and electoral manifestos, as well as the extent to which they consider it a contingent element or even a meta-historical factor. Finally, there is consideration of how they have interpreted their mission of confrontation and competition with the variably populist parties and movements. Above all, these observations can help to illuminate the evolution of social democracy itself over the last quarter century until today, when many sources consider it to be in serious crisis.

Numerous observers, not least Jan-Werner Müller who has dedicated some illuminating pages to this theme, have suggested considering the indiscriminate use of the “populist” label in current political language (above all by its detractors) as an indicator of a worrying “failure of political judgement”³. On one hand, this proliferation is proof of an incapacity for effective assessment, and consequent *a priori* rejection, of demands which, though radical, neither fall outside the scope of representative democracy of liberal inspiration, nor aim to undermine its rules and institutions. On the other hand, the definition of “populism” is also ever more hastily attributed to political formations that explicitly include among their conceptual references certain historical experiences, the spectres of which have crossed the European continent in the past, leaving behind wreckage that is difficult to fully eliminate⁴.

From the perspective of the social democratic and other parties, the abuse of the accusation of “populism” handed out indiscriminately left and right, just as “old” and “new” are used in the rapidly mutating European political struggle, appears as yet another proof of an enduring difficulty to assume a characterising and distinct position within the continental political spectrum, independently of momentary electoral fortunes and participation in national governments⁵. Regarding the latter, it is worth remembering that today (2017) parties of social democratic inspiration are members of the governments of all three countries in question (Italy, Austria, Germany), in coalitions that transcend the traditional competitive division between right and left wing. In this

³ J.-W. MÜLLER, “*The people must be extracted from within the people*”.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the links between recent populist and fascist movements, see C. MUDDE, *Populist Radical Right Parties*.

⁵ On the present-day abuse of the “populist” category, see G. CAMPANI - M. PAJNIK, *Populism in Historical Perspective*, p. 25.

situation, the proliferation of the accusation of “populism” appears to simultaneously indicate the renunciation or incapacity to continue using the categories of the political discourse of the past (specifically the left/right continuum), as well as a delay in elaboration of new political categories that take due account of new emerging political phenomena, even if disconcerting, rather than uncritically rejecting *a priori* the demands expressed by the affirmation of the same.

Stated in other terms, the political communication of the social democratic forces appears inclined towards treating everything they categorize under “populism” as a pathology of morbid irrationality, a contamination of political life that compromises the correct application of democratic rules. This applies both to domestic scenarios and when seen emerging in other countries or more in general on a continental level. A similar approach is recognizable at least since the election to government in Italy of the coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi together with the Northern League (Lega Nord, LN) and the post fascist National Alliance party (Alleanza Nazionale, AN) in 1994, and in the birth in 1999 of the coalition of the Austrian government between the People’s Party (Volkspartei) and Haider’s Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ), the latter up until that time considered among the “pariahs” of the political arena. Although these events are still underway, it is not difficult to recognise similar accusations in response to the surprising increase in profile and consensus for the “Alternative for Germany” (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD). Regardless of intentions, this refusal to analyse and seek deeper understanding of the “populist phenomenon”, and the failure to challenge its contents in the face of public opinion, has had and continues to have today two dangerous consequences for social democracy. The social democratic leadership postulates an insurmountable division between the “responsible politics” pursued by them or supported through their participation in governments, and the irresponsibility of populist propaganda. However, in public opinion this might appear an easy way to avoid any form of confrontation regarding criticism of their political policies as such, and a way of extracting themselves from free debate and facing real underlying issues which, intentionally or not, the “populist” demands might signal⁶. Regarding

⁶ This is an underlying thesis developed, among others, in the volume C. MUDDE, *On Extremism and Democracy*.

political communication, as early as the rise of Silvio Berlusconi there emerged an even more counterproductive approach to confront this “populist phenomenon”. This involved renouncing rational arguments and instead appealing directly to the same emotional intransigence that according to many observers constitutes the distinguishing characteristic of populism itself⁷. This conservative approach (*a priori* defence of democratic rules and the balance of power, as successful achievements of European integration to date) instead of positively proposing something, represents a sterile re-affirmation of an unbridgeable moral gap, in the end generating a paradox: the traditionally “rationalist” social democratic family oriented towards an idea, by now somewhat vague, of progress, is ever more inclined, with ever less effectiveness, to make use of moral and emotional arguments to counter the rising populist movements. The latter in contrast, notwithstanding the traditional accusation of appealing to the gut reaction of voters, are increasingly eager to adopt a managerial, business-like, and even technical style to raise their public profile and attract categories of voters that traditionally they could not reach⁸. Although not deriving from the three countries under discussion, this process is better illustrated by an example rather than abstractions: a few months ago there was indignation for the news that student representatives of the French National Front (Front National, FN) had for the first time entered the Paris Institute of Political Studies, the temple of French technocracy that the National Front itself had harshly criticised in populist terms for many years⁹. As regards the Alternative for Germany, its tortuous and tumultuous evolution in recent years cannot cancel the fact that originally it was identified by the international press as a “party of professors”, clearly referring to the academic component that provided the original program centred on the abandonment of the Eurozone by Germany¹⁰. Even though there are obvious differences, it is possible to locate the initial Berlusconi experience within the same tradition, when he became the standard bearer and inspiration for many others in Europe who presented themselves as “successful businessmen on loan to politics”, assuming the

⁷ N. URBINATI, *The Intellectuals*, p. 604.

⁸ J.-W. MÜLLER, “*The people must be extracted from within the people*”.

⁹ *Le Front national revient à Sciences Po Paris*.

¹⁰ R. GRIMM, *The Rise of the German Eurosceptic Party*.

leadership of populist movements that leverage the presumed capacity of the leader to effectively manage the “company-state” on the basis of their extraneity to the professional political “cast” (a characteristic considered fundamental by populists)¹¹. It is impossible to overlook the obvious contradiction, according to the old conventions, of the existence of parties that are simultaneously technocratic and “populist”, a contradiction that even when pointed out by their opponents, does not prevent the populist parties from attracting consent from a wider spectrum than in the past¹².

An *a priori* refusal to confront the programs of populist parties also risks damaging the future of social democracy from another perspective. Attributing a growth of support for national populist movements merely to emotional and mediatic factors risks, as clearly pointed out by the political scientist Cas Mudde, overlooking that in any case it is the result of a growing sense of dissatisfaction and insecurity¹³. The denunciation and opposition to the logic of populist parties, their rhetorical strategies, and the temptation of radical “easy” solutions with which they attract support, should not obscure the obvious fact that their rise in recent years is the result of a profound crisis, or rather a disconcerting overlapping of crises. A growing portion of the electorate in various parts of Europe attributes responsibility for these crises indistinctly to the national political classes and European “governors” in the broad sense, including the social democratic parties and leaders. The same electorate appears to consider the “traditional” political gamut, including the social democratic movements, ever less capable of dealing with these problems. The result is a convergence of votes and support towards movements that proclaim themselves not just new but also “anti-system”, and above all not yet corrupted by power¹⁴. These parties and in particular their leaders appear to skilfully exploit what seems to be a crisis of the idea itself of parliamentary representation, finding it easy to pass themselves off as spokesmen for “genuinely popular” demands which they claim are ignored in the corridors of

¹¹ P. MANCINI, *Between Commodification and Lifestyle Politics*.

¹² On the greater flexibility of current populist movements, see G. MOSCHONAS, *The ‘Broken Equilibrium’ in European Politics*.

¹³ *Populism’s Appeal Grows*.

¹⁴ M. KEATING - D. MCCRONE, *The Crisis of Social Democracy*.

power. In this respect, the spokesperson is fundamental in populist rhetoric and is one of the few common features of all the movements that are generically identified as such. The spokesperson claims to embody connotations of transparency and immediacy, very distinct from that of traditional interpreters or champions of popular will, which are more closely identified with the social democratic tradition¹⁵. The most obvious example again comes from the Austrian political world, where the current FPÖ Secretary, Heinz-Christian Strache, chose the successful slogan “ER will, was WIR wollen”: the leader not only “knows” what the people want, but also wants the same thing¹⁶. An echo of this in Italy in recent years was the affirmation within the Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) of the figure of the spokesperson as an explicit and provocative rejection of traditional political representation, likewise their proposal to introduce the possibility of withdrawing parliamentary mandates in cases of “betrayal” of the will of the people, expressed by voting online¹⁷. Over the longer period it is also impossible to overlook a resemblance with the symbolism of the early Northern League (then still the Lombardy League), which wanted the only elected Senator, Umberto Bossi, to act as “spokesperson” for the demands of the North to the deaf national parliament.

Among the overlapping and interconnected crises of these years, the first in order of gravity, especially in the perception of public opinion, is the economic one, the “euro Crisis” as commonly defined by the international press. Paradoxically this crisis had the merit of bringing back into the centre of debate, at least historiographic debate, something obvious that was too frequently underestimated. The success of democracy in Europe after the war, its capacity for taking root and expanding before and after 1989, was not only the result of institutional engineering and the balance of powers, but also of a considerable and widespread rise in living standards above those achieved by the regimes in the recent past. From this perspective, a prolonged perception of relative impoverishment, economic and social uncertainty, excessive inequality in the distribution of income, might not represent only a momentary and

¹⁵ Regarding populism, Nadia Urbinati coined the effective oxymoron “direct representative democracy”, N. URBINATI, *Zwischen allgemeiner Anerkennung und Misstrauen*.

¹⁶ *Polizei zu Strache-Plakat*.

¹⁷ I. DIAMANTI, *Una mappa della crisi*.

contained risk but lead to real damage to the foundation of the entire democratic edifice. Observing closely, the cause and effect between the perception of economic crisis and the rise of populism is a constant in the political communications of the social democratic parties. What makes them sensitive to this theme is probably their historical evolution. Many of them faced the immediate post-WWII period with little or no sympathy for a political-economic system based on capitalism and liberal democracy. Their programs at the time were inclined towards a neutralist international stance, with a propensity (though rather vague) for socialization of the economy. It was the material success produced by the post-war order, combined with the radicalization of the contrasting dichotomy between East and West, that induced the national social democratic parties to undergo processes of redefinition of identity and to merge into general alignment with the liberal-capitalist matrix, for example in their support for the project of European integration¹⁸. However, precisely the confusion in today's social democratic political discourse between criticism of the economic policies of "austerity" and attacks on the foundation of the entire political-economic system, all hastily bundled under the label of "populism", represents a serious error of perspective¹⁹. In conceptual terms, liberal democracy should constitute (and has long constituted) a sufficiently competitive political arena to allow a plurality of ideas to be compared for the definition of distinct and alternative programs, but without these calling into question the fundamental rules of the game. These rules are guaranteed by a number of institutions excluded from so-called "electoral accountability". Historically, the model of "constrained democracy" developed around this delicate equilibrium, becoming widespread first in western Europe. It is founded on a balance between popular participation and prevention of the risk of a return to totalitarianism, which an absolute and unchecked popular sovereignty could produce. The proof of the success of this model is its adoption in all the countries in Europe that emerged from more or less extended periods of authoritarianism, also subsequent to the turning point of 1945. If this equilibrium appears more fragile today than it might have appeared in the past, and more at risk of being overwhelmed by judgements of "absolute popular

¹⁸ D. SASSOON, *One Hundred Years of Socialism*, pp. 137 ff.

¹⁹ On the relationship between social democratic parties and austerity, see D.J. BAILEY - J.M. DE WAELE - F. ESCALONA - M. VIEIRA, *Introduction*.

will”, then the cause should also be sought in the current confusion between acceptance and defence of the rules of the game, as well as the spread of a consociational model and the practice of “large permanent coalitions” into which social democracy itself appears to have declined, and not only in the three countries under examination. In the face of a widespread perception of economic crisis and an apparent absence of programmatic alternatives among the major traditional political cultures, to the extent that eminently political decisions by now tend to be presented as “technical” and obligatory, there is the risk of radical options and those with a decidedly populist imprint becoming more attractive. This logic is even more marked on the level of the EU institutions, in which public opinion clearly perceives a strong influence on decisions for the future, but against which the traditional accusation of “technocracy” overlaps with the dwindling collaboration between the popular and social democratic groupings²⁰. The approach adopted so far on both a national and continental level to counter the economic crisis, admitting for arguments sake that the definition of “austerity” is accurate, has revealed a lack of imagination by the political powers that collaborate in the guidance of the EU, and a disguised technocratic approach that refuses to acknowledge any legitimacy to criticism and alternative proposals. Once again it is appropriate to note how the refusal to concede equal dignity to political opponents was previously considered a distinctive characteristic of populist movements, since they proclaimed themselves as sole expression of the authentic popular will, and so unable to tolerate a legitimate opposition²¹.

In contrast, the current economic crisis ironically seems to be producing a strange phenomenon of inversion of values. On one hand, a moralizing technocracy like the one that acted on a European level in relation to Greece, called on to “expiate”, with very punishing policies and external penalties, its former prodigality. On the other hand, some populist movements try to present a neutral and technical approach to the electorate through the recruitment of real or masquerading economists²². In this reconstruction of the contrary positions that developed around the economic crisis, the temptation certainly exists of irrespon-

²⁰ O. TREIB, *The Voter Says No*.

²¹ C. BICKERTON - C. INVERNIZZI ACCETTI, *Populism and Technocracy*.

²² J.-W. MÜLLER, “*The people must be extracted from within the people*”.

sibly assigning to the European institutions the role of scapegoats for a failure to achieve objectives on a national scale, as by now happens regularly even by governments with social democratic leadership or participation. It is worth remembering the hard and belligerent tone of the position adopted by the German ex-Chancellor Schröder in opposition to European obligations when, at the end of the 1990s, the German economic position was much less rosy than it is today²³. Fifteen years later it would be Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi to proclaim intransigence regarding his government's budget laws ("if Europe rejects them, we will send them straight back just as they are")²⁴. More recently, not even the Austrian social democrats have spared criticism for the European management of the "migrant crisis", to the extent of calling for the return of tighter control over the frontiers by the national government. It is all too obvious how the hasty adoption of peremptory arguments by the nationalist populist movements, designed to gain easy consensus over the short term, have ended up legitimizing the logic and arguments involved, validating their aspirations for respectability and legitimacy to compete for the national government.

