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# The Brown Chameleon<sup>\*</sup>: Europe's Populism Crisis and the Re-emergence of the Far Right

## ABSTRACT

Right-wing populism has been the most influential political movement in Europe for the last few years. Far from being a newcomer on the political stage, it has managed to shape political discourses as never before since the end of World War II. This paper identifies what right-wing populism is and why right-wing populist parties have again become relevant in almost every European country. It argues that it is an expression of, and a reaction to a crisis of liberal democracy triggered by a variety of deep transformations in the way we work and organise our economies. The European Union (EU), as an unfinished project that tries to overcome national boundaries, must be extremely vigilant to these developments, for right-wing populism is opposed to the very idea on which the EU rests.

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\* Political scientists call populists, 'chameleons', for their ability to adapt to their surroundings. The 'brown' is a reference to the colour of Nazism in Europe.

## INTRODUCTION

A collective sigh of relief went through the capitals of Europe in the first half of 2017. In March, Dutch right-wing populist Geert Wilders was defeated by Mark Rutte, the conservative incumbent prime minister, in the parliamentary elections of the Netherlands. Later, in spring, French liberal Emmanuel Macron won the presidential elections as well as the legislative elections with a landslide victory over Marine Le Pen, the right-wing populist who scared the old continent with the prospect of 'Frexit'; it would have marked the end of the European Union (EU).

Earlier in 2016, the Green candidate Alexander Van der Bellen managed to become president of Austria, winning against right-wing populist Norbert Hofer after a dramatic half year that saw the nullification of the first two rounds of elections due to counting mistakes. Germany's elections to the *Bundestag* in September 2017 seemed a comparably relaxed affair before Chancellor Angela Merkel and her Christian Democratic Party (CDU) lost almost ten percent of the vote, and her coalition partner, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) ended up with the worst result it has ever had in its post-war history.

Although Merkel remains Chancellor after excruciatingly long coalition talks (that left Germany without a government for more than half a year) the success of the right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) shows that not all is well in the political landscape of Europe. In October 2017, Austrian voters gave the right-wing populist party FPÖ their best result ever with 27.4 percent of the vote; they now form the government in Vienna with the Conservative ÖVP.

The assumption that the "Brexit" referendum in the UK in June 2016—preceded by persistent propaganda of the right-wing populist party, UKIP—would trigger a mass exodus from the European Union was always misplaced. However, right-wing populists keep on

challenging—and changing—the liberal political order in almost all European countries. Right-wing parties comprise the third strongest political power in the continent and can receive “anywhere between 20 and 30% of votes” in Western Europe;<sup>1</sup> in some Eastern European countries, they are even stronger.

These developments are part of a larger crisis of the liberal-democratic order that has found expression in the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, the rise of autocratic leaders like Vladimir Putin in Russia and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, as well as the ascent of China as a super-power. The British historian Timothy Garton Ash rightly observed that the world is experiencing a global “anti-liberal counter revolution”.<sup>2</sup>

It would go well beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the implications and challenges of an expected end of the Western-dominated Post-World-War II order,<sup>3</sup> but it is clearly the backdrop for the rise of right-wing populist parties.

This paper will identify what ‘right-wing populism’ is and trace its ascent in Europe. It will argue that such rise is a reaction to the economic, political and social changes that have been brewing for some time and which are unlikely to dissipate soon. Globalisation and the growth of the internet as an ubiquitous medium of information have triggered profound changes in people’s lives, including in work and communication. Populism has capitalised on this development; right-wing populism, especially, is a direct, if retrograde reaction to it. It challenges the very idea of the European Union that was founded as an antidote to excessive and destructive nationalism after World War II and has become the main instrument of the comparably small European countries to secure their economic and political relevance in an increasingly globalised and multipolar world. Populism also poses a threat to liberal democracy—the political and economic success model

of the European Union. Europe therefore cannot afford complacency vis-à-vis the populist tide.

There is no dearth of scholarly literature on this subject. This paper will dwell on a few aspects of it. The aim is both normative and pragmatic. Scrutinising the current political developments in Europe, this paper will train the political focus on the risk of losing the liberal and democratic achievements that the EU has become a symbol for over the last 60 years.

Both the European Union and its member states have to act decisively to prevent right-wing populists from making further inroads into the political mainstream. This requires a variety of measures on different levels, such as political parties, national policies and legislation, as well as the interaction between the member states and the EU. Without them, Europe will be bogged down by retrograde discussions and lose its ability to weather the challenges posed by the new multipolar global order and its growing insecurities.

### **'RIGHT-WING POPULISM': DEFINITIONS**

Populism as a political phenomenon has been widely analysed by various scholars. Interestingly, however, these scholars have not reached a common definition, let alone a theory of populism. They have also failed to foresee how quickly right-wing populism would grow in the last few years and how much threat it would pose to the European Union and the existing Post-World-War Order.

