

The Resurgence of Populism in Europe

Ivayla Stoeva*

Abstract

Since 2016 world politics has been changing to one vested with nativism, protectionism and cultural nostalgia, a world of “post-trust” in which demagoguery and populism are used as tools to arouse popular trust and legitimacy. The article outlines three dilemmas the EU faces in regard to populism resurgence and lists several factors for the growth in electorate support for populist political parties, such as migration, inequality, terrorism, crisis of political representation. The author also identifies different factors triggering the rise of populist parties in Western and Eastern countries and has classified the populist appeals in three categories: scapegoating, capitalizing resentments and constructing authority, all colored with new approaches of negation, using Islamophobia and Euroscepticism.

Key words: populism, populist rhetoric categories and appeals

JEL classification: D72, D73

Since 2016 political events such as Brexit, Trump’s election for president, the electoral results of the National Front in France, Alternative for Germany, the Freedom Party of Austria and the Five Star Movement in Italy, along with the growing electorate of a number of populist far right political parties across Europe are indicative of the emergence of new politics – nativist, protectionist, vested with cultural nostalgia; a world often defined

as a world of “post-trust”, a world in which demagoguery and populism are the key to being in power. Although populism is not new on the political stage, its re-emergence has shaped the political discourses in Europe like never before since the end of World War II. Apparently the EU today is challenged to search for a way out of the situation “EU at a crossroads”, and the answer to the question what the EU future will be seems vaguer and problematic with the resurgence of populism not only in the heart, but also in the periphery of the EU.

Based on discourse analysis, the article examines the rhetoric populist techniques and appeals of the far-right political parties across Europe, thus showing that language is not a neutral tool for transmitting messages, but nowadays in the voice of the populist parties it is rather a way of talking about and understanding the world (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002: 1).

In order to solve the puzzle of the EU future, first we need to examine what populism is. Although the first scientific researches on populism appeared in the middle of the 20th century, we still do not have a well-defined doctrine explaining what populism really is. Examining the broad literature on this subject, we can conclude that populism can be examined from different aspects. In 2011, Jansen (2011, p.82) defined populism as a movement, stating that it is “*any sustained, large-scale political project that mobilizes ordinarily marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people*”.

* Asst. Prof. PhD, Political Science Department, University of National and World Economy

Both Mudde and Canovan explain populism as a political ideology. According to Canovan (1999, p. 3), "*Populism in modern democratic societies is best seen as an appeal to 'the people' against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society*". Few years latter Mudde (2004, p. 543) concluded that populism is "*A [thin-centered] ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be the expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people*".

Despite the fact that populism is not yet a well-defined concept, it has its own inner logic, which takes distinctive forms in the logic of how populist claims are articulated. Therefore, quite often populism has been defined as political style or political discourse. For example, Jagers & Walgrave (2007, p. 322) describe populism as "*A political communication style of political actors that refers to the people*", while de la Torre (2000, p. 4) defines populism as "*A style of political mobilization based on strong rhetorical appeals to the people and crowd action on behalf of a leader. [...] It is a rhetoric that constructs politics as a moral and ethical struggle between el pueblo and the oligarchy*".

Why does populism matter today? It is evident that at the moment Europe is living in populist times. The systematic crisis in Europe made European citizens feel more and more disillusioned with mainstream politics. Their anger, distrust and fury against the mainstream political parties, the bureaucrats in Brussels, and the economic elites have prepared the political scene for new populist political actors, who speak in the name of the "people".

In regard to the uncertainties of the future of the EU political project following the Brexit and the increasing demands for restoring the sovereignty of the member countries, voiced by the populist parties, we can outline

three major dilemmas regarding the future development of the unique European project in relation to populism.

The first line of inquiry is related to the question: who is responsible for the puzzle of the European integration – the European red tape (political and bureaucratic elites) or the European citizens? The economic and financial crisis has motivated a number of citizens to ask for their place in the political agenda of the EU, thus allowing them to discover the existence of the democratic deficit. Following this, citizens have uncovered and realized that despite all European policies, the dividing lines between the interests of the elites and the ones of the citizens are not closing, but expanding. This division provokes increasing mistrust in the EU institutions; the political and the bureaucratic elites are aware of the reasons why they want and need more Europe, but the lack of solidarity among the European citizens and the persisting feeling of not being represented increases Euroscepticism.