Furthermore, the inclination of many social democratic parties to resume aggressively fighting the political game in the national sphere, rather than recuperating and reinventing their traditional and characterizing internationalist inspirations, risks becoming yet another own goal. The challenge on the international level includes the greater capacity for European coordination demonstrated by populist parties in recent years, and even more so the successful transnationalization that populism appears to be enjoying in recent years. The connections between some of the most influential European movements are well known: the new Northern League of Matteo Salvini, the National Front of Marine Le Pen, the Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV) of the Dutchman Geert Wilders (and the common "political-cultural" reference, still entirely to be deciphered, constituted for many by the Russian leader Vladimir Putin). Even more surprising was the collaboration, albeit brief, on a European level between the Italian Five Star Movement and the UK Independence Party²⁵. Certainly a new design

²³ J. SLOAM, *Responsibility for Europe*.

²⁴ *L'offensiva di Renzi in Europa*.

²⁵ N. STARTIN - N. BRACK, *To Cooperate or Not to Cooperate?*

stage should take its lead from a critical self-assessment of the many opportunities missed in the past, in particular in the late 1990s when the (re)birth of the populist movements was still obscured by the relative dominance of social democracy on a continental level. At the time, parties variously belonging to the social democratic family participated in government coalitions in as many as twelve out of fifteen countries in the EU zone, including the four largest (France, Germany, Italy, and Great Britain). Nevertheless, even that period left in inheritance only the ephemeral slogan of the “Third Way”, launched by the British Labour Party and never entirely embraced by the other partners²⁶. All told, rather than giving rise to a new programmatic cycle, it appears to have resolved into a legitimization of the evolution of social democracy towards a “correctional” pragmatism (thus even less than reformist) implemented in different ways on a national level, and expressed in the economic policies of the Blair government, the privatizations of the Jospin government in France, and soon after by the “Agenda 2010” of the German Chancellor Schröder²⁷. When just a few years later, many social democratic leaders would return to the opposition, it was already difficult to sustain that this period had significantly changed the course of continental politics. Proof of this was the failure to promote a “Social Europe” in the program of the Party of European Socialists before the elections for the Strasbourg Parliament in 2004, a consequence of the contrasting vetoes of the various national movements²⁸.

However, today even that minimum programmatic common denominator appears impressive, compared to the current phenomena of national refocusing of social democratic policy, where in many countries the parties in this political family appear to nurture positions closer to their centre-right government partners rather than their “sister” movements in other countries. In this sense, today’s degree of reflection and capacity for renewal appear completely inadequate in analytic terms even before considering political initiative²⁹. The most obvious example is again the Greek crisis, during which the social democratic parties preferred to strengthen their support for their traditional ally

²⁶ A. GLYN, *Aspirations, Constraints, and Outcomes*.

²⁷ M. RYNER, *An Obituary for the Third Way*.

²⁸ G. MOSCHONAS, *When Institutions Matter*.

²⁹ O. CRAMME, *The Power of European Integration*.

at the time, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), without any consideration for its responsibility in the country's economic disaster and its bipartisan support for the "austerity" policies. Instead, all other political phenomena, in any way associated with contradictory pressures and extremist temptations, were automatically silenced with the "populist" label. As a result, and especially in the case of Syriza, social democracy *a priori* excluded itself from all possibility of influencing the political evolution. Comparing this to the 1970s, when various European countries (including Greece) returned to democracy after extended periods of dictatorship, paints a very poor picture of the international political capacity of today's major European social democratic parties, SPD (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) and SPÖ (Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs) first and foremost. In the 1970s they made efforts to influence the rebirth of local party systems, promoting the evolution of political forces with similar ideologies and programs, even when the initial situations were not necessarily the most promising—as in the case of the Portuguese Socialist Party (Partido Socialista, PS), at the time virtually non-existent and disorganized³⁰. The results of this operation was a success story deriving from long, careful political effort, all of which has disappeared today in the face of the facile current definition of "left-wing populism", adopted as a mantra by European social democrats and significantly restricting their margins for manoeuvre in order to shape developments in the European political scenario.

It thus emerges that for many reasons the present day European crisis, and the rise of populist movements that appears to fatalistically accompany it, cannot be reduced merely to its economic dimension. In the past, populism regularly enjoyed political revivals each time there was a disintegration or complete implosion of the party system and existing political culture. In this respect, Italy can boast the dubious honour of being a "test lab", in the sense that its emergence of new populist movements anticipated the phenomenon repeated later in other national contexts³¹. However, the traditional reconstruction can no longer be considered adequate, that mediatic, political, and legal sensationalism of the collapse of the party system at the beginning of the 1990s triggered

³⁰ G. BERNARDINI, *Stability and Socialist Autonomy*.

³¹ M. TARCHI, *Italy*.

the rise of Italian populist movements. Clearly the latter also exploited the obvious incapacity of the traditional parties, in particular on the left-wing, to guide the country through the subsequent stage of transition and marked social transformation. Therefore the “waxing” of the new populist movements, cannot be attributed solely to the spectacular disintegration of the party system, but also to its progressive and silent implosion that preceded and followed 1992. Stated simply, for years the European social democratic parties appeared to underestimate the growing phenomenon of political disaffection and electoral abstention. Too frequently, these phenomena were given the reassuring justification of being physiological effects implicit in advanced democracies. On the contrary, they represent another of the reasons for populism and in many ways are a necessary premise, expressing dissatisfaction with democracy and declining faith of the electorate in the traditional political options³². Recently some social democratic exponents have explained the phenomenon of electoral disaffection as the end of recognition of the traditional cleavage between left and right by citizens, but it is necessary to repeat once again that this cause is itself the result of the confusion generated by extended government collaboration by social democrats with their natural political adversaries in all the three countries under examination, and elsewhere.

Finally, the rise of populist movements can also be considered the consequence of a social crisis, which embraces much of what has already been stated above. The relevant issues are not only economic factors, but include the progressive delegitimation of the welfare state in response to its inadequacies, its declining capacity to generate social mobility, and ultimately its constant structural downscaling, underway already for decades. Generally, the “fiscal revolts” often promoted by populist movements arise from the perception of an inequity between sacrifices requested and benefits obtained. Again, the purely material factor masks a crisis of representation in the wider sense, with ever greater sections of the population no longer feeling represented and shielded by the narratives produced by the traditional political forces, and consequently by the social policies that they promote³³. In this respect

³² H.-G. BETZ, *Conditions Favouring the Success and Failure of Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties*.

³³ W. KORPI, *Welfare-State Regress in Western Europe*.

the political communication of the social democratic parties appears to show that their social analysis is out of date regarding which electors turn to the “populist” parties and the reasons for their decision³⁴. One of the rare enunciations on this dates back a number of years when the Italian ex-Prime Minister, Massimo D’Alema, expressed the view that the electorate of the Northern League during the 1990s was “a chip off the left-wing block”. It is disconcerting to note how, in Italy and elsewhere, for a long time this statement was misconstrued rather than investigated, and it was attributed to a mere play of words on parliamentary alliances (the possibility that the Northern League might be recoverable for a left-wing coalition). Instead, D’Alema’s observation had the merit of implying that it was the traditional social references of social democracy, industrial workers, and the traditional working classes in general, that betrayed the left-wing movements in elections, yielding to the irrational localist appeal of the Northern League against the specter of “globalization”. Twenty years later, social democracy still lacks an effective analysis of how the rise of real and presumed populist movements is also the consequence of a new social configuration, and new phenomena of positive and propositional political activism³⁵. The most obvious example is how young voters are seeking a necessary self-affirmation against the static and dated social inequalities, defined perfunctorily in populist propaganda as the “casts”, and for the time being the social democratic message appears too weak to attract them.

In conclusion, it has been hypothesized that today Europe provides new populist movements with numerous national test labs for a phenomenon that appears increasingly transnational. Until recently, and to an extent still today, the outstanding exception was Germany, where pressures in this direction were contained by the substantial stability and reliability of the party system. However, looking at the case of Great Britain, the same proverbial characteristics did not hinder the rise of the UKIP, capable quite apart from its own electoral results of strongly influencing debate around “Brexit”. Instead, it would be more useful to acknowledge, especially by the social democratic parties on the strength of their history and identity, that populism has less reason

³⁴ P. TAYLOR-GOOPY, *Social Democracy and the End of the Welfare State?*

³⁵ For example, on the issue of migrations and multiculturalism, see S. MERET - B. SIIM, *Multiculturalism, Right-Wing Populism and the Crisis of Social Democracy*.

to take hold and prosper where there is no widespread economic and material dissatisfaction.

Finally, a recent phenomenon deserving of attention is the apparent acceptance of the populist challenge by certain social democratic party leaders exclusively in the media sphere and on the basis of the capacity to “talk as the people do”³⁶. In addition to legitimizing a dangerously simplified dialectic on issues that are instead complex, like the migrant phenomenon, this trend inappropriately substitutes a real detailed confrontation with the solutions that the populist parties advocate³⁷. If this unwillingness for confrontation in these issues is based on a negation of legitimacy to their adversaries, it would seem that we have a case of the proverbial stable doors being closed after the horses have already bolted, considering the electoral support and especially the extended political permanence that many populists now enjoy. Instead, a confrontation of this type, risky as it might be, could lead to the emergence of useful elements for programmatic renewal and a revived forward looking vision, which social democracy appears to need now more than ever before³⁸, in the hour of its crisis (most recently proven in the result of the French presidential and the German parliamentary elections), which some already consider irreversible.

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³⁶ On the social democratic temptation to “dash” towards populist rhetoric, see T. BALE et al., *If You Can't Beat Them, Join Them?*

³⁷ For a similar point of view, see C. MUDDE, *The Populist Zeitgeist*.

³⁸ Though starting from different premises, similar conclusions on the need for programmatic renewal of social democracy are also reached by B. ROTHSTEIN - S. STEINMO, *Social Democracy in Crisis?*.

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The Greens and Populism: A Contradiction in Terms?

by *Hans Heiss*

1. *The specter*

“A spectre is haunting us, the spectre of populism”. The current fear in Western Europe concerning the rise in support for populist movements might best be expressed by this paraphrasing of Karl Marx’ famous saying from *The Communist Manifesto*¹. In recent years, Central and Western Europe have been particularly alarmed by the success of populist movements. Since Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 US presidential elections and especially since his inauguration, the degree of influence possessed by populist groups has increased in leaps and bounds.

This raises the question, is the advance of populist organizations truly unstoppable, given that the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) has made a breakthrough in Germany, the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) is governing in Austria, and that the National Front (Front National, FN) has been demonstrating its potential in France? Do Marine Le Pen’s narrow defeat in the French presidential election and the Netherland’s unambiguous rejection of Geert Wilders represent nothing more than a short respite? Is the continuing success of the Five Star Movement in Italy (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) the sign of a near irreversible trend, which is drastically altering the political landscape of Europe? Since 2014, anxiety and fascination concerning the success of populist movements have largely determined the political atmosphere and the mood within the media.

My thanks and appreciation to Máiréad Patricia Jones for the translation.

¹ This connection was already made as early as H. DUBIEL, *Das Gespenst des Populismus*, pp. 3-50.

As populist power is on the rise within Europe, its borders are skirted by authoritarian leaders successfully consolidating their power, such as President Vladimir Putin, who controls the Russian Federation, and the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who used the attempted coup of July 2016 as an excuse to carry out a radical, political cleansing of the country and to restrict the rights of the press, the parliament, and his political opposition, in direct contravention of the fundamental principles of the Turkish constitution.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the pressure of globalization has increased sharply, as new players have entered the global economic stage and wealth has been forcefully redistributed from bottom to top², leaving hundreds of millions of people in industrialized countries to live precarious lives of unemployment and new poverty. This pressure has incited feelings of powerlessness and rage, which in turn create the perfect breeding ground for populist movements. These movements have undoubtedly grown more virulent as a result of the increased flow of immigrants and refugees into the areas of Europe and the USA: millions of economic migrants and refugees are trying with all their might to get to the lands of safety and opportunity which they believe Europe and North America to be.

Refugees have been making their way to western countries *en masse* for almost ten years now and their numbers are swelling dramatically, as economic hardship and war force people from their homes. The hopeless situation in Central Africa, especially in Nigeria, Somalia, Eritrea, and Gambia, along with the power vacuum in Libya is driving millions of people to the North African coast, where they wait to make the crossing to Europe. Since 2014, around 200,000 African migrants and refugees have been arriving on the European continent every year, landing first in Italy, and to a lesser extent in Greece, so that they can try and get to Central Europe from there.

The ongoing war in Syria and Afghanistan, with its brutal collateral damage and consequences, has turned the stream of refugees into a flood, as people attempt to reach the wealth and safety of Europe.

² For a comparison of the American and global situations, cf. J. STIGLITZ, *Reich und Arm.*

After the number of immigrants peaked in 2015, the influx clearly slowed down. However, it is still substantial enough that anxiety and counter reactions are growing in the US and Europe alike: considerations like the financial costs and difficulties involved in integration, social and cultural differences, the fear of crimes and acts of terrorism which the immigrants might commit are giving populist movements a constant supply of new arguments.

Over the last 20-30 years, globalization and instability have resulted in heavy losses in terms of income and status for European and US citizens, which, together with the sense of “foreign infiltration” by migrants and refugees, constantly adds fuel to the populist fire³.

2. *The phenomenon of populism*

This article will give a brief outline of the rise of the Green movement and its political parties, particularly in Western Europe, and then illustrate the divisions and inerrability, which link Green politics with populist strategies and ideas, taking several policy areas as examples. The core thesis should be tested and even partly confirmed by the demonstration that populist tendencies are to be found within the Green movement, along with its representatives and leaders.