There are a number of reasons for this weakness in academic thought: For one, right-wing populists in Europe were for a long time politically not relevant enough to be taken seriously. Their ascent to power started a few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union—when the EU was still euphoric with its own success. After two disastrous wars

in the 20th century, many Europeans thought they had become resistant to excessive nationalism, authoritarianism, protectionism and the politics of exclusion that culminated in World War II and the Holocaust. The academic discourse, as a result, remained detached from the political developments of the last decade in Europe and missed the revolutionary potential of the internet in creating alternative discourses. This allowed right-wing populists ample space to build their constituency.

The German political scientist Karin Priester has identified three types of definitions for the concept of 'populism' without reaching an overarching conclusion. Populism has been defined as: an ideology; a strategy to gain and stay in power; or a discursive practice.

This same analytical vagueness led Priester to choose the subtitle, "Approximation to a Chameleon"<sup>4</sup> for her book on right-wing and left-wing populism. However, the fact that definitions are difficult and approaches differ does not make the object of description a chameleon. It simply indicates the enormity of the intellectual challenge and perhaps even the failure to grasp it.

When populism is defined as "a political style, a discursive practice or a strategy to gain power,"<sup>5</sup> one ends invariably up with diverse phenomena. Left-wing parties such as *Syriza* in Greece or the German *Die Linke* (the successor of the former Eastern German Communist Party) have been called 'populist'; so have the right-wing parties such as the French *Front National* and the separatist Italian *Lega Nord*. The *Five Star Movement* of Italian Comedian Beppe Grillo borrows from the repertoire of Green movements but is anti-EU and anti-immigration, and therefore hard to locate anywhere in the established political spectrum. The Dutch *Pim Fortuyn List* has distinctly liberal views on social and economic questions while being fiercely anti-immigration and anti-Islamic—two characteristics for the new right.



If populism is seen as a way to reach out to voters in a more “emotional” rather than “rational” way, individual politicians are sometimes labelled as populist, independent of their ideological preferences, and most politicians can be seen to be at least sometimes populist, especially on the election trail.<sup>6</sup> In fact, few politicians seem to be immune to this tendency in addressing the voters.

Benjamin Moffitt, an advocate for the theory of populism as a political style, believes that “this approach allows us to compare populism as a general phenomenon.”<sup>7</sup> However, in the public discussion it has rather blurred the picture for the more worrying elements in the current political climate in Europe. That is the ascent—or perhaps more aptly, the return—of the extreme right under the wings of what is sometimes called the “populist revolt”.

This paper will therefore follow Cas Mudde’s basic definition of populism: “...an ideology that assumes that society is divided in two homogeneous, antagonistic groups, the ‘pure people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’ and that claims that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* or the general will of the people.”<sup>8</sup> This, as Jan-Werner Müller points out, is a “necessary but not sufficient condition” to qualify as a populist.<sup>9</sup> He adds that populists are “always anti-pluralist” because they “claim that they, and they alone, represent the people” and that their claim is “not an empirical one: it is always distinctly moral”. This is “another way of saying that populism is always a form of identity politics”.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of right-wing populism, the definition of what is the “people” follows the well-known ethno-nationalist pattern: they are white, Christian (or at least not Muslim) and (in most cases) heterosexual. Migrants either cannot be part of the people, or they are expected to “assimilate”. Such is the anti-pluralist core of right-wing populism. It is based on the idea of a general will (*volonté générale*) that

came up in 18th-century Europe through French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, although most populists usually would not spell out the theory behind it. The idea that there is a “will of the people” as a whole (as opposed to the conflicting individual wills) was criticised as soon as it was formulated, for example by Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel who alluded that it leads inescapably to the terror (*terreur*) of the French revolution.<sup>11</sup> Later on, liberal critics such as Bertrand Russel warned that, “the doctrine of the general will (...) made possible by the mystic identification of a leader with its people, which has no need of confirmation by so mundane an apparatus as the ballot box”.<sup>12</sup> Russel went as far as to draw a direct line from Rousseau to Adolf Hitler. The main argument here, as Müller rightly pointed out, is that the reference to the will of the people “renders the political position of populists immune to refutation”<sup>13</sup> –and that is exactly what makes them anti-democratic. While populists might not have a theory of the general will, they regularly allude to it and suggest that only they know and represent it.

The following are only a few quotations from populist leaders to exemplify this:

- *“The immigrationist (sic) religion is an insult for human beings, whose integrity is always bound to one national community, one language, one culture.”* (Marine Le Pen, speech at the Summer Festival of Frejus, September 2016)
- *“We must stand together to counter Islamisation. We must speak the truth and defend our civilisation. If we fail to do so, we will end up either enslaved or dead.”* (Geert Wilders in: *The Washington Times*, 14 September 2012)
- *“Can anyone else decide for Hungarians who we Hungarians should or should not live with?”* (Victor Orbán, Euronews.com 23, February 2016)

These three short quotations bring to the table almost everything that right-wing populism today is about: A political ideology that is based on “one national community, language and culture”, that claims to speak for the people as a whole (“the Hungarians”), that refuses immigration and believes that it has to “defend” its “civilisation” against Islam. Nonetheless, it has been noticed that this is probably not yet “a comprehensive set of beliefs”, as the definition of ideology would go. Michael Freeden therefore coined the term “thin ideology”<sup>14</sup> for populism, which can be helpful to keep in mind. It means that populists generally have no full-fledged theory of society and the state, but follow a certain set of goals and borrow from complex ideologies in areas outside their core identity. That is the reason why populism is found on both the political right and left, and why there are local differences across countries. This paper focuses on right-wing populism as it currently stands as the most relevant challenge to the liberal political order and to Europe.