The second dilemma facing the EU is related to the "common enemy". Who that might be – the refugees or the terrorists, the USA or Russia? The European solidarity lacks the consolidating factor of "*the obvious, powerful and premeditated enemy*" (Bauman, 1995, p. 320-321). The use of the so called "soft power" (model of dialogue and negotiations) by the EU cannot turn it into an independent geopolitical actor, with its own strategy and therefore it is not able to take on the burden of an active and vivid presence in the highly polarized and contradictory world today.

The next dilemma corresponds to the question: Can the common market be used as common base for EU solidarity and justice? Unfortunately the common market itself alone cannot produce politically stable solidarity. In addition, the populist political parties could also further "*weaken the EU's legitimacy. This in turn would prevent Europe from bridging the deep divisions that have emerged between creditors and debtors, north and south, euro-*

ins and euro-outs, and citizens and elites – and make the European Parliament increasingly irrelevant” (Leonard & Torreblanca, 2014, p.2).

The systematic crisis in Europe conduced to additional mobilization of the European citizens by means of radicalization of political messages, such as cultural conservatism, xenophobia, racism, populism based on the opposition between the elite and the people. In other words, the new European populism is founded on two underlying conflicts: the first is the antagonism “we-they” (we – the Christian Europeans and they – the Muslim, refugees, and immigrants) and the second one is the existing structural cleavage – the conflict between the national and the European (Todorov, 2010, p. 233).

The dread of the unknown, the loss of identity in the “global village” increases the fears of the Europeans towards the “foreigners”, allowing a number of populist and demagogical political parties to utilize the anti-capitalist, anti-European, anti-immigrant, anti-Islamic rhetoric. The growth in electorate support for populist far-right (radical) political parties can be explained by a number of factors. The first factor that triggers that growth is the loss of economic security and the growing inequality. According to Thomas Piketty (2014) today we are living in the so called Gilded Age, where only a few people have accumulated enormous wealth. Inequality, however, not only relates to the people, but taking into consideration the regional differences in the EU, we can conclude that there is also specific inequality among the EU regions that trigger additional frustration and despair among the European citizens.

The second one is the increased migration towards Europe (refugee waves and economic migration). The increased number of immigrants and refugees coming to the EU for the last decade, on one hand provoked deeply rooted fears among the European citizen of

losing their cultural identity and rituals, and on the other losing their jobs to the new comers.

The third factor is terrorism – the last two or three years Europe has suffered a number of terrorist attacks, which provoked people to be afraid of the differences.

The forth, but equally relevant factor is the crisis of political representation and the gradual decrease of the impact of mainstream political parties on society. Therefore, the new European nationalism successfully recreates a new reality for the citizens, in which the society is divided into two antagonistic parts: in hierarchy dependence – the “people” vs. the “elite” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543), and horizontally – the “people” vs. the “foreigners” (Canovan, 1999, p. 5).

The rise of the populist far-right political parties in Eastern European countries cannot be explained by the same factors that have led to the emergence and expansion of the radical right in Western Europe. Up until 1990s problems such as globalization and immigration did not exist for these societies, but one of the major impulses for the emergence of far-right political parties was the transition to democracy that created a number of the so called “losers” – people living in small villages, with low incomes, without jobs, etc. A vast number of people that at first were enthusiastic about the democratic change, then turned to far-right political parties, because they became angry and dissatisfied with the life they compared to what had been promised they would achieve, in other words these countries faced the so called democratic fatigue. Mistrust of mainstream political parties has been growing along with the mistrust of all democratic institutions such as parliament, government, justice system – all of them labelled with the sign of corruption. Therefore it is not surprising that East European far-right political parties were able to gain such an electoral support offering the people a way out of the crisis. The Euro-zone crisis and the migrant crisis

in the EU additionally enhanced the impact of the far-right political parties on national and European level. The fear of the EU policy towards the nation state and the fear of losing their national identity with the Union caused a rise in right-wing radicalization on the basis of slogans about national purification, opposition to the EU, and a return to “true values” (Ekiert & Kubik, 2014, p. 54).