In order to do this, however, it is necessary to first give a short overview of the phenomenon of populism, as well as some terminological clarification. Does “populism” really have sufficient explanatory power to be a usable term, beyond its function as a buzzword or an expression used only to provoke? Or are the movements, which are classified as “populist”, nothing more than new variations on a theme that already existed long before now?⁴

The political scientist Jan Werner Müller answered this question to a certain extent in his essay, *Was ist Populismus?*, in which he proposed a ten-part definition of the term⁵.

³ Cf. K.J. CRAMER, *The Politics of Resentment*.

⁴ N. WERZ, *Populismus*.

⁵ J.-W. MÜLLER, *Was ist Populismus?*

Müller's main theory refers to one of the basic features common to populists, who claim that "We—and only we—represent the true people"⁶. In contrast, they depict the political elite as false representatives of the people, who rule unjustly and who prevent state institutions from functioning as they should.

According to populist groups, the true people must be given a voice and fair representation, seeing as the political elite, the general public, and state institutions have supposedly been systematically avoiding their responsibilities, with negative consequences for the well-being of large demographics. Thus, if they were to take over the government, ostracize and neutralize the illegitimate opposition, purge the state and its institutions accordingly, and rule unopposed, populist organizations would, by their logic, be acting in the best interests of the true people. It does not matter if, during this process, a populist leader like the Dutch politician, Geert Wilders, only meets with the people when under police protection and has not been able to move around freely in years, leaving him effectively out of touch with the people. However, "It would be an error to think, that one must actually be close to the people, in order to seem as though one were in touch with them. To that end, it is enough to simply talk and tweet in the right way"⁷. In March 2017, Wilders had 780,000 twitter followers, nine times more than Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who only has 86,000 followers. Rutte has not helped his case by rejecting the advantages of a smartphone in favor of an ancient Nokia model.

3. *New social and communicative configurations*

Analytical categories, such as those developed by Jan-Werner Müller make it possible for us to look beyond the ubiquitous idea of "populism" and identify new dynamics, which have developed in recent years. It is becoming clear, that the new forces of populism are reacting first and foremost to changes in the fabric of society itself, to social and communicative configurations, which have been radically transformed.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-136.

⁷ F. HAUPT, *Unter Feinden*.

They are the polarizing answer to the social division and fragmentation, which the Western world has been experiencing for at least twenty years. Gaps are increasingly opening between large social groups in the developed countries of Western Europe, between their respective living conditions and the ways they perceive the world. There is a fundamental difference in the kind of opportunities in life to which the varying groups have access⁸. Although GDP is growing in Western European countries, at a quick rate in Germany, Spain, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia and more slowly in France and Italy, large social groups are still experiencing a clear loss in influence and in social participation. Members of the lower middle classes have an arduous existence, living on a low income and constantly under the threat of having their lives derailed by adversity, of being left behind by their social peers.

In many cases, social welfare makes little difference and only very rarely does it truly offer an escape from the poverty trap. The pressure of the constant struggle to live and the ever imminent threat of failure bring forth resignation and aggression or at the very least, mistrust of “politics”. No one believes that a solution can come from politics; instead, they wallow in a kind of abject disappointment, so intense as to be almost enjoyable, incited by the real or imagined failures of the political elite, a kind of disappoint which can veer into fury at any moment.

The above-mentioned influx of refugees into Western Europe are the last straw, as these newcomers are seen as direct competition for social benefits and living space⁹. The changes wrought on our subjective experience of the world by the presence of “strangers” take place slowly, but they are still threatening. What is more, refugees and asylum seekers are often seen as omens of our own imminent hardships and of the unstoppable, gnawing force of globalism, consuming all that is secure and familiar. In addition to this, the public attention focused on refugees and asylum seekers is perceived as an insult, because in the media at any rate, they receive far more attention than domestic poverty.

The advent of the internet and social media radically transformed public communication at almost exactly the same time as social relationships

⁸ Already a classic: T. PIKETTY, *Das Kapital im 21. Jahrhundert*; M. BRANKO, *Global Inequality*.

⁹ Cf. A. BETTS - P. COLLIER, *Refugee*; H. MÜNKLER - M. MÜNKLER, *Die neuen Deutschen*.

began to break down. Since 2010, Facebook and Twitter have become the leading channels of public communication, as they allow far greater access to an audience, as well as the opportunity broadcast one's own messages on the internet. This is made easier again by the fact that it is possible to make oneself heard online, even with abbreviated, poorly formulated messages. A multitude of new communities are being established online, where the isolated suddenly find that not only are they no longer alone, but also that the internet is filled with masses of other like-minded people. They go from powerlessness to a sudden feeling of power, drawn from the certainty that their commentary has real impact and can win them approval. This certainty is reinforced by the "ennobling" presence of prominent figures, from politics and other areas of society, on the internet, with Donald Trump, whose tweets have a greater influence on politics than his actions in real life, leading the way.

The ease of access generated by the internet resulted in a fragmented, accelerated discourse, with two principle results—aggressiveness and conflict. The concentration of argumentatively inconsistent rage and threats circulating online on a daily basis is surpassing anything we could ever have imagined¹⁰. One might even think that after some time, new ways of moderating the whirlwind of public communication, of organising and controlling it may even emerge, that sites such as Facebook will actually have a calming effect and that using them will become such a normal part of our daily routine, that our tendency to irritability and outrage will diminish. However, online communication has yet to reach its most hysterical heights, so the level of aggression continues to increase dramatically—and populist movements are benefitting enormously.

However, perhaps now, in early 2017, populism has passed its peak, as left-wing movements are beginning to catch up: Martin Schulz, the SPD's (Social Democratic Party) candidate for the chancellery drastically reduced the support for the Alternative for Germany¹¹, by means of his populist oratorical style, while the new US President Donald Trump has acted increasingly as a deterrent ever since he took office. According to

¹⁰ Enlightening: C. RENDUELES, *Soziophobie*.

¹¹ M. WILDT, *Volk*; V. WEISS, *Die autoritäre Revolte*; J. BENDER, *Was will die AfD?*

Heribert Prantl, chief editor of the “Süddeutsche Zeitung”: “The world is not currently experiencing a global fruition of populism but rather a universal act of self-exposure by so-called right-wing populists”¹². This may seem at first to be far too optimistic, however, his evaluation may yet prove to be accurate.

4. *The Greens: Opponents of populism?*

The Greens are one of the few parties and political movements not to have a reputation of associating with populist organizations¹³. Their holistic approach to politics, focusing on an all-encompassing union of nature, society, and the environment, should immunize them against the tendency towards polarization and the dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion from which populist parties and movements draw their power. At first glance, one might even think that because of the integrative, *intercultural* principles on which the Green movement is founded and their rational approach to many significant political issues, the Greens would be the natural opponents of intransigent, populist representatives. The Greens’ attitude to politics and society is essentially wide-ranging and inclusive, which stems from a desire to understand local politics and social areas of activity in terms of their global context.

The Greens’ political style also appears to be undeniably anti-populist. Their pan-European advocating for grassroots democracy and gender equality makes them seem so citizen-oriented and liberating, that no one even stops to wonder whether they might be employing populist strategies, designed to represent—and sympathize with—the demands and interests of “the people”.

Their political decisions and the people whom the Greens appoint to positions of power show that they prioritize transparency, the restriction of power and personal ambition, and the elimination of hierarchies and gender inequality. There is a marked tendency among members of the Greens to see themselves as the representatives of an anti-populist

¹² H. PRANTL, *Stroh zu Gold*.

¹³ An early record of this: F. MÜLLER-ROMMEL, *Grüne Parteien in Westeuropa*; H. KLEINERT, *Vom Protest zur Regierungspartei*.

movement, committed to the common good and the “big picture” and the protection of commons and nature.

However, because the Greens concentrate above all on a global agenda and grand plans for the environment, economics, the climate, distributive justice, immigrants and refugees, it sometimes seems as though some representatives are losing sight of the real concerns and difficulties of local citizens. They do have well-established citizens’ initiatives, which defend environmental concerns at a local level, however, when it comes to social issues and the concrete needs of the citizens themselves, the Greens often show far less sensitivity.

To put it bluntly, there is a prevailing impression that many of the Greens in Europe do not understand the groups generally known as “the people”, the situation of the middle class, or even the hardships experienced by the poor and the lower classes on a daily basis¹⁴. Many Green party members have little interest in the precarious living conditions of various social groups, people who have moderate incomes at best, with meager pensions and inadequate living space, who are dependent on social welfare. The fear of losing social status and the feelings of exclusion, be they real or imaginary, experienced by large social groups are indeed acknowledged, but frequently without any real empathy. The language, the behavior, the self-assurance, and the living situations of many Green party members are too distant from the poor conditions experienced by the underprivileged, the fear of loss experienced by the “declining society”¹⁵ for them to ever understand each other.

Contempt and misjudgment frequently prevail on both sides, as can be seen when the Greens point out the obtuseness of the poor, when they comment on their less than commendable lifestyle, and criticize their dietary and spending habits. As a result, it is understandable that poor, socially vulnerable people have the impression and even like to cling to the prejudice that the “eco-nuts” have no sympathy for the “the true people”.

¹⁴ An enlightening autobiographical account on the distinction and differentiation processes: D. ERIBON, *Rückkehr nach Reims*.

¹⁵ O. NACHTWEY, *Die Abstiegsgesellschaft*.

Even when staunchly left-wing Greens, such as Jürgen Trittin, the former German minister for the environment, discuss the enormous pressure on the lower classes, they do so without any inner sense of connection with these problems, without the compassion necessary in such matters. In Trittin's 2014 book, *Stillstand*¹⁶, where the former minister laid out a remarkable plan for a social and environmental reform of Germany, he stated baldly that "The lower half owns nothing at all, the lowest fifth is encumbered with debt", without any indication of sympathy for their struggles.

The Green movement is founded on reason and logical persuasion, seemingly the opposite of the populist line of argument, and so it has been judged to be fundamentally alien to and incompatible with populism. Populist strategies seem to be more suited to left-wing populist movements like Podemos and Cinque Stelle, whose primary aim it is to heavily criticize political parties and the establishment¹⁷.

So, if the Greens are invulnerable to populism, might that not prove them to be the literal antithesis of the populist movement, whose strength has been surging for years, especially in 2016 when Brexit and Trump's victory in the US presidential election gave it further momentum? This assessment is accurate in many respects; however, it is helpful to point out that populism is not just associated with right-wing parties and movements. As a practice, a form of normative conditioning, and a political style, populism also has a perceptible influence on the main opponents of right-wing politics.

Populism is not associated with any single political spectrum; as emphasized by Thomas Meyer, it is in fact a "technique of governance", and so, populist forces also reach out to the public as "social movements protesting against an alienated leadership". Populist movements seek to act mostly "from below" and thus they are anxious to articulate their position as rebellious protesters "from within the people". Populists make use of a dichotomous dynamic based on the systematic employment of inclusive and exclusive principles, often with astounding expertise. In the process, they often emphasize the "polarization between the people

¹⁶ J. TRITTIN, *Stillstand Made in Germany*, p. 114.

¹⁷ B. GRILLO - G. CASALEGGIO - D. FO, *5 Sterne*.

and the elite” by means of communication methods with a distinct “anti-enlightenment” streak¹⁸.

If we can therefore think of populism as a strategy for governing and communicating, which is not necessarily related to political content, then it could be compatible with Green and left-wing movements as well. What is more, according to the political theorist Chantal Mouffe, the Left’s refusal to take advantage of this potential is in fact a serious failure. If left-wing movements were to take the sovereignty of the people seriously as a concept, Mouffe claims that they would then have to abandon their reluctance to employ populist strategies. However, they could use them to support the cause of equality, unlike the right-wing movements who attempt to suppress that cause¹⁹.

Given that populism is an option that is available to both the Left and the Greens, it is worth examining the Green movement’s affinity for populist strategies more closely.

5. *The concurrent rise of the Greens and populist movements from 1980 onwards*

Green parties in Europe began rising progressively in the mid-seventies, when offshoots from student groups, protest movements, and the new Left joined together to combat the construction of nuclear power stations and the NATO Double-Track Decision of 1979, which proposed to upgrade Western European weapons systems with medium-range missiles²⁰. Numerous citizens’ movements had been developing since the mid-seventies, first in Germany, then all over Western Europe. These movements, which often had strong local ties, protested vehemently against large infrastructure proposals, such as dams, canals, chemical plants, and especially nuclear power stations. This resistance, obstinate in nature and spreading like wildfire, resulted in some shocking controversies, such as 1975’s enormous demonstrations against the proposed nuclear power station in Wyhl in Baden-Württemberg, which

¹⁸ K. PRIESTER, *Rechter und linker Populismus*.

¹⁹ C. MOUFFE, *Agonistics*.

²⁰ On the subject of the social conditions at the time: F. UEKÖTTER, *Deutschland in Grün*, pp. 137-149.

were attended by protesters from all levels of society. Three years later, this incident was followed by another large-scale protest against the construction of a nuclear plant in the Austrian region of Zwentendorf.

The development of a political project from these scattered, heterogeneous movements was in no way guaranteed. They were widely different on a number of levels: politically, they ranged from Christian Democrats to hardline leftists; socially, they included everyone from students to farmers to middle class intellectuals to housewives; on an ideological level, they comprised every alignment from autonomists to conservatives to hippies to nationalists²¹.

These groups and initiatives would have fallen apart due to their many differences, if it hadn't been for the unifying effect of several powerful, integrative factors²²: these cohesive forces included the changing social values, which became apparent in the post-materialism of the late seventies²³, the common fear of radiation poisoning and of other dangers associated with nuclear power, the shift in leading economic sectors as the influence of industry waned, the semantic discourse of ecology, which led to the development of new conceptual classifications, and the growing importance of the environment in a time of economic and political crisis.