The extended search for the nature of the “beast” might have been obfuscated for too long that with populism, it is also the far political right that has re-emerged in Europe in a new avatar and as a player to reckon with. While not every member of a right-wing populist party is a fascist, it is important to understand that all right-wing populist parties are hosts to at least some elements of this ideology and its representatives.

In his provocative book, “Where Have All the Fascists Gone?”<sup>15</sup> Canadian political scientist Tamir Bar-On traces the origins of the European New Right back to the time before 1945, when fascist parties ruled with mass support in countries such as Germany, Italy and Spain. He rightly pointed out that it was a misplaced expectation to believe that the ideas of the far-right would be discredited forever after they ruled supreme for a long time. “The ‘Right’ was never dead. It did not vanish

after 1945. One wanted to believe that it was a phenomenon of the times in between the wars and that it died with Hitler in the bunker. I never believed this. (...) History never returns in the same way but there are structures of thought that live on.”<sup>16</sup> It is worth remembering that fascist regimes were in power well into the 1970s in Spain (Falange under Francisco Franco until 1975) and Portugal (Estado Novo under Antonio de Oliveira Salazar until 1974). This is considered the main reason why both these countries do not have relevant right-wing populist parties at present. The memory is too fresh.

The Israeli political scientist Zeev Sternhell describes fascism as a European “cultural phenomenon”<sup>17</sup> that “surfaces in times of crisis”. He points out that it started as “a revolt against the principles of enlightenment”, against the idea that society consists of individuals, that the social body is not an organism. It is therefore not surprising that it has become the main claim to power by the populist far right to represent the “pure people” as opposed to the “corrupt elite”. Understanding the continuity of thought between what is called ‘right-wing populism’ today and ‘fascism’ is of utmost importance. In Austria, for instance, where a right-wing populist party, the FPÖ enjoyed double-digit results in the national elections as early as 1990, the vernacular always knew this connection all too well. FPÖ-leader Jörg Haider has been called a “feschtist”, a word made up from the colloquial word “fescht” (for smart, stylish) and “fascist”. It did not stop people from voting for him.

Unfortunately, for a long time the notion that right-wing populism and right-wing extremism are two distinctly different things blurred the picture. Karin Priester defined ‘right wing extremism’ as “a holistic ideology based on the idea of an ethnically and culturally homogeneous nation” which in turn leads to an “anti-pluralistic, anti-liberal conceptions of state and society”. While this concept might not feature

in the political manifestos of today's right-wing populist parties, it is the continuity of thought and an underlying assumption in the minds of many a representatives and voters of these parties that prevails.

This is exactly why right-wing populist parties keep on sliding into extremism, even if they started as something quite different. For example, the German *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)*, was initially a party that rallied people who were skeptical about the introduction of a single currency in Europe. Quite a few of its original members were economists or came from the business community. One of them is the former President of the *Confederation of German Industry (BDI)*, Hans-Olaf Henkel. Henkel was vice president of the *AfD* and became one of their members of the European parliament. Today he is quoted in the media as saying that he regrets ever joining that party. For Henkel, *AfD* has become an “NPD (*the German right-wing extremist National Democratic Party*)-light, possibly even identical with the NPD. It worries me that I helped to create a real monster,” Henkel said in an interview with the German radio *WDR*.

One might be surprised about his naiveté, but it is important to understand the success of these parties. It has obviously been a carefully crafted strategy by the far right to subvert or merge with protest parties that enjoy support in the conservative upper and middle class. Some authors have rightly pointed out that this strategy was formulated as early as in the 1960s by the founding father of the European New Right, Alain de Benoist. At a time when the public discourse was dominated by the left, Benoist wanted the right to learn from no lesser than the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci opined that civil society is a “trench of Western democracy” and that in countries with a strong civil society, the left needs to fight there for hegemony before it can access power. He called the adaptation of this “cultural turn-around”, *meta-politics*. It is hard not to see how almost all right-wing populists have

learned from either Benoist or Gramsci. Marine Le Pen, for example, has often been portrayed as the person who successfully cleansed the *Front National* from the fascist heritage of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen. But the French judiciary, for one, does not believe such a claim. In 2014, a court in Paris ruled that Marine Le Pen could be called a fascist “without transgressing the limits permitted to freedom of expression on the question”.<sup>18</sup>

