

Europe's Populist Surge

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ABSTRACT

Because so much commentary on contemporary populism overlooks its deep historical sources, many observers fail to appreciate the durability of today's populist appeals and the likely staying power of the parties built around them. [...]in three other countries-Finland, Lithuania, and Norway-populist parties are now part of the governing coalitions.

FULL TEXT

Headnote

A Long Time in the Making

The year 2015 was a dreadful one for Europe in general and for the eu in particular. It started with the terrorist attack against the magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris and ended with an even more deadly jihadist assault in the same city. In between, the eu battled an economic crisis in Greece, which threatened the entire eurozone, and endured a staggering inflow of refugees from the Middle East and other war-torn regions.

The year 2016 has not been much better. More terrorist attacks have shaken the continent. The refugee crisis has abated slightly, but only because the eu has outsourced the problem to Turkey- a country that is itself experiencing a bout of instability. And for the first time, the eu is set to lose a member, the United Kingdom, as a result of the so-called Brexit referendum.

All these developments have helped push populist movements to the center of European politics. The threat of terrorism and anxiety about a massive wave of immigrants from the Muslim world, coupled with the widespread belief that the eu hinders rather than helps when it comes to such problems, have created a perfect storm for populists, especially enhancing the standing of right-wing populists in many countries. Chief among them is Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has taken advantage of public fears to rally opposition to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and her belief that Europe should embrace a Willkommenskultur, a "culture of welcoming." Meanwhile, the eurozone crisis has aided the rise of left-wing, anti-austerity populists in Greece and Spain.

But although the threats to security and economic stability that have rattled Europe in the past few years may have spurred the current populist surge, they did not create it. Its origins lie further back, in the structural shifts in European society and politics that began in the 1960s. Because so much commentary on contemporary populism overlooks its deep historical sources, many observers fail to appreciate the durability of today's populist appeals and the likely staying power of the parties built around them. It's true that populists have often struggled to hold on to power once they've obtained it. But today's social, political, and media landscapes in Europe favor populists more than at any time since the end of World War II. To reverse the populist tide, today's floundering, hollowed-out mainstream European parties and the entrenched elites who guide them will have to respond with far more

dexterity and creativity than they have shown in recent decades.

THE PURE PEOPLE

As with any "ism," definitions are crucial. A useful one goes like this: populism is an ideology that separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," and that holds that politics should be an expression of "the general will" of the people. With a few exceptions, that kind of thinking remained on the margins of European politics throughout the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century. Aspects of populism could be found in the communist and fascist movements, particularly during their oppositional phases. But both of those ideologies (and the regimes that embraced them) were essentially elitist, placing a small group of powerful insiders above the masses.

In the first decades of the postwar era, Western European politics was defined by a broad consensus on three key issues: alignment with the United States in the Cold War, the need for more political integration on the continent, and the benefits of maintaining a strong welfare state. Deep and wide support for those positions left little space for ideological alternatives, and populism was no exception. It wasn't until the 1980s that populist thinking truly began to make its mark, with the arrival of radical right-wing parties such as France's National Front, which rose to prominence in the wake of mass immigration and growing unemployment by promising to return France to the monocultural glory of its past.

Today, populist parties are represented in the parliaments of most European countries. The majority are right wing, although not all are radical. Others are left wing or espouse idiosyncratic platforms that are difficult to place on a left-right spectrum: for example, the Italian Five Star Movement, which has found success with a combination of environmentalism, anticorruption rectitude, and antiestablishment rage. In national elections held in the past five years, at least one populist party earned ten percent or more of the vote in 16 European countries. Collectively, populist parties scored an average of 16.5 percent of the vote in those elections, ranging from a staggering 65 percent in Hungary to less than one percent in Luxembourg. Populists now control the largest share of parliamentary seats in six countries: Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and Switzerland. In three of those (Hungary, Italy, and Slovakia), populist parties collectively gained a majority of the votes in the most recent national elections, although in Hungary and Italy the main populist parties are rivals. The situation in Hungary is most striking, where the governing party (Fidesz) and the largest opposition party (Jobbik) are both populist. Finally, in three other countries—Finland, Lithuania, and Norway—populist parties are now part of the governing coalitions.