From alliances between ecological, pacifist, and feminist protest groups and post-Marxist leftists or even social conservatives arose a spectrum of directly democratic, anti-hierarchical political movements, which rejected the organized, programmatic structure of political parties and refused to consider entering parliamentary democracy at first. At the time, the Greens viewed political parties as focal points for privilege, corruption, and power hoarding, as instruments of conservative control—this is not dissimilar to the views currently held by populist movements²⁴. On top of this, political parties seemed like fossils, rigid in their habitus and approach, unable to address citizens' concerns in a dynamic, unorthodox fashion.

²¹ Cf. S. REICHHARDT, *Authentizität und Gemeinschaft*.

²² Convincing: F. UEKÖTTER, *Deutschland in Grün*, pp. 140-149.

²³ A seminal study on this issue: R. INGLEHART, *The Silent Revolution*.

²⁴ The most recent polemic: H.H. VON ARNIM, *Die Hebel der Macht*.

It was only in 1980 that groups within the Green spectrum agreed to a common, organizational platform (as can be seen by the Declaration of Saarbrücken in Germany, for example) and then, from 1982 onwards, began to join federal and state parliaments and local governments²⁵.

After 1985, the Green political agenda changed, mostly in reaction to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, which caused multiple deaths and had a serious impact on broad swathes of the European continent, leading to radical alterations in public opinion and attitudes. At that point, the Green movement, having already slowly come to terms with the idea of parties and entering parliament, stopped ruling out the possibility of actually participating in government, as can be seen in the case of the coalition between the Greens and the SPD in the German state of Hessen, the first of its kind; in December 1985, state governor Holger Börner accepted Joschka Fischer as his coalition partner and minister with visible reluctance. Only a decade before, Fischer had provoked the police and the public alike through his activities as a member of a left-wing activist group known as “Spontis” and as a street protester²⁶.

This coalition, which took place only a few months before the Chernobyl disaster and ten years after the Greens’ first political campaigns, was a clear sign that the situation had changed at a fundamental level.

6. *Between coordination and fragmentation*

During the 1980s, Green parties all over Europe took important steps to consolidate and institutionalize their movement, culminating in the European Parliamentary elections in early 1989, when as many as 30 Green representatives from eight different countries won seats in Brussels and Strasbourg²⁷.

The Greens had run an unsuccessful campaign during the first directly balloted European Parliamentary elections in 1979. However, after that, they focused ever more intently on reaching the EU level, which made cooperation, coordination, and institutionalisation even more neces-

²⁵ M. KLEIN - J.W. FALTER, *Der lange Weg der Grünen*, pp. 41 f.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

²⁷ F. SCHMIDT, *Auf dem Weg zur Europäischen Grünen Partei*, p. 51.

sary. The Greens had far more success at a national level in 1979; the German Green party achieved a support base of 3.2% that represented at least 900,000 voters and they also received millions of Deutschmark in restitution of election costs, which they put towards developing an organisational platform²⁸.

So it was that about fifteen years after the gradual formation of a fairly nebulous movement, the various parties of the European parliament found themselves flanked by a new, political power with left-environmentalist, pacifist and intercultural leanings, which covered the entire political spectrum, from conservative social democrats to left-wing liberals. Consequently, as newcomers to the landscape of European politics, the Greens were met both with acceptance, sometimes friendly, sometimes reluctant and with harsh rejection from the traditional political parties as well as large sections of society. This palpable aversion gave way but slowly to the realization that the movement was more than just a transitory phenomenon and that it was to become a long-term presence in the EU parliament and national assemblies.

Only a few months after the 1989 elections, Green parties and groups all over Europe were surprised by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent raising of the Iron Curtain. This sudden change in the political climate was entirely unexpected; very few Greens in Western Europe had plans in place for such a dramatic reversal of previous trends in the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. Up until this point, Green political work and initiatives had been primarily aimed at criticizing Europe's strong ties with the USA and the associated military alliance with NATO. This criticism was often accompanied by a harsh rejection of westernized lifestyles and political culture.

However, it was difficult for many Western European Green party members to acknowledge that key issues of freedom and democracy needed to come before criticism of the materialistic life style and consumerism of the West and before environmentalist strategies for the countries behind the Iron Curtain. Hitherto, only citizens' movements, with which the Greens had very little in common, had campaigned for these basic rights.

²⁸ H. KLEINERT, *Die Grünen in Deutschland*.

Nevertheless, Green political groups developed particularly early in Eastern Europe because the communist regime had a worrying tendency to trivialize environmental problems, which was frequently proportional to the often alarmingly large scale the problems reached. The pollution and contamination of entire tracts of land in proximity to chemical factories and energy plants reached devastating levels, to the extent that even the police and the governments could not suppress the protests. These groups were grudgingly tolerated from the mid-eighties onward, and by 1990, they had become so well organized that they were immediately capable of participating in government²⁹.

After 1989, the Eastern European Green factions were indispensable in forming multiple coalitions, despite their small size. However, their participation in government was often short-lived because although they contributed to the initial development of the newly formed democracies, they were no longer needed after that first “volatile” phase and sometimes they simply fell apart by themselves.

7. The early beginnings of left-wing populism

An overview of the relationship between the Greens and populism during that first fifteen-year phase shows that populist features were indeed present in the political culture of the Green movement.

As a result of their connection to grassroots democracy, their insistent emphasis on citizens’ “true” needs, which had yet to be understood, and their tendency to choose charismatic leaders, despite their alleged commitment to the principle of collective leadership, many of the Greens were brought closer to populism than they would have liked themselves.

Democracy at the time was a kind of male-dominated plutocracy, meaning that the Green support for grassroots democracy, gender equality, and quickly rotating political mandates achieved very little, particularly since at a basic level, backroom political power was often worth far more than parliamentary or civic influence. For many members of the Green movement, this inspired contempt for democratic institutions, which they saw as nothing but vehicles for the allocation of power,

²⁹ W. RÜDIG, *Zwischen Ökotopia und Desillusionierung*, pp. 148 f.

ignoring their other important functions as procedural guarantees, providing institutional security and transparency. The Greens criticized the procedures and representatives of “old” democracy with scathing severity, which may in fact have been necessary, even beneficial. However, this scorn was often accompanied by an air of arrogance that carried distinct traces of populism.

Green political leaders often took on roles, which were directly contrary to the movement’s belief in grassroots democracy, becoming inadvertent symbols of populist leadership, like Petra Kelly (1947-1992), who was active in Germany and Europe³⁰, Joseph Bovè in France, Daniel Cohn-Bendit (*1943), Alexander Langer (1946-1995) in Italy³¹, and of course Joschka Fischer (*1948)³². With their impressive lists of demands, visionary political objectives, and charismatic leadership qualities, they caused a great deal of debate and even hostility within their own movements. Large sections of the grassroots support base ascribed almost messianic attributes to them, which detracted from their legitimacy more often than not and brought them noticeably closer to populist principles of leadership.

Another covert populist feature arose from the Green rejection of formal organization, which quite frequently opened the door for the above-mentioned personality cults.

8. *Professionalized and ready for government, but Eurosceptic*

Although the Green movement’s inherent tendency to populist modes of inclusion and exclusion was not mainstream, it was a significant enough sub-current that it ought not to be forgotten. This tendency became less prominent as Green parties in Europe focused on professionalizing their political action, setting up party statutes and committees, formalizing their political objectives, and creating a more defined organizational structure. This was motivated by their aim to participate in government, which they achieved in Finland in 1995, in Italy in 1996,

³⁰ Cf. S. RICHTER, *Die Aktivistin*.

³¹ F. LEVI, *In viaggio con Alex*.

³² M. GEIS - B. ULRICH, *Der Unvollendete*.

in Germany in 1998, and in Belgium in 1999³³. This experience had different consequences in different places; for the Italian Green party, Verdi italiani, their accession to government was the beginning of their collapse, while the German Greens benefitted extensively from their 1998-2005 coalition with the SPD. Their cooperation with the Social Democrats' controversial but ultimately successful plans for reform consolidated the Greens' position in Germany.

This determined drive towards organizational coordination was also evidenced by the founding of the European Federation of Green Parties in Helsinki in June 1993³⁴: the EFGP was intended to be a common programmatic and organizational platform for 21 Green parties. In February 2004, the Green parties gathered in Rome for the founding of the European Green Party, which brought all these groups under one roof.

Behind their commonalities, which were considerable to outsiders' eyes, and despite their successful attempts to carve a niche for themselves within the European political landscape, the Green movement's attitude towards the EU was ambivalent from the very beginning.

Their views on European integration proved to be inconsistent, frequently divided, and sometimes susceptible to populist characteristics. From the early eighties to far into the 2000s, the Greens adopted a position of skepticism or even rejection as regards the EC and the EU. Even though they acknowledged the necessity of pan-European cooperation, the Greens still viewed the EC as "Europe Incorporated", the domestic market as a path to complete environmental destruction, and the EU as a model of bureaucracy and anti-democracy³⁵.

Many Greens perceived the union as nothing more than the first steps on the path to a European "superpower", which was directly opposed to the kind of "small is beautiful" theory espoused by Leopold Kohr³⁶. This unification also stood in the way of the more regional Europe which the Greens wished to build. They were also very suspicious of

³³ Cf. W. RÜDIG, *Zwischen Ökotopia und Desillusionierung*, pp. 147 f.

³⁴ Cf. F. SCHMIDT, *Auf dem Weg zur Europäischen Grünen Partei*, p. 52 and p. 57.

³⁵ An autobiographical account of the matter: C. ROTH, *Europa*.

³⁶ L. KOHR, *Das Ende der Großen*.

member states' compliance with EU foreign policy as laid out in the European Political Cooperation as this intergovernmentally formed platform was outside democratic control. In addition, the Greens took a very harsh, if factually justified stance on the growing economic potential of the EC/EU, whose relationship with the so-called "Third World" remained unclear.

The "Fortress of Europe" was accused of reinforcing the exploitative structures of global trade by means of protectionist structural and agrarian policies and using subsidies to outperform the weaker agricultural economies of southern countries, whose smallholder farms could not compete. From the Green perspective, these kind of European policies were incompatible with principles of international solidarity and regional autonomy.

The opposition to the EU that permeated the Green movement during this phase of its history strongly resembles the Euroscepticism and criticism commonly expressed by right-wing populist parties, who denounced the EU as corporate lackeys, bound by rigidity and centralization.

9. A transition in European politics

In the 1990s, the political alignments of European parties changed dramatically, as is evidenced by the shift towards *realpolitik* made by the Greens in France, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

The Yugoslav Wars were a thorough test of the Greens' fundamental belief in pacifist foreign policy: their support of military intervention in former Yugoslavia represented the breakdown of their wish to see Europe only as a "civil power", as well as their rejection of NATO. The Dutch Green party was the first to endorse NATO's intervention, and the German, French, and Belgian Green parties followed shortly after—against all the essential principles and beliefs they had held until that point³⁷. This led to bitter internal conflicts and multiple resignations from the parties, which eventually escalated to the point of an internal crisis. Alexander Langer, one of the Greens' central

³⁷ An inspiring piece of the Greens' volte-face: K. GRITSCH, *Krieg um Kosovo*, pp. 133-143.

European figures, committed suicide in 1995, broken by the discord that the Yugoslavian conflict had caused; this period proved to be a brutal trial for the entire Green movement³⁸.

After the events of 9/11, the Greens' differing approach to military violence once again became an issue, especially as regards the controversial intervention in Afghanistan. It was not until the Greens unanimously opposed American military intervention in Iraq in 2003 that the movement once again presented a united front on the dangers of armed intervention policies.

The European Greens parties' transition to *realpolitik* arose as a consequence both of their participation in government around 1995 and of the interventionist positions they adopted during the Yugoslav Wars³⁹. However, this transition did lead the Greens to be less tempted by populism, as they had sometimes been before.

When in government, the Greens learned—sometimes painfully—the necessity of political compromise and they began to soften their maximalist demands, such as “Disarmament now!” and “Withdraw from nuclear power immediately!”. They adopted a more relaxed approach to European politics, toning down their criticism of the EU's monstrous greed and focusing far more on the opportunities and limitations of Europe as a civil power.

The Green parties in Western Europe now began to direct their criticism at the USA, which had already long come under suspicion from Western European left-wing factions, who distrusted the US as a global political force and viewed the country as a hotbed of multinational corporations and neoliberalism.

The Greens grew ever more distant from the USA, with their hostility reaching ever-greater peaks; it surged higher during the Iraq War in 2003, then higher again during the financial crisis of 2008, and even higher still during the 2014 protests against Big Data, the NSA wiretapping scandal, and the free trade agreement, TTIP. It was extraordinarily difficult for the Greens to look beyond the USA's negative image and

³⁸ Cf. F. LEVI, *In viaggio con Alex*, pp. 199-223.

³⁹ Cf. W. RÜDIG, *Zwischen Ökotopia und Desillusionierung*, pp. 171-176.

many points of criticism, including their government and their blunders and transgressions in global trade and politics, and acknowledge the positive effects of American influence.

However justified the Greens' criticism of American foreign policy, the country's neoliberal economic policy, its divided society, and its excessive use of natural resources may have been, it devolved all too often into demonizing the country on ideological grounds. They saw the USA as the origin of a western lifestyle and economic model, which was leading directly to catastrophic climate change, and the plundering of the world's natural resources.

What is more, Green anti-Americanism formed a seamless link between them and right-wing populists, who were equally strong in their denunciations of America's status as a domineering global police force and finance capital. These right-wing arguments also tended to make anti-Semitic references to America as the "Jewish finance capital", covertly at times but quite blatantly at others⁴⁰.