Instead of “cleansing” fascist parties, right-wing populism managed to replace right-wing extremism in Europe, ideologically and functionally because it rebranded itself in a way that it became acceptable to a larger number of voters who would not choose outright fascism, be it out of conviction or because of the taboo attached to it. One important aspect of this “rebranding” has been the change from biological to cultural racism.<sup>19</sup> While it seems that even old-fashioned Anti-Semitism is again on the rise in Europe,<sup>20</sup> for a while Anti-Islamism (often euphemistically called “Islam-critique”) had functionally replaced “the Jews” as enemy of “the people”. While most right-wing populist parties try to embrace Jewish organisations as a kind of proof for their difference, a profound change is rather questionable, for two reasons. “Islam-critique” is obviously a form of “Orientalism”<sup>21</sup> that “essentialises” and stereotypes Islam as a religion and culture that is totally different from the Christian or “Judeo-Christian” culture (as it is now fashionably called) and therefore should have no place in Europe. The so-called “Critique of Islam” is in most cases neither a critique nor has it much to do with Islam. If the definition of critique is taken as “method of disciplined systematic analysis of a discourse”, Islam-critique generally lacks all: method, discipline, system and analysis, not to speak about knowledge of Islam. One could even question the claim that “Islam-critique” is not racist and anti-Semitic. A large number of Muslims are in fact “Semitic” and even those Muslims who are not, are often subject to racist stereotyping. Both are worrying and follow

intrinsically from the populist idea that “the people” is something more than the sum of its parts. While in a liberal understanding the people would be the empirical citizens of a particular country, the way populist parties use this expression is different. It alludes to an entity that it does not define nor explain and therefore needs to create in the mind of its supporters. It does so by “othering” strangers through factors that liberal constitutions usually exclude as criteria for discrimination—such as religion, colour and race. From there, it is only a small step to gliding into resentment and using it as a method to rally support. It is therefore not surprising that Anti-Islamism has become a major feature of all right-wing populist parties. It hardly matters whether societies struggle with the integration of Muslim immigrants—such as France, the Netherlands and Germany—or if they suffer from what may be called the “imaginary Muslim”, like Poland and Hungary, where the number of Muslims is minuscule.<sup>22</sup>

In an article titled, “The Long Game of the European New Right”, the Australian philosopher Matthew Sharpe warned: “One thing is clear. Any meaningful alternative to this New Right, and the increasingly global currency of the older Rightist ideas it has reanimated will have to take one page from its meta-political book, and learn quickly about and from the foe.”<sup>23</sup>

## **CASE STUDIES: RIGHT-WING POPULIST PARTIES IN EUROPE**

The ascent of right-wing populist parties in post-war Europe did not happen overnight. This section gives an overview of the most relevant right-wing populist parties in Europe without attempting to exhaust the subject. The aim of this outline is to give anecdotal evidence to their political relevance as a European political force that goes well beyond the boundaries of the individual member states of the EU. It will also show some communalities and differences between them.



An important difference exists between countries of Western Europe and the new member states in the formerly Communist East. There are many reasons why right-wing populist parties are so strong in the East and enjoy comfortable majorities as governments in Poland and Hungary. Eastern European countries were not part of the Western political discourse and economic development for almost 60 years. When they regained their freedom after the end of the Soviet empire, citizens expected a quick integration into market economy and its promise to produce wealth for all. This did not happen. Although macro-economic figures might not look bad for countries such as Poland, there are still large parts of the population that feel they were better-off under Communist rule.

At the same time, political culture and discourse was shaped by distinctly different traditions than in Western European countries. A feeling that “not everything was wrong then”, than can be equally found in Eastern Germany has created a backlash against a Western liberal discourse that seemed increasingly condescending towards the “newcomers” in the East. Additionally, the loss of national sovereignty during the time of the Iron Curtain makes them more unlikely to surrender power to the European Union now, although most of them appreciate the support and sense of protection they received from the EU after the breakdown of the Soviet empire. However, the massive economic transformation that failed to benefit everyone made the right-wing narrative sound more acceptable: the rhetoric of the “decadent” West that allegedly destroyed values such as religion, family and nation. This is one of the arguments that is used equally by communists and the religious right. It is also used by Russia for its strategic goal to weaken the European Union, but it is much older than the current confrontation between Russia and the EU and can be found in Communist propaganda as well as in pre-Communist Russian thinking. It echoes earlier co-operations between, for example



conservative revolutionaries and the far left, such as the cross-front (“Querfront”) in Germany in the 1920s or the “Third Position” (that combined reactionary right-wing cultural views with radical left economic positions) in countries such as France in the 1930s and ‘40s. After all, nationalism and socialism were the most powerful ideologies of the 19th century in Europe and fascism can be seen as an attempt to combine both.<sup>24</sup>

Even countries that are firmly grounded in the intellectual tradition of the West such as France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have very successful right-wing populist parties today. This is a reminder of the fact that there is a pan-European school of thought (or a “cultural phenomenon”) that rejects liberalism, market economy and individualism in the name of nationalism, religion and an ominous, pre-rational and pre-democratic “will of the people”. Indeed, it has a long history.