The above listed premises, according to Jean-Yves Camus (2002) have led to the “mutation” of the populist parties in Europe, which can be systematized in three groups:

First, far-right political parties, varying from the National front in France to Jobbik in Hungary and “Golden Dawn” in Greece –all focus on the anti-immigrant rhetoric, cultural racism, stigmatizing the “others”. The core messages of the far-right political parties have not changed over time, but in the past ten years the leaders of these political parties, in particular the National Front have managed to soften the image of the far-right, leaving behind the ideas of neo-Nazism, claiming they are far from being “racist”, but rather being defenders of secularity and of democracy, they fight against the Islam presented as a

religion of intolerance, oppressing women, homosexuals, and Jews (Mayer, 2013).

Second, political parties that raise the flag of the national sovereignty, such as the Party of Independence in UK and the Alternative for Germany – concentrate on the themes of identity, immigration and cultural decline, without being burdened with extremist and racist views (Camus, 2002).

Third, the members of the European conservatives and reformists group in the European parliament that includes the British conservatives and the political party “Right and Justice” in Poland whose nationalism can be defined with David Cameron’s statement: *“In the name of a state multiculturalism we have encouraged the different cultures to exist separately, isolated from one another and withdrawn from the main culture (...) I think that it is time to break off with the policies of the past, which failed”* (Todorov, 2013, p. 183).

Despite the existing differences among the populist parties across Europe, if we examine their party programs, we can see that they also share some core values. These similarities can be observed in the table below.

Table 1. *Populist Party values*

Country	Party/ movement	Globalization		Nation state	Democracy	Economic policy		
		Trade	Immigration	Sovereignty	Representation	Redistribution	Corporate taxes	Banking sector
Germany	Alternative for Germany	Mixed	Populist	Populist	Populist	Mixed	N/A	N/A
France	National Front	Populist	Populist	Populist	Populist	Populist	Populist	Populist
Austria	Freedom Party of Austria	Mixed	Populist	Populist	Populist	Populist	Liberal/ Consensus	N/A
Italy	Five Star Movement	Populist	Populist	Populist	Populist	Populist	Populist	Populist
Poland	Law and Justice Party	Mixed	Populist	Populist	Liberal/ Consensus	Populist	Liberal/ Consensus	Populist
Hungary	Jobbik	Mixed	Populist	Populist	Populist	Populist	N/A	Populist

Source: Allianz Global Investors, Barclays, August 2017.

The failure to impose multiculturalism in Europe and the following refugee crisis revived xenophobia, although today it is seen in a slightly newer aspect as Islamophobia, nationalism based on negativism: no to the refugees, no to the migrants, no to religious

freedom, no to multiculturalism, no to the European integration. In other words, the new European nationalism cultivates Islamophobia, postulates to differentiate the “roots” of the nations from the immigrants and in particular the non-European ones, whose right to stay

in the country, as well as their economic and social rights should be limited.

The popular success of these political parties cannot be possible without the use of populism, understood as a discourse and political style. The populist discourse is understood as the polemic techniques and means (including the mass media) used to lead to delusion, aiming to convince the people in their rightfulness; so it is an appeal to the emotions of the people rather than the reason, thus provoking racists, religious and class prejudices.

The populist appeals can be classified in three main rhetoric categories:

1. The first one can be defined as scapegoating, or proposing answers to where all the problems come from: By engaging in stereotyping of out-groups, the demagogue attempts to justify prejudice against them (Bronner, 2014, p. 59).
2. The second category is arousing and capitalizing resentment and paranoia, followed by increased distrust in public authorities: By stoking a sense of outrage, humiliation at a loss of influence, or an obsession with the perceived decline of society, the demagogue is able to compel their followers to renounce due process and rule of law in their rush to marginalize, expel or punish the scapegoated out-group (Benson, 2011, p. 25). According to Bart Bonikowski (2016, pp. 10-11) the populist political parties exploit the antipathies towards the scapegoated out-groups – ethnic, racial, or religious minorities and a result of this exclusionary discourse is the implicit narrowing of “the people” to a subset of the public that qualifies as the legitimate source of political power.
3. The third category is constructing authority – on the one hand, the demagogue proclaims himself to be a truth keeper, on the other he proclaims others to be ostensibly corrupt elites, stating they all profit from the institutions (Bonikowski, 2016, p. 11).