Similar, albeit more ambiguous parallels between the Greens and right-wing populists became apparent in the way both groups related to Russia: although Russia was harshly criticized for invading Chechnya, this criticism was restrained by the EU's basic need to establish good relations with Russia as their geopolitical neighbor, especially as NATO and the EU were expanding. As part of the OSCE, Russia and the CIS-countries were to be incorporated into a cooperative security system. The possibility of Russia joining the EU was also under discussion, although the Greens did not manage to put forward a common position on the issue. In 2000, there was perceptible sympathy among the Greens for a renewed, more democratic Russia as a force to counteract the USA and as an addition to Europe, which only began to diminish in 2005, as Putin's continuing presidency began to show ever stronger signs of authoritarianism.

⁴⁰ Cf. S. ARNOLD, *Das unsichtbare Vorurteil*.

10. *Opposing right-wing populism: An opportunity to remodel the Green party*

The Greens' ascent to organizational consolidation and governmental responsibility took place at approximately the same time as right-wing populism made a breakthrough in the mid nineties, which prompted the Greens to recreate their image. From 1991-92, the number of immigrants and asylum seekers entering the EU began to increase, which presented a huge opportunity for populist parties, who were also benefiting from the decline of traditional, major parties like the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats, as well as the criticism being levelled at the ongoing unification of Europe, which had increased dramatically with the EU's eastward expansion and failed constitution. As the union grew larger, the disparities in the member states' development grew with it, with differences within the EU standing out ever more starkly, while deepening the unification process proved to be more difficult than ever. The change in Europe's political landscape and culture was becoming apparent.

The turmoil which set in across the EU around 2000 eroded the support base of traditional, major parties and threw the political culture into confusion, thereby giving the Green parties far greater scope to act, which was used in different ways within different countries:

- In France and Austria, the rise of the FN and the FPÖ provoked decisive counterreactions, with the Greens beginning a programmatic campaign to remake their public image⁴¹. The major parties like the Conservatives and the Social Democrats often chose to adopt positions, which were closer to those of right-wing populists, which in turn gave the Greens the opportunity to present themselves as parties founded on openness, integration, and inclusion.
- In Italy, the Greens disintegrated so rapidly after their participation in government from 1996-2001 that they could not take advantage of the political upheaval in Europe; instead, the movement collapsed due to internal differences and personality clashes⁴². This was a symptom of the situation afflicting Southern European Green movements that

⁴¹ Cf. W. RÜDIG, *Zwischen Ökotopia und Desillusionierung*, p. 164.

⁴² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 162 f.

could not adapt their image within the fragmented political landscape in order to set themselves up as antagonists to the major parties, as Greens in other countries had managed to do.

- In Finland, Germany, and some other EU countries, rather than being seriously weakened by their departure from government in 2002-2005, the Greens rebranded themselves as environmentalist parties of governmental quality with well-structured goals⁴³. The Greens demonstrated their readiness to be in government by joining multiple coalitions at a state level, as they also had in Austria. Having a well-established presence at a state and local level was a perpetual source of renewal for the Greens, allowing them to reconsolidate positions and resources.

The Greens' foundation of environmentalist, pacifist, and intercultural values, their egalitarian, participative political style, and their ever-rising standards for social and gender equality remained essential parts of their "corporate identity". They also set out an expansive program designed to emphasize their image as champions of democratic EU integration, opposing Eurocentrism. This image, together with their successful government participation, did not just raise them to the level of natural antagonists to right-wing populists, but also made them seem practically immune to this strain of populism.

11. *Learning from confrontations*

One must also ask, whether the Green movement ought to seek out more confrontations with the populist rhetoric of inclusion and exclusion, to challenge populists' unjust claim to the power of defining what is truly "right" and "good" for "the people". Figures such as the American Bernie Sanders or the English Jeremy Corbyn give the impression that a certain measure of left-wing populism and subtle polarization is an excellent defense against right-wing populists. This is also a highly debated issue among the Greens of Austria, where historical leaders such as Peter Pilz claim a good dose of left-wing populism to match the presence of conservative or right-wing political leaders such as the

⁴³ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 160 f. and pp. 165-168.

ÖVP-Chancellor Sebastian Kurz or his partner Heinz-Christian Strache, front-man of the Freiheitlichen since 2002⁴⁴.

As it is, the German Green movement is already coming to rely on that form of popularity exuded by such party figures as Winfried Kretschmann, governor of Baden-Württemberg who gives off an aura of paternal authority, which is distinctly reminiscent of populist leaders. Since this “father figure” took office in 2011, he has consistently given the impression that he is down-to-earth and in touch with the people, which is reinforced by his careful, almost artisanal work in government. The content of Kretschmann’s humane, but fundamentally restrictive migration policy and his promotion of traditional industry areas, such as the automotive industry, albeit with environmental restrictions, have pacified voters, because he is accommodating traditional forms of identity. Thus, a few populist elements have been allowed to slip into the Green movement by Kretschmann’s grandfatherly presence⁴⁵.

The implication for Green politics is that in the “age of populism”, they can only continue their political successes if they create a connection between polarization, differentiation, and integration. If, on the other hand, the Greens mainly limit their focus to the issue of integration, anxious to preserve balance and moderation, and ignore the pain and conflict this issue can bring about, then they will undoubtedly lose credibility and become less convincing, resulting ultimately in an indifferent electorate and dwindling influence.

So even the Greens cannot escape the logic of confrontationally forming identities based on “them” and “us” divisions, which represents the normative, formative core of populist movements.

Although they are far from the ethnocentric, Eurosceptic, anti-integrative, and monocratic models that are the foundation of right-wing populism, neither the performances nor the messages of Green parties are free of “shades of populism”.

The simplified strategies that suit modern media lead to the use of binary codes, which are not compatible with the Green worldview, with their commitment to enlightenment principles and their willingness to

⁴⁴ N. MAAN, *Streit über Nutzen und Gefahr des Populismus*.

⁴⁵ P. HENKEL - J. HENKEL-WAIDHOFER, *Winfried Kretschmann*.

acknowledge complexity. However, the fact remains that as a core issue, the environment can have just as polarizing an effect as the task of fighting political corruption; both can be used to convey a dichotomy of “good” versus “evil”.

Moreover, when the beginnings of the Green movement are examined, it becomes evident that echoes of populist strategies such as polarization and extremism have been successfully used to mobilize the electorate since 1980. In the case of the Greens, these strategies were consciously employed to motivate and mobilize people; however, they were used in combination with a necessary moderation of argumentative style.

For this reason, Green parties’ political goals, range of social concerns, and methods of communication all represent a fascinating testing ground for the potential scope of populism, because even the Green movement is not immune to the attractions of populism.

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European Liberal Parties and the Challenge of Populism

by *Guido Thiemeyer*

1. *Introduction*

Populism has been a phenomenon in European politics since the middle of the 1980s, which—notwithstanding some historical examples such as Poujadism in France—has hardly been analyzed by historians so far. Political scientists, in contrast, have dealt with the problem from the very beginning. There is no commonly shared definition of populism, first and foremost because populist parties and movements in various European countries differ significantly. There are, however, some similarities: populist action is directed against the elites of a political system. Populists claim to represent “the people”, “common sense”, or national interests, leaving aside the question of the concrete meaning of these notions. This goes along with the breaking of the real or imagined taboos of a society. These taboos refer to an interpretation of history or to the commonly shared habits of a society. Apart from that, populists claim to strengthen the nation and its representation. They are skeptical or simply against any integration of their respective country into international organizations—such as the United Nations or the European Union—and stress the significance of national independence. They are also opposed to economic and societal integration into world markets and, by extension, to globalization. Instead, they claim to favor the national economy and society over the “unreasonable demands” of world markets and transnational entanglements. Globalization is considered one of the origins of the economic and political problems of the present.

Political scientists have identified three major reasons for the emergence of populism since the 1980s. First, globalization and the dissolution of national borders played a role. The emergence of a single European and transatlantic capital market in the 1990s and the establishment

of transnational labor markets in the EU were a challenge for the governance of nation-states. Secondly, this development created new possibilities for actors who were skilled in the transnational level on the one hand; on the other hand, it was considered a threat for national production. There were, therefore, winners and losers with globalization. Populists addressed the losers and claimed to be their political representatives within the political system of the nation-state. As a result of these developments among other things, traditional structures of national societies were called into question or even dissolved. This was the case for political milieus, political parties, and trade unions, but also for religious and other moral bonds. Thirdly, political scientists have ascertained a change in political communication and the media in national societies since the 1980s. The growing significance of private instead of public TV and broadcasting stations has led to a much greater dependency upon audience ratings for the national media. This in turn had significant repercussions for the content of the media: apolitical entertainment and scandalization significantly gained importance, the struggle for attention within the media system became an end in and of itself. This again changed the political communication because actors in the political sector adapted to these new structures in the media system.

This article examines the reaction of liberal parties within this context. Liberal parties in this sense are those political parties in European states that define themselves as being “liberal” even though their political position may differ significantly. The article refers to the 1990s and early 2000s and is therefore primarily based upon published sources provided by the parties themselves or upon public speeches by their leaders. The lack of archival material inevitably leads to a certain vagueness of the result. The article will argue that all in all there were three liberal reactions to populism: a first group of actors tried to isolate populist parties and politicians within the political system. A second, quite to the contrary, tried to integrate populism into the existing political system in order to eliminate one of its characteristic features: opposition against the political elites. And a third reaction was the adoption of elements of populism by liberal parties, and in some cases liberal political parties even became populist themselves.

2. *Liberal parties and populism: Examples*

A typical example of the strategy of exclusion is France. French conservative and liberal political actors tried to cope with the Front National, a right-wing party that was modernized when Marine Le Pen took the party leadership from her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, in January 2011. She broke with her father's tradition of racism and anti-Semitism and tried to open up the Front National also for conservatively oriented voters. The Front National became an anti-establishment party in France, breaking with the republican tradition and, as a result, calling into question the Fifth Republic. The Front National is strongly opposed to French NATO membership, the Schengen system of the European Union, and the European Monetary Union¹. The European Union is blamed for the persisting economic crisis of the country and the high unemployment rates above all among young people. According to the Front National, the French economy should be protected against competition from abroad, gain strength, and by this create new jobs for French people. Apart from that, the Schengen system, the abolishing of permanent controls within parts of the European Union, is considered a threat to national security. Overall, the Front National presents itself as an alternative to the republican parties of the socialists and conservatives. This strategy proved to be quite successful: in national elections (for the *Assemblée Nationale*) the right-wing populists went from 4.29% of the votes in 2007 to 13.6% in 2012; in European Elections, from 6.34% (2009) up to 24.86% (2014); and in the presidential elections, from 10.4% (Jean-Marie Le Pen) in 2007 up to 17.9% (Marine Le Pen) in 2012.

The French political establishment was shaken by the success of the right-wing populists but acted in different ways. While on the political right there was a certain tendency including among the Republicans to—at least rhetorically—adopt the new style, others were strongly opposed to the integration of the Front National into the political system. One good example of the latter position was Jean-Christophe Lagarde, president of the liberal-conservative *Union des Démocrates et Indépendants*. In his eyes, the Front National was no republican party and therefore not a member of the political system of the Fifth Republic: “Le député de Seine-Saint-Denis a expliqué que le FN, qui

¹ T. LAMPE, *Der Aufstieg der “Front National” in Frankreich* and S. CHWALA, *Der Front National*.

‘prône la discrimination’ et n’est ‘pas un parti républicain,’ n’avait simplement pas été inclus dans l’organisation matérielle’ de l’évènement”². Quite similar was the reaction of his party colleague and delegate of the Départements Seine et Marne, Yves Jégo:

“C’est dommage, ça laisse un goût amer dans l’esprit de nos compatriotes, ça laisse penser qu’à certains moments, dans certaines circonstances, on pourrait s’acoquiner avec un parti qui n’est pas comme les autres et qui n’est pas républicain, donc je pense que rien n’est réglé c’est la République qui a perdu”³.

These parts of the liberal republicans in France therefore adopted a strategy that aimed at excluding the populists from political republicanism in France and, in doing so, from one of the strongest and most important elements of French nationalism. In French political philosophy ever since the Great Revolution, the nation and republicanism were congruent elements of the French state. Populism was therefore treated just like monarchism in the nineteenth century and the collaborative *Etat Français* under the leadership of Philippe Pétain in World War II. Neither, according to the republican ideology, were part of the French nation. Because the nation, seen from this point of view, was closely connected to the tradition of republicanism, populist movements such as the Front National were not members of the French nation.

This position, however, was not undisputed among the liberal-conservatives: François Bayrou, mayor of the city of Pau and leader of the conservative-liberal *Mouvement Democratique*, was afraid of the consequences of this strategy of exclusion: “Venir devant les caméras et dire qu’il y a une faute morale, donc on va stigmatiser ... le Front national ...) c’est le meilleur moyen de faire venir les voix au Front national”⁴. The strategy of exclusion, according to Bayrou, would be considered as a confirmation of Front National propaganda claiming that the party (and therefore their voters) were not accepted as a part of the political system. Indeed, the Front National presented itself as the party of those who were not represented in the political system, and who therefore had no vote. According to Marine Le Pen, the Front

² See <http://www.parti-udi.fr/actualite-pour-jego-udi-rien-nest-regle-a-droite-au-sujet-du-fn.html>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See <http://www.mouvementdemocrate.fr/article/ce-discours-de-stigmatisation-les-electeurs-tentes-par-un-vote-fn-lentendent-pour-eux>.

National represented those who were excluded by the economic and political establishment. This debate, however, was not restricted to the liberal and conservative parties in France, but also took place in the socialist party.

The situation in the United Kingdom was slightly different. In September 1993, the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP) was founded with the principle aim of getting the UK out of the European Union⁵. According to UKIP activists, the UK and its parliament had lost their sovereignty by joining the European Community in the early 1970s. The European parliamentary elections in 1999 marked the breakthrough for the party when it got 6.3% of the votes and therefore sent three delegates to the European Parliament. As a result of the British electoral system, the party was not represented in the British Parliament (except for one MP who changed from the Conservatives to the UKIP), but it played a major role in the public debates within the country. Another reason was that Euroskepticism has never been restricted to UKIP members (even if they were the most radical opponents of EU-membership), but has always been also quite popular in parts of the Conservative party. Since the beginnings of supranational European integration in the early 1950s, the country and its political elite had never stopped to discuss the membership question. Even after the British referendum in 1975, there was a constant opposition to British membership in the EU. When viewed from this angle, the referendum in June 2016 and its outcome were therefore no surprise, even though most political observers had predicted a victory for the “remainers”.