Not all right-wing populist parties openly want to destroy the EU or demand an exit of their country. The positions vary from open hostility (Front National, Geert Wilders) to resistance against some of its policies (PiS, AfD) and mere rhetorical support while demanding changes that would effectually abolish the Union (FPÖ). What unites all of these parties is an utter disregard for the achievements of the EU as a force of stability, peace and prosperity in the continent. A return to the nation state in different form is the retrograde political vision of all right-wing populists. As former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer wrote in a dark commentary after the election of Donald Trump: “The Western world as virtually everyone alive today has known it will almost certainly perish before our eyes. (...) And in Europe, the crypts of nationalism have been opened; in time, they will once again release their demons upon the continent – and the world.”

Following is a tapestry of the current right-wing populist scenario in Europe.

## 1. France: Front National (FN)

The *Front National* is one of the oldest of the European parties that are considered as right-wing populist. Founded in 1972, it is a good example of the changes that the far right has undergone since the end of World War II. Until his resignation in 2011, Jean-Marie Le Pen, father of the current FN-President Marine Le Pen was the undisputed leader of the party that started as a fusion of a number of far and radical right-wing organisations in France. Jean-Marie Le Pen was convicted by French courts more than 20 times for insults, threats of murder, racist statements, denying the Holocaust, and even for physically attacking a socialist mayor during an election campaign in 1989.

Although the party was treated as a pariah organisation by the French media and the mainstream parties, Jean-Marie Le Pen managed to come out second in the first round of the presidential elections in 2002, but was defeated by Jacques Chirac in the second round, who won 83 percent of the votes. It is relevant to note that even then, 17 percent of the French voters wished for a far right Head of State.

In 2011 his daughter, Marine Le Pen, became Chairperson of the party after she had campaigned for a few years for what was called a “normalisation”, “modernisation” or even “de-diabolisation” of the Front National. While her rhetoric is indeed more moderate than her father’s, critics have pointed out that indeed many of the FN members have not changed and it therefore remains an open question if the party is substantially different under Marine Le Pen.<sup>25</sup> While the daughter has refrained from any Antisemitism, as most of the right-wing populist parties in Western Europe do now, the party remains fiercely anti-immigrant and anti-Islam. During her campaign for the Presidential

elections in 2017, Marine le Pen toned down her anti-EU rhetoric after she noticed that the French are probably not that much in favour of a 'Frexit'. But the direction is clear: Le Pen had formerly pledged to take France out of the passport-free Schengen travel zone and the Euro, and to hold a referendum on leaving the EU.

Economically, the FN changed its position several times. From the anti-capitalist beginnings in the 1970s, to neo-liberalism in the 1980s and protectionism in the 1990s. The FN under Marine Le Pen is protectionist, anti-globalist, and opposed to the European common currency. This development is a good example for what is called the "thin ideology" of right-wing populists. However, it is important to note that there are a few constants of radical right-wing ideology that do not change. They must be acknowledged as the core ideology of right-wing populism. It is, not surprisingly, similar in all the right-wing populist parties in Europe.

Although she lost against Emmanuel Macron the second round of the presidential elections in 2017, Marine Le Pen managed to win over 33.9 percent of the French voters. The story of the FN is all but over.

## 2. Hungary: Fidesz and Jobbik

Hungary has been governed by the Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz) since 2010. The fact that Fidesz has a relevant contender to the right of the political spectrum, the right-wing extremist "Movement for a better Hungary" (Jobbik), has led to more than a little confusion over the question of how to label Fidesz. This confusion is exemplary for the muddled discourse about right-wing populism. In 2015, Cas Mudde wrote an article for the *Washington Post* titled, "Is Hungary Run by the Radical Right?"<sup>26</sup> He comes to the conclusion that "liberal democracies are threatened not just by illiberal parties but also by mainstream parties implementing illiberal policies".

This phenomenon has been often observed, for example when conservative parties implement stricter law and order policies or clamp down on refugees in order to regain votes. In the case of Fidesz, it raises the question: At what point in time would a party stop being “mainstream” and start being “illiberal”? Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán himself declared that he wants to transform Hungary into an “illiberal national democracy” and this is exactly what he has been doing since he came to power in 2010. Under his leadership and equipped with an absolute majority in parliament, the Hungarian Constitution has been altered seven times in the last five years. In May 2017, the European Parliament proposed to invoke Article 7 of the Treaty of the European Union against Hungary because of a “serious deterioration of the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights”.<sup>27</sup> By now, the Hungarian government controls the constitutional court and large parts of the media.