TINA POLITICS

Most conventional explanations of this trend emphasize the importance of two factors: globalization and the economic crises in Europe that resulted from the financial meltdown of 2008 and the subsequent Great Recession. But the current populist moment is part of a longer story and is rooted in the postindustrial revolution that led to fundamental changes in European societies in the 1960s. During those years, deindustrialization and a steep decline in religious observance weakened the support enjoyed by established centerleft and center-right parties, which had been largely dependent on working-class and religious voters. In the quarter century that followed, a gradual realignment in European politics saw voters throw their support to old parties that had become virtually nonideological or to new parties defined by relatively narrow ideological stances.

Later, during the last two decades of the twentieth century, mainstream European parties increasingly converged on a new elite consensus—a common agenda that called for integration through the eu, multiethnic societies, and

neoliberal economic reforms. The embrace of a vision of Europe as a cosmopolitan, business-friendly technocracy was particularly pronounced among parties that had traditionally been social democratic, many of which were inspired by British Prime Minister Tony Blair's concept of a "New Labour" party and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroder's move toward a "new center" (neue Mitte). The traditional center-right parties also shifted away from their historical identities, as leaders such as Merkel and David Cameron of the British Conservative Party adopted more centrist and pragmatic approaches to economic and cultural issues.

This convergence created a fertile breeding ground for populism, as many voters began to see political elites as indistinguishable from one another, regardless of their party affiliations. To many Europeans, mainstream elites of all parties also seemed to share an essential powerlessness, owing to two massive transfers of authority that took place in the second half of the twentieth century: from national governments to supranational entities such as the eu and the International Monetary Fund and from democratically elected officials to unelected ones such as central bankers and judges. In many eu member states, vital issues such as border control and monetary policy were no longer the exclusive responsibility of the national government. This led to the emergence of so-called tina politics—"TiNA" being short for "There is no alternative," the line political elites often used as a shorthand for the argument that their responsibility to the eu or the imf outweighed their duty to be responsive to the demands of voters.

At the same time, the advent of the Internet produced electorates that were more plugged in to political debates and more independent-minded (although not necessarily better informed), which made them more critical of and less deferential toward traditional elites. In particular, voters became more aware of the fact that elected officials often blamed agents or factors outside their control—the eu, globalization, U.S. policy—for unpopular policies but claimed to be fully in control and took credit whenever policies proved popular.

The Internet also severely limited the gatekeeping function of mainstream media. With far more stories and voices finding an audience, populist narratives—which often contained a whiff of sensationalism or provocation—became particularly attractive to media organizations that were chasing eyeballs as revenue from subscriptions and traditional advertising plummeted. These subtle but profound shifts set the stage for short-term triggers, such as the global financial crisis and the spillover from Middle Eastern conflicts, to turbocharge populism's growth.

POWER HUNGARY

The rise of populism has had important consequences for the state of liberal democracy in Europe. Although populism is not necessarily antidemocratic, it is essentially illiberal, especially in its disregard for minority rights, pluralism, and the rule of law. What is more, as the case of Hungary demonstrates, populism is not merely a campaign strategy or a style of political mobilization that leaders shed as soon as they achieve political power. Since 2010, Orban has openly set about transforming his country into what he described in a 2014 speech as "an illiberal new state based on national foundations," in which the government purposely marginalizes opposition forces by weakening existing state institutions (including the courts) and creating new, largely autonomous governing bodies and packing them with Fidesz loyalists.

Although the situation in Hungary is exceptional, Orban's success has inspired and emboldened many other right-wing populists in the eu, from Marine Le Pen in France to Jaroslaw Kaczynski in Poland. Most distressing, the rise of populist illiberalism is facing less and less opposition from embattled mainstream parties, which have fallen silent or have even applauded the trend.

Left-wing populists have been nowhere near as successful as their right-wing counterparts. In Greece in 2015,

Syriza's amateurish attempt to challenge euimposed austerity policies backfired, and Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras was ultimately forced to accept precisely the kinds of spending cuts and structural reforms that he had pledged to prevent. Since then, no other left-wing populist parties have managed to succeed at the national level, with the exception of Podemos (We Can) in Spain. And although left-wing populists are generally less exclusionary than their right-wing counterparts, political polarization in Greece has increased significantly since Syriza came to power in January 2015. Many opponents of the government feel vilified by official rhetoric portraying them as members of a fifth column doing the bidding of Berlin or Brussels. And Tsipras has proposed several laws that could limit the space for political opposition by increasing state control of education and the media.