Although Euroskepticism could be found in both major parties, the Conservatives as well as Labour, the Liberal Democrats had always advocated British membership in the European Union⁶. Therefore they became the staunchest opponents of UKIP. “Libdemfightback” was their slogan, and it shows a little bit of the rigor of the political debate on that question. In 2014, the Liberals published an inquiry on the behavior of the UKIP delegates in the European Parliament showing that they were among the “laziest” of the MEPs. Leading UKIP members were not present at important debates and votes of the EP. According to

⁵ T. BALE - A. J. WAGER, *The United Kingdom Independence Party*.

⁶ R. STURM, *Das politische System Großbritanniens*, pp. 247-249, and R. DOUGLAS, *Liberals*.

this paper, party leader Nigel Farage in particular was only present at 43% of the votes between 2009 and 2014, and his deputy Paul Nuttall performed even worse at 42.6%. The speaker of the Liberal Democrats group in the EP therefore stated:

“There is no doubt about it, UKIP MEPs offer the worst possible value for money for their constituents. Time and again they fail to turn up for crucial votes that benefit British citizens, whether it is research funding for our leading universities, slashing roaming charges for holiday makers or ending wasteful overfishing in our seas”⁷.

The paper and its content are a good example of the way in which the Liberal Democrats tried to cope with the problem of populism in Britain. On the one hand, they picked up an argument that was usually used by the opponents of the EU: the waste of public money in “Brussels” and the European Parliament. The real wasters, Fiona Hall claimed, were the UKIP MEPs. On the other hand, the Liberal Democrats tried to show that the UKIP was not supporting British interests in Brussels and Strasbourg. Even though they demanded a stronger defense of British interests, they failed when it came to concrete action. The Liberal Democrats therefore aimed at a political debate with populism in general and the UKIP in particular. In the European election campaign in 2014, they once again stressed that they were the only major British party that pleaded for EU membership without any reservations because they were convinced that this was a matter of national interest. The UKIP, in contrast, pleaded for a change. “But don’t be fooled: it’s change of the worst kind,” party leader Nick Clegg argued.

“Behind the crowd-pleasing, pint-swilling banter is a party that wants to turn the clock back. UKIP’s only answer to the complexities of the modern world—in which our lives and communities have been transformed with dizzying speed—is pulling up the drawbridge, shunning the outside world and hankering for some bygone past. These are people who resent the 21st Century”⁸.

The situation in Italy, by contrast, was very different from that in the UK. The Italian party system broke in the early 1990s and a completely new system arose⁹. As the result of a reform of the electoral system (now

⁷ See http://www.libdems.org.uk/ukip_meps_exposed_as_the_laziest_in_europe.

⁸ Nick Clegg warns exiting the EU would undermine Britain’s interests, http://www.libdems.org.uk/nick_clegg_warns_exiting_the_eu_would_undermine_britain_s_interests.

⁹ G. TRAUTMANN - H. ULLRICH, *Das politische System Italiens* and P. WEBER, *Die neue Ära der italienischen Mehrheitsdemokratie*.

a mixture between a majority voting system and a proportional system), two political groups came into being: on the one side, a liberal-left one (Ulivo), and on the other, a conservative one (Forza Italia, later Casa delle Libertà, and then Popolo della Libertà). Neither, however, was a political party in the narrow sense of the word, but rather more or less party alliances that came into being as a result of the changing voting system which benefited larger party groups at the expense of smaller parties. There were some elements of populism in Forza Italia that had been founded in January 1994 by Silvio Berlusconi, a businessman who dominated the private media companies in Italy. At that time, Forza Italia was a particular political movement because it was by no means based on a social movement or a certain milieu but instead dominated by Berlusconi himself. The party was to a large extent financed by his enterprises, and its political positions were strongly influenced by opinion surveys. This proved to be extremely successful because Berlusconi used his own media groups to communicate his political aims. From 2008 on, however, he lost influence in Forza Italia which had become part of the conservative Popolo delle Libertà.

Instead, a new populist movement came into being. The Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S), organized by the comedian Beppe Grillo and a new kind of populist party¹⁰. It started with some success in regional elections until it became the second force in the parliamentary elections in 2013. Its political position, however, remained nebulous. Beppe Grillo himself pleaded for the exit from the European Monetary Union while other activists stressed the advantages of the EMU for Italy. There is, however, a certain EU-skepticism in the movement that criticizes first and foremost the “bureaucracy” in Brussels and the democratic deficit of the EU. Rather typically, Grillo demanded more direct democracy in the EU and Italy even though he guided his own movement in an authoritarian way. Another typical feature of the Cinque Stelle and Grillo was his fundamental opposition against the existing Italian political system.

There has been no “liberal” reaction to the emergence of populist parties in Italy since the 1990s. The Partito Liberale that had been founded after World War II and had played a significant role in various governments dissolved in the early 1990s. Since then, liberal positions could be found

¹⁰ B. BRANDAU, *Fünf Sterne gegen Berlusconi*.

in the left-wing Ulivo as well as in the Polo della Libertà. Francesco Rutelli was a member of the left-wing party group and, as the mayor of the city of Rome and vice president in the national government led by Romano Prodi, played a major role in Italian policy in recent years. He pointed at certain contradictions within the Cinque Stelle program:

“Sono rispettosissimo dei militanti che si candidano anche nel movimento cinque stelle e vogliono fare politica perché è un modo per concorrere al bene pubblico. Grillo però non si presenta alle elezioni e nel suo movimento non si vota, non c'è una elezione democratica. Decide tutto lui, chi entra, chi esce, chi caccia. Non è un capolavoro di democrazia”¹¹.

Rutelli made clear that he was not opposed to the M5S in general. He was, however, quite skeptical with regard to Beppe Grillo who never stood as a candidate in a democratic election but played a dominant role in the movement. His presidency in the party was by no means legitimized by democratic elections. The same pattern of thinking could be found in the left-liberal Italia dei Valori led by the public prosecutor Antonio di Pietro who had played a major role in the Mani pulite movement of the early 1990s.

“Ma la vera nemica oggi è la demagogia, forma degenerata della democrazia, conseguenza di un impoverimento della società dove alta è l'ingiustizia sociale. La favola del non fare ciò che si critica, non regge neanche per Grillo, 'l'imbalsamatore'. Un'incoerenza all'italiana, andare contro la politica per fare politica. Chi ci ha ingannati per vent'anni con burlesque ed effetti speciali, ha dimostrato il tragico vuoto che sta dietro all'irresponsabilità”¹².

The menace for democracy is not, as Grillo maintains, the existing party system but it is, according to di Pietro, the demagoguery used by Grillo himself. In the end, he accused the M5S of irresponsibility.

But among the Italian liberals, there were also some people clamoring for the integration of the M5S into the political system. One of them was Marco Panella, one of the most prominent actors in Italian politics since the 1950s. In 1955, he was part of a group of liberals who left the Partito Liberale to establish a new republican movement. The Partito

¹¹ Grillo, Rutelli: “Rispetto militanti ma non è capolavoro democrazia” in: <http://www.alleanzaperlitalia.it/articolo/?id=8116&I=Grillo,%20Rutelli:%20%C2%ABRispetto%20militanti%20ma%20non%20%C3%A8%20capolavoro%20democrazia%C2%BB>.

¹² Grillo, tra la demagogia e l'imbalsamazione in <http://www.italiadeivalori.it/grillo-tra-la-demagogia-e-l'imbalsamazione>.

Radicale played a certain role in Italian politics until the 1990s. On July 26, 2013, Panella published a paper advocating closer cooperation between some actors of the M5S and himself. After some intense debates with Cinque Stelle members, Panella openly supported the movement's candidate for mayor of the city of Rome, Marcello di Vito¹³. There were therefore some liberals in Italy trying to integrate the M5S into the political system, but they were a minority. The majority of Italian liberals were skeptical and hostile toward the populist movements.

Another interesting example of the integration of populist movements into the political system is Denmark. In 1995, the Dansk Folkeparti came into being. Up to today, it has been a party that fights for the protection of the Danish social system which, in their eyes, is menaced by migrants from abroad. With this, the Dansk Folkeparti combines political positions from the left, like the defense of the welfare state, with important elements from the far right, like hostility toward migrants. It is therefore also opposed to Danish membership in the European Union.

The rise of populism in Denmark is closely related to the Islamic terror attacks on the United States in September 2001¹⁴. In November 2001, a new government under the leadership of Anders Fogh Rasmussen from the right-wing liberal Venstre party took office and was supported by the Dansk Folkeparti in the national parliament. That meant that the Dansk Folkeparti had considerable influence on the government even though it was not part of it. As a result, the asylum law was modified to prevent those people in Denmark who had already been accepted as asylum-seekers from bringing their relatives into the country. The restrictive policy towards migration is partly due to the new populism represented in Denmark by the Dansk Folkeparti. But in contrast to most other European countries, there is a certain acceptance of restrictive migration policies in other Danish parties too. Even the Social Democrats advocate the protection of the social system by preventing migrants from entering the country¹⁵. This, however, was no protection against populism. Since its founding, the Dansk Folkeparti gained con-

¹³ *Dichiarazione di Marco Pannella.*

¹⁴ S. MERET, *Die Dänische Volkspartei* and C. WIRRIES, *Populismus und Pragmatismus.*

¹⁵ See <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/daenemark-migrationsministerin-ist-fuer-maximale-abschreckung-a-1071695.html>.

siderable support in national elections. In the parliamentary elections of June 18, 2015, it became the second party after the leading Social Democrats even though the migration crisis in Western Europe had not reached its culmination point. The Danish strategy of integration therefore failed in fighting populism.

Another important example is Austria. The Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) was dominated by different ideologies since its founding in 1955. One of course was influenced by classical liberalism. Apart from that, the FPÖ also became the holding center for Austrian members of the former Nazi Party. In 1986, Jörg Haider took the presidency of the party. From then on, the FPÖ became an anti-system party, attacking the consensual Austrian model policy that was dominated by the conservative ÖVP and the social democrats of the SPÖ¹⁶. Under Haider's leadership, the FPÖ that had only played a minor role in Austrian politics so far became the "third power" with the conservatives and the social democrats. Even though the FPÖ presented itself as an anti-system party attacking the old structures of the Austrian system, it was represented in various governments in the *Bundesländer* as well as in the national government. The FPÖ addressed the right-wing electorate up to the 1980s by integrating the so called "Wehrmacht generation" and afterwards with its opposition against Islam. The development in Austria has thus far been an exception in Europe as Haider succeeded in transforming an existing liberal party into a populist movement.

Whereas the FPÖ was quite successful since the 1990s, classical liberalism in Austria was in crisis. As a reaction to the Haider strategy, some liberals left the FPÖ in 1993 in order to establish a new liberal party called Liberales Forum. Even though they had considerable success in national elections in the mid-1990s, they failed to surmount the four-percent-barrier for parties in national elections. In January 2014, the Liberales Forum dissolved and a new liberal party appeared: Das Neue Österreich und Liberales Forum (NEOS). They won five percent in the national elections in September 2013. The NEOS argued strongly in favor of Austrian membership in the EU and the European Monetary Union. Even though they have been represented in the national assembly since 2013, they are too weak to influence the policy of the

¹⁶ B. TÖTH, *Am mächtigsten in der Opposition* and R. PASQUARÉ, *Austrian Populism after the Victory of the FPÖ*.

three dominating parties in Austria. Apart from that, there is a strong competition among liberal parties: the Bündnis Zukunft Österreich (BZÖ), founded by Jörg Haider after his resignation from the FPÖ, stands for conservative economic liberalism. The same applies to the Team Stronach für Österreich led by the industrialist Frank Stronach who stands for flat taxes, more competition in the economic system, and a reduction of bureaucracy. There is, therefore, a strong competition among liberal parties in Austria leading to a fragmentation of liberalism in this country.

With regard to right-wing populism, the Federal Republic of Germany was a latecomer in Europe¹⁷. The reason was the special development of Germany after reunification in the 1990s. In the eastern parts of the country, the Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (PDS), the direct successor of the former communist party in the GDR, succeeded as a third power between the big parties of Western Germany, the conservative CDU and the social democrats (SPD). In the 1990s, the PDS stood first of all for regional interests of the new *Bundesländer* of the former GDR with a strong tendency to the left. The reform of the labor market (“Agenda 2010”) implemented by the SPD-led federal government between 2003 and 2005 changed the situation. As a result, the Wahlalternative für Soziale Gerechtigkeit (WASG) was established in the western parts of Germany and soon merged under the leadership of Oskar Lafontaine with the PDS to form the new party Die Linke. The new party became the most important opposition against the “Agenda 2010” but also against the European Union that was blamed for being one of the origins of the neo-liberal economic turn in Germany. Die Linke therefore also assembled together a considerable part of those in Germany who were against the European Monetary Union. All other German parties were in favor of the EMU even though there was also widespread skepticism against the euro among the conservative middle classes. There had already been liberal opposition against the monetary union in the mid-1990s led by some economists because the EMU challenged the model of the Bundesbank in monetary policy¹⁸. But this group could hardly identify with the only opposition against monetary union in the political sector, Die Linke. Conservative and

¹⁷ F. DECKER, *Warum gibt es in Deutschland keine relevante rechtspopulistische Partei?*

¹⁸ G. THIEMEYER, *Der Kampf um das wahre Europa.*

liberal opposition against the EMU up to 2008 therefore coalesced in the media, the “Bild-Zeitung”, but also with the editorial staff of the economic part of the “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung” and in part, the weekly magazine “Der Spiegel”. The media therefore became the “functional equivalent” of a populist party in Germany¹⁹.