The European Commission has taken legal steps against Hungary over laws that restrict universities and NGOs that receive foreign funding as well as its refusal to take in refugees under a plan decided upon by the European Council of Ministers, in which Hungary was outvoted. Orbán still tries to present himself as a traditional Christian-Democrat, with an emphasis on ‘Christian’. According to him, Brussels is dominated by “liberal nihilists”. He also started an anti-EU campaign under the rallying cry: “Let’s Stop Brussels!” People were warned in leaflets that the EU is planning to impose higher utility prices and “illegal immigrants” on Hungary. But how did Orbán and Fidesz, both of whom were seen as staunchly liberal in the 1990s, develop into leaders of right-wing populism in Europe? The answer lies in the complex history of communist and post-communist Europe that was largely ignored during the euphoria following the fall of the Iron Curtain. The dismantling of the Communist state did not automatically lead (and probably could not) to a democratically accountable bureaucracy. The reality was murkier. There were winners and losers after the system

change, and after the euphoria about the newly won democracy and market economy had settled down, the divisions became increasingly obvious. Another reason is that there has been little to none experience with democracy in Eastern Europe even before World War II. After the end of Soviet dominance, the idea of democracy became identical with “national sovereignty” in most of Eastern Europe. Interventions of the EU in national affairs are seen with increasing scepticism, not only in Hungary.<sup>28</sup>

The fact that Orbán and his party have a contender to the right in the form of Jobbik has aggravated the situation. The name “Jobbik” itself is a play with words in Hungarian and can mean either “the better” or “the righter”. Jobbik gained 20.5 percent in the parliamentary elections in 2014 and sees itself as “anti-Zionist” who wants to reduce the rights of the ethnic minority of the Roma and of homosexuals. Other than most right-wing populist parties, Jobbik is interestingly not anti-Islam. It rather sees Islam as a bastion of traditional culture “in the darkness of globalisation and liberalism”, as Chairman Gabor Vona put it.<sup>29</sup>

Jobbik's existence not only lets Fidesz look moderate. It has also created a public discourse where the formerly conservative party Fidesz might have taken over radical positions in order to wean voters away from Jobbik. Apparently, most mainstream parties did not dare to openly contradict Jobbik, for example in its rant against “gypsy criminality” because they believed that this is actually what most voters think, even on the left of the political spectrum.<sup>30</sup> This mechanism is not confined to Hungary and contributes to the growth of right-wing populist parties all over Europe.

### 3. Poland: PiS

Poland is the second Eastern European country that has embarked firmly on an anti-liberal course with the election of the Law and Justice

Party (PiS) in 2015. In July 2017, the party that has an absolute majority in the Polish parliament Sejm agreed on a reform of the justice system that allows the Justice Minister to appoint and dismiss judges. Critics have deemed this rightly as “the end of the tripartite division of powers in Poland”.<sup>31</sup> A second reform plan aims at curbing the influence of the Supreme Court by retiring all 87 current judges.

Protests by the opposition were reported by the public Polish television in good Soviet-style propaganda as “attempts to organise a coup against the democratically elected government”. Earlier, street protest by women’s groups had stopped the government from passing a new law that would almost totally ban abortion in the predominantly Catholic nation.

Both cases show the deep division in Poland about the future course of the country. Many voters of PiS have cast their ballot in favour of the party because it introduced rather generous social security measures, including a children’s allowance, a raise in the minimum wage, and free medicine for senior citizens. While it seems unclear how the government wants to finance these schemes, they surely appeal to the Poles who feel left behind by decades of neo-liberal politics. As Kurianowicz has pointed out, other than for example in Turkey, where journalists and civil society face imprisonment for defecting views, most people in Poland do not feel a negative change in their daily life so far. “Autocratisation happens in silence.”<sup>32</sup>

However, the Amnesty International report on Poland for 2016/17 is alarming for the EU. The long list of illiberal reforms—regarding the justice system, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, discrimination related to race, gender, sexual orientation—reads like a negation of everything that the European Union has so far stood for and championed to others. It is, in many ways, an attack on what could be seen as the core identity of Europe. Not surprisingly, the conflict

between Warsaw and Brussels has reached a state that was inconceivable only a few years ago.

The European Court of Justice already refused legal proceedings by Hungary and Slovakia against the European quota on refugees. But PiS-Head Jarosław Kaczyński as well as Victor Orbán in Hungary announced they would ignore the ruling by the court. Kaczyński warned that Poland would have to “change its culture” if it were forced to accept refugees and thus be in danger to “perish”—an argument that seems particularly absurd in Poland. According to Eurostat figures from 2016, only 1.6 percent of the Polish population were not born in Poland, and only 0.1 percent of the population are Muslim.

#### **4. Germany: AfD**

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) is a relative newcomer to the European scene of right-wing populism. Founded in 2013, it managed to enter the German parliament, the “Bundestag” in the elections of 24 September 2017 with 12.6 percent of the vote. It is the first party of the far right that has managed to cross the five-percent hurdle that blocks smaller parties from entering the Bundestag. This has led to soul-searching in Germany.

It is no surprise that right-wing populists in Germany have had a late start compared to those in other European countries. After the end of Adolf Hitler’s ‘Third Reich’, there has been a strong taboo on all political positions resembling Nazi ideology, both in East and West Germany and even after the re-unification in 1989. With the last generation that experienced the World War II vanishing and a lively scene of right-wing populists in all neighbouring countries, Germany today is no longer an exception.