The first rhetoric category is mainly related to the proposed economic patriotism. It represents a new national alternative to the market globalization, by offering new job positions closed for the foreigners, a state responsible for everything – in other words it is hegemony of the right masked with left rhetoric. The emergence of this economic patriotism has been facilitated by the lack of left alternatives that can fight the income stagnation, the decreased and fewer financed social services. The economic patriotism is clearly visible in the statements of the far-right political parties in the EU. For example, according to Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Front, the free movement is “madness” and therefore “we should restore our state borders”. Therefore the new nationalism has been constructed along the dividing lines: nation state against the European governance; the idea of “one land, one nation” against the multicultural society.

Therefore, Euroscepticism is a distinctive characteristic of the new European nationalism. All far-right (radical) political parties in one way or another doubt the essence of the integration as well as the future development of the EU; they aspire for its dissolution or, at least, for preserving it as a formal structure but restoring the national sovereignty to the member states, exploiting the themes of the cultural decay and the change in the demographic picture of lots of the European states.

The second rhetoric category of the demagogue appeal is visible in the expressions used by the nationalists to arouse and capitalize resentment and paranoia. For this category what is of importance are the used abusing metaphors and images of the forbidden golden past, colored with manifestations of racism, xenophobia, anti-immigrant acts. The electorate is instigated towards fear from the other nationalities, because they threaten to take their jobs, they endanger the indigenous culture and safety.

Marine Le Pen argues French citizenship should be «either inherited or merited». As for illegal immigrants, they *«have no reason to stay in France, these people broke the law the minute they set foot on French soil»* (Nowak & Branford, 2017).

In addition, the terrorist attacks in Europe lead to fortified space identification. For example, the radical political party Pegida in Germany have stated that *“the attacks in Paris do not come out of the blue; they are a result of the migrant policy across Europe”* (Hewitt, 2015). Their position has been firmly states on January 1, 2016 in Cologne, when the main slogan of the anti-Islam meeting was *„Rapefugees not welcome“*. In a similar way Orbán opened his anti-immigrant campaign saying that *“Today the pledge is Europe, the European way of life, the survival or the extinction of the European values and nations or their transformation to be unrecognizable. We want Europe to be kept for the Europeans”* (Mudde, 2015).

This rhetoric category today is closely related to the issue of the enemy within Europe. It is quite easy to blame all immigrants for the problems of the nation as well as for the terrorist attacks across Europe, but the main issue remains unsolved, i.e. who is the actual enemy within Europe. We cannot ignore the fact that most immigrants are Muslim and this changes the demographic picture of Europe, but on the other hand it is also very interesting to observe that nations such as France and Slovakia use the anti-immigrant and anti-Islam rhetoric while France has a big Muslim minority and Slovakia does not have one.

The third rhetoric category is related to the appeal of creating the demagogue as the true and only authority; the opponents are often discredited in order to be able to control the narrative and negate the opposition. The most recent evidence of this rhetoric category can be seen at the French presidential elections this year. Marine Le Pen, has attacked her centrist rival Emmanuel Macron stating that

he is a “hysterical, radical Europeanist” who is weak on jihadi terror (Henlye, 2017).

Discrediting the opponent is widely used technique in political battles to win the electorate, but when it comes to far-right political parties in Europe today they resort to using specific language and accusations. As it is evident from the past year elections in France and Germany, the far-right political leaders accuse the mainstream political leaders for being too Europeans, i.e. they forget the national interest favoring the EU; they freely open the state borders without thinking of the following consequences for the state, predominantly state security; that they have governed for years and were not able to handle the social problems in the society, but on the contrary the immigrant policy they were adhering to for a long time has led to exclusion of certain groups in the society.