The situation changed again under the influence of the financial crisis from 2008 onwards, which increased the opposition against the EMU among liberals and conservatives in Germany. The crisis provided the intellectual basis for the foundation of a new political party on the right that mainly focused on the opposition against monetary union. The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) was founded by Bernd Lucke, a professor of economics at the University of Hamburg²⁰. The AfD originally presented itself as the “real” liberal party that stood for monetary stability, budgetary equilibrium, and free entrepreneurship. The main topic however was the opposition against the EMU and the European Union in general, a unique feature of the party in the conservative milieu. This again made the party attractive for those who were not only opposed to the European integration of Germany, but also to the political system itself. The politically unexperienced Lucke was forced to resign from the party chair and was replaced by a group of politicians who fought against the *Altparteien* (i.e. the established party system). They were supported by the Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes (PEGIDA), a political movement on the far right advocating the protection of the German nation against a pretended attack by “Islam”. The AfD therefore became the German equivalent to European populism.

At the same time, the traditional liberal party in Germany, the FDP, was in a deep crisis. After a disastrous defeat in the national elections in 2013, when the party once again failed to enter the Bundestag, the entire leadership resigned from office. The new chairperson, Christian Lindner who was elected in December 2013, sharply attacked the AfD. He pleaded for no compromise towards the “nationalökonomische Bauernfängertruppe”. “Mit nur einem Zentimeter in Richtung der

¹⁹ F. DECKER, *Warum gibt es in Deutschland keine relevante rechtspopulistische Partei?*, p. 47.

²⁰ F. DECKER, *Alternative für Deutschland und Pegida*.

Eurohasser würden wir unsere Seele verlieren”²¹. From then on, those in the FDP who had pleaded for the integration of the populists, such as the Euroskeptic Frank Schäffer, were isolated in the party. Lindner attacked the AfD time and time again: the current political and economic crises, he said in a speech at the parliament (*Landtag*) of the *Bundesland* of North Rhine Westphalia in January 2016, were not a major problem in his eyes. Germany and the European Union were able to cope with them.

“Das Problem sind die Rechtspopulisten. Denn wenn eins die Grundfesten der europäischen Einigung erschüttert, dann das: wenn wieder eine nationale Abschottungspolitik gemacht werden würde! Und dagegen müssen wir uns gemeinsam wehren—auch in Deutschland. In Frankreich hat sich Le Pen von den Radikalen getrennt, um bürgerlicher wirken zu können. In Deutschland hat sich die AfD von den Bürgerlichen getrennt, um radikaler sein zu können”²².

The German FDP, therefore, joined those liberal parties in Europe that try to isolate populist parties within the political system.

3. *Conclusion*

There was no unanimous, specific reaction of liberal parties to the challenge of populism in Europe. All in all, three patterns of political behavior can be identified: first, there was the strategy of isolation. Some liberal parties tried to isolate populist movements and parties within their respective political system and the national consensus. This was the case in France, where conservative-liberals claimed that the Front National was not part of the republican system of the country. As republicanism has been an important point of reference for the construction of the French nation since the Great Revolution, this meant that the Front National was excluded from the French nation. Another example of the strategy of exclusion can be found in Germany. Here the new president of the FDP, Christian Lindner, tried to show that the AfD did not belong to the German political consensus: anti-Europeanism was not in the German national interest. Apart from that, he hinted at the point that the AfD was partly close to Nazi positions. This was an additional instrument for excluding the party from national consensus. The same

²¹ *Neuer FDP-Chef geht die AfD frontal an.*

²² *Ibid.*

pattern can be found in the UK: the Liberal Democrats tried to show that the UKIP, in spite of pretending to fight for national interest, did the opposite when they failed to be present at votes of the European Parliament that without any doubt lay in British interest.

Another strategy for coping with populism was inclusion. This was the case in Denmark, where the conservative-liberal Venstre was tolerated by the populist Dansk Folkeparti. The price, however, was a very restrictive migration policy that brought the country into conflict with the European Commission and other member states of the EU. The strategy of inclusion, to be sure, was possible in Denmark because there is also a certain acceptance within the established party system for a restrictive migration policy.

A special case in this context was Austria. Here, in the middle of the 1990s Jörg Haider succeeded in pushing the liberals out of the FPÖ and transforming the liberal party into a populist movement. This, however, was possible because Nazi ideology and therefore the opposition against the existing political system had played a role in the FPÖ from its beginnings in the 1950s onwards.

To come to a conclusion, there has been no specific liberal reaction to populism in Europe. The reaction of liberal parties depended not so much on ideology as on their own history and the structure of their respective political systems.

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Populism

A Short Conclusion to the Volume

by *Anton Pelinka*

1. *Populism*

Populism has become—rightfully—a term beyond the polemics of day-to-day politics. Populism has entered the discourse of political scientists, historians, and sociologists. Obviously, the more traditional concepts of the description and analysis of contemporary political tendencies were not sufficient, not deep, not complex enough for the phenomenon of what is perceived as populism today.

Populism is at the same time an old and a new phenomenon. It has been used to describe the presidency of Andrew Jackson in the 1830s, the Russian Narodniki at the end of the nineteenth century, and the Latin American phenomenon of Peronism. Populism was the term used to describe new formations of parties of the extreme right in Europe¹. The perception of populism usually was and is something not entirely positive—for liberal democracy. Populism is seen as an open or at least indirect challenge to the democracy as it exists in the world (and especially in Europe) in the twenty-first century's second decade.

Even before the rise of parties like the French National Front to political prominence, Robert Dahl has argued that democracy defined as “polyarchy”—a democracy characterized by what it is not, not tyranny—is challenged by “populistic” democracy²: A system, which tends to give all political power to the majority, tends to neglect checks and balances, and tends to restructure the relationship between a (democratically) elected leader and “the people”. Institutions between the top of the political pyramid and the society as such were more or less seen as negative.

¹ R. WODAK - M. KHOSRAVINIK - B. MRAL (eds), *Right-Wing Populism*.

² R.A. DAHL, *Polyarchy*.

But all attempts to find a broad academic as well as political consensus about the meaning of populism usually run into vagueness and contradictions. Populism easily escapes academic clarity in a way other “isms” can not. Of course, socialism and liberalism and conservatism, “left” and “right”, are also in many respects rather soft terms with many grey zones between one and the other. But populism seems to be missing what the others have—a rather undisputed core, surrounded by disputable secondary qualifications. Populism is an “ism” of specific non-quality. Or—do we just have the need to find populism’s core?

One aspect everybody seems to agree about is protest. Populism is a protest movement, as Karin Priester emphasizes in her contribution. Populism does not intend to keep the status quo—any kind of status quo. It is driven by the dissatisfaction with the given situation; by the status quo on the economic side—like the existence of social inequality. But populism articulates the perceived burden of economically more advanced regions (like Catalonia, like Northern Italy) in keeping a country’s financial balance by paying more into the national budget the getting out of it.

To get to the very essence of populism, was the purpose of a conference which dealt with the populist phenomenon by looking into specific cases, general tendencies, and different attempts to explain the very substance of this specter, which haunts political science and other academic disciplines: We may not exactly know what populism is, but we are aware of its significant importance for today’s political systems and processes.

2. *Populism—form and methods*

Following Robert Dahl’s approach, populism is first and foremost a technique, which claims to be one or even the only one democratic technique to transform the will of “the people” into political decisions. The populist assumption is that any institutions, which are there to interpret the people’s will, are of secondary importance—and potentially a danger to “real” democracy: Political parties and parliaments, law courts and media are, for the populist understanding of democracy, not necessarily negative; but those institutions can become a negative factor because they may distort or misrepresent the people’s will.

In this populist distrust of intermediary actors and institutions, Robert Michels' "iron law" plays a role: Any institution between "the people" and the people's will chief executioner will always be influenced by a self-interest not identical with the people's interest. Populism is linked to the "elite theorists" (like Michels) "that sooner or later all institutions would be controlled by oligarchies"³.

Fascism—influenced by this kind of theory—saw in that reasoning about elitist tendencies a proof of the impossibility of "real democracy". Populism on the other side wants to make democracy free of such elitist tendencies by the intention to get rid of self-interested elites, of oligarchies. Donald Trump's behavior, informing "the people" by a daily tweet about his thinking, his responses, his feelings, his plans, is a perfect example for the populist attempt to communicate with "the people" without relying on intervening institutions like media, political parties, or parliaments.

That is the background of the populist approach to politics: Populism accepts representative democracy only as the exception to the rule. The rule is (or should be) plebiscitarian democracy. Democracy should be direct democracy. Final decisions should be taken directly by "the people"—in form of referenda. Decisions by representative institutions (especially parliaments) are seen as a concession to any society's daily life, which may not allow all the citizens (and therefore "the people") to make all decisions, which had to be made. But representative democracy is accepted with mistrust by populism.

As Günther Pallaver has demonstrated in his analysis, the media play a significant role in establishing a perceived direct link between "the people" and populist movements, allowing specific parties and politicians to denounce their opponents as enemies of the people. This role of the media has become even more significant due to the social media, which can be played by specific politicians—mobilizing followers in the name of "the people" against opponents. The message populist politicians send can be transferred directly to "the people"—without any intervening actors like journalists. As this can and is done top down—e.g. directly from the White House—the authoritarian implication can easily be seen.

³ J.-W. MÜLLER, *Contesting Democracy*, p. 183.

In his contribution to this volume, Maurizio Cau writes about populism's implicit attack on constitutionalism. The populist hostility towards "constitutional tradition" is at least tentatively incompatible with the democratic order as established in the aftermath of the ("glorious") British, the American, and the French revolutions—an order that accepts opposition and guarantees minority rights by institutionalized checks and balances. This anti-constitutional trend has a potential: The consequence could be "totalitarian democracy" as analyzed by J.L. Talmon⁴.

Direct democracy has one implication: It is by its very nature majoritarian. Implemented consistently, it leads to the tyranny of the majority. All the safeguards—enshrined in the different charters of human rights, in the different constitutions as basic citizens' rights, will be in danger—if direct democracy becomes the rule. The present understanding of liberal democracy, as it exists, is the limitation of any power—including the power of the majority. Populism, implemented logically to its very end, implies the dictatorship of the majority.

The weakness of the populist approach to democracy is the assumption that "the people" is a rather homogenous community with a consistent understanding of its interests and values. Populism has problems accepting the diversity of societies, realizing the fragmentations, the social cleavages and their political implications, the dividing gaps any society consists of—the result of diversity, of the differences of gender and generation, class and religion, ethnicity and region. Under no circumstances do "the people" have just one will, one interest—but different, more or less contradicting interests. Populism neglects this kind of reality. The belief in the existence of "the people" and "its" will is potentially the beginning of authoritarian and fundamentalist thinking: Who does not share the people's will can easily be criminalized as an enemy of the people.

3. *Populisms—substance: Exclusivity*

Populism constructs the existence of "the people" by specific criteria of inclusion and exclusion. Democracy has developed over a long ongoing process of including more and more people, by progressively eliminat-

⁴ J.L. TALMON, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*.

ing the omission of specific segments of society. Segments of society, excluded from politics through history, became included: poor males, former slaves, and—mostly during the first decades of the twentieth century—women. The people—members of a society, organized within a territory, organized as a state—became the “demos”, members of the society, privileged to participate in politics, in the decision making process. Democracy has become—over the centuries—more and more inclusive.

But what seemed to be the end of the process of inclusion, general suffrage for women and men, is not at all ending this process of inclusion of people into the demos. One decisive aspect of globalization—the worldwide migration of millions—demonstrates an ongoing challenge to democracy. Dahl has provided an answer to this challenge with the concept of citizenship as a “categorical right”. He points to a crucial issue. Populism tends to deal with that issue by arguing for exclusion and not for inclusion. Dahl’s basic argument:

“How inclusive should the demos be? ... the demos should include all adults subject to the binding collective decisions of the association”⁵. With other words: Any person, legally living in a territorially organized community—i.e. a state, must be entitled to participate in the democratic process. And it is exactly this norm that is less and less fulfilled in advanced democracies as more and more persons are legally living in democratic states without the right to participate in the political system. Populism tends to defend this violation of the norm by insisting on the existence of nations based on excluding significant segments within the nation—excluded by “blood” or “race”, “culture” or “civilization”.

The basic fiction of any kind of populism is the assumption of the existence of an undisputed qualification of belonging to “the people”. For that reason, the European Union—as Michael Gehler describes in his analysis of the difficulties to accept European diversity as institutionalized by the EU—is a logical scapegoat: The “Euroscepticism” of the different shadows of populism is first and foremost an opposition to a European experiment which ends national exclusivity.

Marco Brunazzo shows in his analysis of the Lega Nord that this exclusivity does not stop at the defense of the borders of the existing

⁵ R.A. DAHL, *Democracy*, p. 120.

nation states: Secessionist nationalism wants to create new borders, new exclusions—populism (especially, but not only in its right-wing variety) leads back to the way of explosive difference; a difference familiar from the catastrophic first half of the twentieth century.

Following Benedict Anderson, any community, any nation is “imagined”: It exists first and foremost in the perception of those who see themselves as “us”, and of those—“them”—who perceive “us” from the outside⁶. Populism is an excellent example that this imagination is based on the construction of specific stereotypes. Marco Brunazzo has used, in his contribution, this approach to focus in the imagination and invention of “Padania”: An imagined community used to justify secessionist nationalism; a community with perceived differences between “us” and “them”.

In the European discourse, where “race” has become a no-word as a consequence of National Socialism, the phenomena which are called “populist”—political parties, protest movements, mass media—are directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly opposing an understanding of democracy as inclusive as explained by Dahl’s concept of citizenship. The reason is the implication of this concept: Anyone who legally lives in a particular country should have the chance to become a citizen within a rather short period and without too many bureaucratic hurdles⁷. This democratic inclusiveness violates the interests of those who already enjoy the privilege of being included. To justify interest based exclusiveness, existing differences (e.g. concerning religion and cultural traditions) are used to brand “the others”, to create and invent differences, which cannot be overcome.