While the AfD originally started as a party opposed to the common European currency Euro, it quickly developed into a right-wing populist



party with many of the same ideological features as its peers in Europe such as anti-Islam, anti-immigration and a staunch nationalism. This triggered the exodus of some of its founding members such as the former president of the *Confederation of German Industry (BDI)*, Hans-Olaf Henkel, who later said about his time at AfD: “It worries me that I helped to create a real monster.” There is an increasing sense in the German public that Henkel’s drastic words could be right. Leading AfD members such as former Chairperson Frauke Petry and the party’s top-candidate in the German elections Alexander Gauland keep on testing and transgressing the boundaries of the political discourse in Germany. It would be hard not to see the system in that madness.

Petry, for example, suggested in 2016—at the peak of the European refugee crisis—that the police could “shoot at refugees” in order to stop them from entering the country. Gauland recently said about German Minister of State, Aydan Özoguz that she should be “disposed of in Anatolia”. Özoguz was born and raised in Germany by Turkish parents. The German word that he used for “dispose” (*entsorgen*) is usually used for rubbish. In a country that has a history of dehumanising euphemisms, this phrase reminds strongly of the term “*Endlösung der Judenfrage*” (*Final solution to the Jewish question*) that was used by the Nazis for the genocide and which rightly created an uproar. It has become a regular feature of AfD politicians to deny their statements or (if that is not possible) claim that they were misunderstood. Rather obviously, they are slowly pushing the boundaries of what can and cannot be said within the political discourse in Germany. While this is a strategy not uncommon in other countries as well, it has been more relevant in Germany, where the taboo on right-wing extremist positions is still stronger.

The AfD is also a good example of how the ascent of right-wing populist parties can change the nature and substance of political discourse. Media attention especially during the refugee crisis was huge



in Germany for the demands of the AfD. It has not faded since but the media have become more aware of their role as an echo chamber for the radical position of right-wing populists. This is how right-wing populists have been able to influence policy-making even without being in the parliament or, let alone the government.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's initial step to open Germany for refugees triggered what was called the German "Willkommenskultur (*welcome culture*). This openness, however, quickly collapsed under the persistent attacks from right-wing populists and conservatives. Merkel later became a staunch advocate of the controversial EU refugee deal with Turkey that aims at reducing the number of asylum-seekers in Europe. However, it did not help Merkel in the 2017 elections, and her party lost more than eight percent of the votes compared to 2013. It is widely believed that her loss owed to her handling of the refugee issue and AfD propaganda.

Some in Germany still believe that, as many a maverick party AfD will start unravelling soon. The fact that Chairperson Frauke Petry announced her exit from the party just one day after their landslide success in the German elections 2017 seems to prove this, but Petry will keep her lucrative mandate as a member of the Bundestag. She now has four years to use that platform and taxpayers' money to spread her ideology. Knowing that Germans in their majority are not keen to leave the EU, the AfD nonetheless suggests a number of reforms for the EU in its manifesto that would eventually lead to the end of the Union. The minimum demand is a reduction of EU institutions because they "restrict the function of democratic nations". Some members demand a referendum about a German exit from the EU.

## 5. Netherlands: Party for Freedom

Germany's neighbour, the Netherlands, has a much longer history of right-wing populism with a uniquely Dutch flavour to it. It started with

Pim Fortuyn, a professor of sociology, who challenged the consensus of Dutch politics as early as 2002 with the founding of his party, the “List Pim Fortuyn” (LPF). He was assassinated the same year, just nine days before the Dutch elections for which he was a candidate.

His killing was a watershed event in the Netherlands because it was the first political assassination in the country since 1672. The murderer, an environmentalist, later said he shot Fortuyn in order to “stop him from exploiting Muslims as scapegoats and targeting the vulnerable sections of society in seeking political power”. Fortuyn’s campaign relied strongly on an anti-Islam and anti-immigration platform. What made him look different from the off-the-shelf right-wing populists was the fact that he was openly gay and criticised Islam for lacking acceptance of homosexuals’ rights. He also held liberal positions on the economy and Dutch drug-policy.

His criticism of Islam as a “backward culture”, as he put it, was no less stereotyped and racist as that of other right-wing populists’. In many other positions, he oscillated between right and left. He was a known Marxist in his youth and a devout Catholic in the last years of his life. However, since his party was largely a one-man-show, it is impossible to say what political direction it would have taken had its founder lived on. The party won 17 percent of the popular vote in the 2002 elections but the government that it formed with the Christian Democrats and the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy was as short-lived as the LPF.

It found a successor in the Party for Freedom founded by Geert Wilders in 2004. Wilders previously was a member of parliament for the “People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy” (VVD), from which he was expelled for his opposition to accepting Turkey’s membership bid for the EU. Wilders managed to inherit large parts of Pim Fortuyn’s voter base. His party was as much a one-man-show as the LPF.

According to opinion polls taken in 2009, it was the most popular party in the Netherlands with 21-percent support. It gained 17 percent in the elections to the European Parliament in 2014 but was down to 13.1 percent in 2017, when Europe was already alarmed about the ascent of right-wing populism after the election of Donald Trump in the US.