Contrary to the normatively prescribed justice and solidarity, the systematic crisis in the EU challenges the founding values of the Union: solidarity, justice and equality. Facing multiple crises and perils – migrant and refugee crisis, crisis of democratic legitimacy, political leadership crisis, economic stagnation, high social tensions, dangers of terrorist attacks, the future of the EU depends on its ability to oppose the internal and external dangers, to provide for economic growth and social justice and solidarity in the highly heterogenic structure of the union and an increasing economic and social destabilization around the world.

The approaches used by the populist far-right political parties in Europe are not new, they have been used before. What is different this time are the specific rhetoric appeals – although some of the categories have been used for decades, the existing serious institutional imperfections of the EU, the increasing mistrust of the European citizens in the European institutions, the EU itself, the fact that mainstream political parties result in processes of fragmentations and re-

nationalization have shifted the main political appeals of the populist political parties to the issues of immigration, terrorism, European and national interests, state borders, the Islamization of Europe, etc.

References

- Bauman, Z., 1995. *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*, Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, Oxford Press.
- Benson, Th., 2011. The Rhetoric of Civility: Power, Authenticity, and Democracy. *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric*, 1(1), p. 22-30.
- Bonikowski, B., 2016. Three Lessons of Contemporary populism in Europe and the United States. *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, XXIII(1), p. 9-24.
- Bronner, S., 2014. *The Bigot: Why Prejudice Persists*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Camus, J.Y. (2002) *Métamorphoses de l'extrême-droite en Europe*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2002/05/CAMUS/8853> [Accessed 12 May 2017].
- Canovan, M., 1999. Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy. *Political Studies*, 47(1), pp. 1–16.
- de la Torre, C., 2000. *Populist seduction in Latin America*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Ekiert, G. & Kubik, J., 2014. Myths and Realities of Civil Society. *Journal of Democracy*, 25(1), p. 46-58.
- Henlye, J. (2017) Le Pen attacks Macron as she steps aside as head of Front National. *The Guardian*, [Online]. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/24/macron-and-le-pen-to-face-off-for-french-presidency> [Accessed 11 June 2017].
- Hewitt, G. (2015) Paris Attacks: The crisis of Europe's Borders. [Online]. Available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34850310> [Accessed 30 May 2017].
- Hofrichter, S. (2017) The economics of populism. [Online]. Available: www.allianzglobalinvestors.de/MDBWS/doc/AllianzGI+-+Stefan+Hof... [Accessed 26 February 2018].
- Jagers, J., & Walgrave, S., 2007. Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium. *European Journal of Political Research*, 46(3), pp. 319–345.
- Jansen, R. S., 2011. Populist mobilization: A new theoretical approach to populism. *Sociological Theory*, 29(2), pp. 75–96.
- Leonard, M. & Torreblanca, J. (2014) The Eurosceptic surge and how to respond to it, ECFR, [Online] p. 2. Available: http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR98_EUROSCEPTIC_BRIEF_AW_%284%29.pdf [Accessed 20 June 2015]
- Mayer, N. (2013) The blurring of the border between the mainstream right and far-right in France has helped to normalize the Front National. [Online]. Available: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/04/03/front-national-norma/> [Accessed 04 October 2017].
- Mudde, C., 2004. The populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), pp.542–563.
- Mudde, C. (2015) The EU is blind for the xenophobia and the authoritarianism of Victor Orban, *Dnevnik*. [Online]. Available: http://www.dnevnik.bg/evropa/novini_ot_es/2015/07/31/2583086_kas_mude_es_zaglushitelno_mulchi_pred_ksenofobiata_i/ [Accessed 12 April 2016].
- Nowak, M. & Branford, B. (2017) France elections: What makes Marine Le Pen far right? [Online]. Available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38321401> [Accessed 11 June 2017].
- Phillips, L. & Jorgensen, M., 2002. *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, London: Sage.
- Piketty, Th., 2014. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Harvard University Press.
- Todorov, A., 2010. *Citizens, elections, parties. Bulgaria 1879-2009*, Sofia: East-West Publishing house. (in Bulgarian).
- Todorov, T., *The intimate enemies of democracy*, Sofia: East-West Publishing house. (in Bulgarian).