This combination of basic interests and ideological superstructure explains why immigration has become the number one issue of populism—in Europe, in America, elsewhere. Migration as one of the most significant aspects of globalization is jeopardizing any understanding that “we, the people”, the sovereign in democracy, is a given reality. “The people” cannot, must not be transformed into a “multinational”, “multiethnic”, “multicultural” demos. The inclusive understanding of democracy is unavoidably multinational, multiethnic, multicultural, because the

⁶ B. ANDERSON, *Imagined Communities*.

⁷ R. BAUBÖCK, *Transnational Citizenship*.

“people” becomes the “demos”, defined not by cultural roots but by demographic realities. It is this inclusive implication of democracy, which violates the alliance of populist interests and populist ideology.

Globalization implies a dramatic increase in diversity. Democratic systems do not seem completely prepared for that consequence. Immigration—the product of economic and cultural globalization—leads to an ethno-nationalistic backlash. Will Kymlicka describes the ongoing conflict: “In virtually every Western democracy, there is a clearly dominant majority group that has controlled the state, and used that control to diffuse its language, culture, and identity”⁸. This majority fears losing its cultural hegemony and its control over society and politics as more and more migrants, more and more different minorities are living within the majority. This fear is the backbone of populism—the fear of losing the power of dominance within a given society.

The generality of the anti-globalization rhetoric and the vagueness of the populist agenda besides the battle cry against the status quo is responsible for a specific populist volatility: Populist actors can act as part of a traditional far right or of a centrist coalition. They can try to get the profile of a reliable centrist factor—or they play the role of a consistent opponent of the “system” as such. In his contribution, Lutz Klinkhammer has used the case of Gianfranco Fini to demonstrate this kind of flexibility. This explains the difficulties in defining systematic differences between the traditional far right and the populist right; between the radical or extreme right on one side, and a more centrist, moderate right on the other. Populism is also the result of the erosion of traditional political categories. Parties, which may have started at the center (like Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia), can become undistinguishable from the populist right—as Giovanni Orsina has exemplified in his essay. Borderlines between different shades have become vague—due to the populist phenomenon.

4. *Populism—who are the “Defining Others”?*

The exclusive understanding of democracy—“US, the people” against “Them, the foreigners” is one important aspect in any attempt to

⁸ W. KYMLICKA, *Multicultural Odysseys*, p. 263.

describe and to analyze the tentatively elusive populist phenomenon. The anti-immigrant response to the increase of global mobility links populism to more traditional right-wing, nationalistic, ethno-centric parties and movements. This is the essence of right-wing populism: Populism is at least tentatively xenophobic—constructing people who are not “us”, but “them”.

Globalization is probably the most significant factor for the understanding of contemporary populism. For Cas Mudde, globalization is populism’s “mutifaced enemy”, representing all the existing as well as the perceived, the simply imagined threats. In the economic sphere, globalization means free trade, free market, neoliberalism, and—especially—migration. Culturally, globalization can be identified with Americanization (“Cocacolonization”) and/or Western neo-imperialism and/or Islamism—with the breakdown of any kind of borders. Globalization (or whatever is understood by this term) motivates indigenous rebellions in Latin America and parties of the European far right, like Front National⁹. But besides all the volatility of the term, globalization stands for the big equalizer—ending all the differences perceived as “natural”; the differences of ethnicity and culture, of gender and nationality.

In his analysis of the response of Social Democracy to populism, Giovanni Bernardini even sees globalization as a “specter”, a ghost, some populist movements fight like Don Quixote’s fought against the windmills. It is the appeal of the populist anti-globalization rhetoric (and the underlying fears and anxieties), which explains the trend of a traditionally leftist electorate to vote for right-wing populist parties. But anti-globalization rhetoric also plays a role in leftist populism—like the German Left party or the surviving communist parties in countries like Portugal. Globalization—not seen in the Marxist tradition as the logical outcome of a worldwide phenomenon but as a willfully established instrument by elites who do not have national roots: This is a perspective that populism on the right and populism on the left share.

Populism is first and foremost seen in its ethno-national dimension. Populism is a phenomenon in the tradition of the far right. But populist “othering” also has a second side—“they” are also segments of the society “above”; persons, milieus, considered to be privileged in

⁹ C. MUDDÉ, *Populist Radical Right Parties*, pp. 184-197.

an unjustifiable way. Populist rhetoric includes elements, which are traditionally seen as part of the political left: anti-elitism, attacks on “the establishment”. The populist rhetoric after 2000 seems to have taken over some mobilizing slogans from the traditional left, especially from the “New Left” identified in Western Europe with the year 1968.

But populism does not exist only in its ethno-national form. In their analysis, Koen Abts and Rudi Laermans have developed the “core structure of populist ideology”—and part of this is a rebellious drive, directed against the “political, economic and/or cultural establishment”, which is attacked for its “privileges, its corruption, and especially its lack of accountability to the people”. This could have been used to define Jacobins at the beginning of the French Revolution. This is not at all “right wing” *per se*. One decisive aspect of populism is the definition of “them”, against whom populism’s rebellious energy is directed: If the perceived enemy is “them above”, i.e. the privileged elites, then populism is, in the traditional sense, more left than right. If the perceived enemy is first and foremost “them outside”, who attempt to invade us, our country, and destroy “our” culture, then populism fits into the ethno-national tradition of the political right.

The variety of political phenomena that are—more or less convincingly—put under the general term “populism” makes it necessary to be as precise as possible to avoid simplistic misunderstandings. Cas Mudde distinguishes between agrarian populism—with roots in the nineteenth century (like the Russian Narodniki), economic populism with distinct socialist elements (especially in Latin America), and political populism as a more general expression of resentment. The three dimensions of populism represent the three versions of populism: the anti-modernist version, the anti-capitalist version, and the anti-elitist¹⁰.

It is also necessary to see regional differences. In East-Central Europe, the history of communist rule over decades and the complex transformation to liberal democracy and market economy have created a special branch of populism¹¹. Germany’s specific history in the twentieth century explains the absence of any significant (right wing) populist party (at least until 2017)—due to a particular sensitivity concerning any

¹⁰ C. MUDDE, *In the Name of the Peasantry, the Proletariat, and the People*.

¹¹ V. HAVLÍK et al., *Populist Political Parties*.

political articulation identifiable as extreme or radically right wing. In Italy, populism reflects regional diversity, including economic inequality. In Austria, populism has to do with the countries post-1945 amnesia concerning the role the Austrian society played between 1938 and 1945. In France, populism is linked to the phantom pain the society of a former imperial power feels when it has to realize (and accept) its less dominant global role.

Populism is more a battle cry than a consistent concept. But the battle cry can be—as mentioned in the different contributions as well as already above—directed against very different enemies: against “them above”; or against “them outside”. The first orientation can be seen as the essence of left populism—as exemplified in Latin America’s Peronism, and in the kind of (at least in the traditional sense) unorthodox socialism as represented by the Greek Syriza. The second one must be seen as the contemporary version of exclusionary nationalism: Keeping “aliens” out; and if they are already in, do not accept them as “our own”. Leftist populism and rightist populism are to be distinguished—but they are not completely different.

One significant link (but also a difference) between populism on the right and populism on the left is the electorate. Populism is the battle cry of those who see themselves as victims. Differently from the traditional right (à la Tories), right wing populists do not represent the defenders of the tradition or any Ancien régime. In addition, different from the traditional (Marxist) left, left populists do not favor transnational solidarity—at least beyond some lip service. Successful populist parties have become a new version of a catch-all party: Articulating the interests of coal miners in West Virginia and steel workers in Northern England, of farmers in Sicily and active Catholics in Poland, of frustrated retirees in Saxonia and of the Dutch middle class, fearing to become the victims of Muslim migrants.

It is fear of the future, the perception of losing the status people are accustomed to, which explains the populist reaction. As Ruth Wodak has analyzed, this kind of fear dominates the right-wing populist discourses¹². It is this kind of fear that motivates blue-collar workers in America’s “rust belt” to vote for Donald Trump. Moreover, it is not

¹² R. WODAK, *The Politics of Fear*.

such a different kind of fear that explains the electoral successes of Syriza in Greece—and of the German Left party, especially in the states that formed, until 1990, the GDR.

5. *Populism—party typology: A new class party or (and?) a new catch-all party*

For most of the twentieth century, political science was used to distinguishing between all-inclusive catch-all parties and exclusive parties—like class or religious or ethnic parties. Traditionally, the first type was seen exemplified in the US-American party system. The second type could be observed in Europe: Communist or Social Democratic workers' parties—or Catholic parties (like the Italian DC) representing not the society at large but specific societal segments¹³. Catch-all parties try to form patch-work coalitions internally, transforming minorities into a—potential—majority, cross-cutting through the differences of gender and age and ethnicity and prosperity. Class or religious or ethnic parties do not even claim to be all things to all persons—they represent the working class (and not the bourgeoisie), the Catholics (and not the Muslims), the Flemish (and not the Walloons). Populism seems to cut through this traditional party typology, through the distinction between all-inclusive and exclusive parties.

Differently from right wing populism, left wing populism has not—at least not yet—become a clearly defined type. Right wing populism—as exemplified in the European Parliament—can be identified as an already existing party family. In the EP, right-wing populist parties are presented by a specific party group—the Europe of Nations and Freedom Group. 37 out of the 750 MPs are members of that group. By far the biggest national party, which belongs to this group, is the French Front National with 17 MPs. On the left side, the situation is slightly different: In the Confederal Group of the European United Left—Nordic Green Left (57 MPs), a mixture of the traditional far-left (like the Communist Party of Portugal) coexists with non-traditional leftists (like the Spanish PODEMOS)¹⁴. The populist distinction is more visible in form of rightist populism.

¹³ R.S. KATZ, *Party in Democratic Theory*.

¹⁴ See www.europarl.europa.eu [accessed November 27, 2017].

A decisive aspect of politically organized populism is the aspect of education, in combination with migration. The blue collar vote, which in countries like France has moved—by a significant majority—from the traditional left to the populist right, signifies one specific aspect of fear: The “white”, “true French” workers are afraid of losing their ethnically based advantage (e.g. on the labor market) to migrant workers, identified as less costly (“cheap”) labor. The better-educated middle class is differently affected by migration—or not affected at all. The middle class therefore seems to be able to be more open, more welcoming toward migration. This is sometimes discussed as the “modernization loser phenomenon”. Less prosperous segments of the society, that despite their comparatively significant level of social security (compared with the past) have reason to fear the effects of a more and more globalized economy. Populism seems to promise a way out of the dilemma, defined by an understandably less rosy outlook of the future; a future defined by an increase in global mobility. For the better educated social segments, this mobility means more personal options; for the less educated segments it means just the opposite.

Populism is many different things to many different people. However, it is more than just a label used when traditional labels do not seem sufficient any more. Populism expresses a degree of dissatisfaction with the state of democracy. In that respect, we can speak of an overall phenomenon. Populist parties succeed in different countries at different times—as a result of different specific conditions. As Frank Decker explains, the “belated” arrival of a right-wing populist party in the German political system can be explained by a very German situation: The historically explainable German reluctance to vote for and accept far-right parties explains the delay of the populist rise on the far right; and the impact of German unification with its unique case of post-communist transformation in one specific region in an already existing democratic system helps to understand why this rise happened never the less—even belatedly.

What is to be done? Any political strategy concerning the rise of populism has to start with an attempt to understand what is going on. It is not enough, to respond to populism with moralistic rhetoric. Established political parties have taken over some aspects of the populist agenda—as Hans Heiss has demonstrated in his essay. Populist success tempts parties in the political mainstream to plagiarize some populist

elements. The existing democracy is the democracy as described by Anthony Downs: Parties will sacrifice any principle if this will promise electoral success¹⁵.

Traditional parties—like the European People’s Party and the different national parties, united in the EPP—have not yet found a clearly defined and convincing strategy in dealing with the populist rise. Steven Van Hecke and Alex Andrione-Moylan call the search for such a strategy an ambivalence between “collaboration and demarcation”—a rather clear indication that there is no clear strategy. Guido Thieme, focusing on liberal parties (like the German FDP), has to conclude that there is not one tested and promising answer to the populist challenge. And Manfred Görtemaker, who compares Angela Merkel and Romano Prodi as centrist attempts in dealing with populism, comes to the same conclusion: It is a method of “trial and error”—and not a recipe, how (sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing) centrist democratic parties and politicians have dealt with populism.

In Reinhold Gärtner’s contribution, the ambivalence of any attempt to put all the populist parties into one clearly defined group is obvious. The case of a party which is a “traditional” far-right party (the Austrian FPÖ—in the tradition of Pan-German nationalism, a party founded by former prominent members of the Nazi party), which has risen by promoting itself as a new party, successfully appealing to voters rooted in traditional centrist (center-right as well as center-left) milieus, makes one central necessity obvious: Populism is a challenge to the existing form of liberal democracy—liberal in its political as well as economic dimension. Populism has to be taken seriously—but academic seriousness also implies the need to prevent all too easy qualifications based only on a traditional typology of political parties and movements.

Cas Mudde calls the populist radical right a “normal pathology”¹⁶. Populism is a normal part of democracy’s every-day life. As populism is normal, there is no need to be alarmist. However, populism is also pathological—especially in its radical right form. This qualification provides enough reason to be concerned; a concern, which should motivate systematic observation and further research.

¹⁵ A. DOWNS, *An Economic Theory*.

¹⁶ C. MUDDE, *The Populist Radical Right*.

Because populism is a challenge, because populism is a potential danger for democracy as a value based system, academic research has to look for new approaches for an ever better understanding of what is going on—in the White House and in the Kremlin, in the European Parliament and in Berlin, Paris, and Rome.

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