Even in countries without populist governments, a populist Zeitgeist has taken hold. In many cases, populists now set the agenda and dominate public debate, while mainstream politicians merely react, sometimes even adopting elements of populist rhetoric, peppering their speeches with references to "the people" and condemnations of "elites." Consequently, even traditionally pro-European Christian democrats and social democrats now use "Brussels" as a derogatory term, evoking a distant elite, removed from the concerns of the common people and posing a threat to national sovereignty.

A NEW POPULIST ERA?

Many scholars contend that European populism is an episodic phenomenon- that it creates moments rather than eras-and that although populists can succeed in opposition, they inevitably fail once in power. That is wishful thinking, and those who engage in it generally put too much stock in a few high-profile populist implosions. This sanguine view overlooks the fact that Orban has been in power for six years and still leads the most popular party in Hungary and populism has dominated politics in Slovakia ever since the fall of communism. Meanwhile, Austria is poised to become the first European country in the postwar era to directly elect a populist radicalright president: Norbert Hofer of the Freedom Party, who leads in the most recent opinion polls.

Deep structural changes in European societies produced the current populist wave. Those changes are not likely to be reversed anytime soon, so there is no reason to anticipate that populism will fade in the near future. Moreover, populist parties are growing just as major establishment parties are becoming increasingly obsolete: in many European countries, it has become rare for any party to win more than one-third of the national vote.

Mainstream parties have to develop short-term and long-term strategies to deal with the new reality of fragmented party systems that include influential populist parties. So-called cordons sanitaires-coalition governments, such as that in Belgium, that explicitly seek to exclude populist parties-will become increasingly difficult to sustain. In the many countries where populists now represent the third- or second-biggest party, a cordon sanitaire would force all the other parties to govern together, which would have the unintentional effect of re-creating many of the very conditions that led to the rise of European populism in the first place. At the same time, it will become harder for establishment parties to govern alongside populist parties. In recent years, populist parties have been willing to serve as junior partners in coalitions. Now, however, many populist parties are much bigger than their potential mainstream partners and will be far less likely to take a back seat.

Still, populist parties are ultimately subject to the same basic political laws that constrain their establishment rivals. Once they achieve power, they, too, must choose between responsiveness and responsibility-between doing what their voters want and what economic reality and eu institutions dictate. Orban has so far been successful at doing both things at the same time, in part by saying different things to different audiences. But Tsipras has learned about the pressures of responsibility the hard way, and has suffered a significant drop in popularity.

This dilemma for populists presents opportunities for liberal democratic parties, be they new or old, but only if they do not simply attack the populist vision but also provide clear and coherent alternatives. Some establishment figures seem to grasp this. For example, in positioning himself for next year's national elections in France, the center-right politician Alain Juppé has cast himself as "a prophet of happiness" with a positive vision of a more harmonious country—a stark contrast to the negativity and fearmongering of his rival within the Republicans, Nicolas Sarkozy, and a rebuke to the divisive rhetoric of Le Pen, the right-wing populist leader of the National Front. And in Germany, Merkel has mostly avoided a strong populist backlash—despite immense frustration and pushback inside and outside her own party—by acknowledging public anger while sticking to a clear policy agenda and a positive message: "Wir schaffen das" (We can do this).

In essence, the populist surge is an illiberal democratic response to decades of undemocratic liberal policies. To stem the populist tide, establishment politicians will have to heed the call to repoliticize the crucial issues of the twenty-first century, such as immigration, neoliberal economics, and European integration, bringing them back into the electoral realm and offering coherent and consistent alternatives to the often shortsighted and simplistic offerings of the populists.©

Sidebar

To Viktor go the spoils: Orban at an Austria-Hungary soccer match, June 2016

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The Dutch political scientist cas mudde has dedicated his career to studying how liberal democracies can defend themselves against extremism without betraying their values. For Mudde, the question is not simply a matter of professional interest: his older brother, Tim, is a prominent right-wing radical. In "Europe's Populist Surge" (page 25), Mudde, a professor at the University of Georgia, argues that today's European populism was decades in the making, a result of the region's deindustrialization and the homogenization of its political parties.

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