As Fortuyn, Wilders masterfully manages to inject hatred for Islam into the public discourse in the Netherlands. His blog<sup>33</sup> is almost entirely dedicated to that goal. He is of the opinion that “Islam is not a religion” and compared the Quran to Adolf Hitler’s infamous book, “Mein Kampf”. The latter is particularly interesting because it follows a certain rhetoric pattern that can be observed in almost all right-wing populist parties: the more they are eager to distance themselves from Nazism, the more likely they will come up with verbal transgressions into the vocabulary of fascism. It will have to be left to psychology to enquire into the deeper roots of this phenomenon. Wilders also demands a referendum about a Dutch exit from the EU. “The EU leaves us no freedom to determine our own immigration and asylum laws. That’s why leaving the EU is necessary.”<sup>34</sup>

The effect of years of right-wing populist discourse in the Netherlands is profound: “Public debate has taken a nasty turn, blaming and shaming ‘foreigners’, Muslims mostly, but also the elite and Europe for the problems people experience. This opened up tensions and rifts which had previously been covered by a soft blanket of ‘political correctness’, which used to be regarded as civilised behaviour but is now seen as treason and deceitfulness”, says Jacques Paulus Koenis, Professor for Social Philosophy at Maastricht University. “The famous Dutch tolerance and progressiveness, if it ever existed has turned into intolerance and a prolonged and painstaking search for Dutch identity.”<sup>35</sup>

## 6. GB: UK Independence Party (UKIP)

The UK Independence Party (UKIP) is the most important example of how a right-wing populist party can influence the public discourse even without being in the national parliament. Founded in the early 1990s as a monothematic Eurosceptic party, UKIP managed to reach out to the British white working-class under the leadership of Nigel Farage by portraying immigration as a major theme of their discontent.

While opposition to multiculturalism and “Islamification” are high on their agenda, UKIP has become famous as the party that pressured the government into holding the 2016 ‘Brexit’- referendum. The referendum is a good example for the futility of any appeasement policy vis-à-vis right-wing populists. The governing Conservative party thought that it could rid itself of the pressure from UKIP but ended up with exactly what it did not want—the decision to leave the EU.

While UKIP sees itself as ‘liberal’ in economics and rather conservative in social questions such as gay rights, it derives its anti-European position from a nationalism that it shares with most radical right-wing parties in Europe. In combination with the specific British Euroscepticism that has supporters throughout the political spectrum in the UK, it could easier raise support for an exit from the European Union than in other European countries.

The theory that after Brexit, other countries would leave the EU in a chain-reaction was always misleading. While the European Union serves populists on the continent as an easy scapegoat for all kinds of ills, there is no serious support for an end of the EU on the continent. But in the UK, nostalgia for the lost empire still seems to serve as an alternative for the larger framework that is needed in order to make small European nations competitive with emerging economic and political powers like China and India.

The behaviour of UKIP leadership after the Brexit referendum is also characteristic of many right-wing populists. Party Chairman Nigel Farage stepped down with the argument that he had reached his political goal and wanted his “life back”. Given the extremely complicated exit negotiations between Britain and the EU, it is a highly immature statement. A lack of professionalism has been a characteristic of many a right-wing populist parties that started to disintegrate as soon as they reached power positions.

So far, breaching rules or standards of democratic ethics has never had much impact on the career of right-wing populists. This is a clear sign that contempt for the democratic system is an integral part of their success story.

## 7. Austria: FPÖ

The Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) is one of the oldest right-wing populist parties in Europe. Founded in 1955, its first chairperson was Anton Reinthaller who was a former member of Adolf Hitler's NSDAP and an officer of its paramilitary wing, the SS. Despite a number of divisions, the FPÖ never managed or tried to shed the label “right-wing extremist” or “faschist”.

According to Austrian political scientist Anton Pelinka, FPÖ represents a continuation of the “German-ethnic” (*völkische*) tradition and successfully combines right-wing populism with right-wing extremism. “No other European country manifests this kind of continuity between a party, that represented a barbaric dictatorship and a party that acts within a post-faschist (post-nazi) liberal-democratic system as a ‘normal’ parliamentary party.”<sup>36</sup>

FPÖ sees itself in the tradition of the failed German revolution of 1848 that was both liberal and nationalist as one of its aims was to unify

the German-speaking states. In the 20th century, its political heritage lived on mainly in student fraternities that were a driving force during the hey-day of the '48 revolution but became largely irrelevant and often reactionary in post-war Europe as a result of an outdated ethnic-nationalist and sometimes anti-Semitic ideology.

Until today, FPÖ leadership is dominated by members of right-wing student fraternities. The party remained relatively small (with results of around six percent in national elections) until the 1980s when the charismatic Jörg Haider took over its leadership. Haider, a highly gifted demagogue managed to win over new voters, especially from the traditionally social-democratic working class. Under Haider, the FPÖ started to advocate for a so-called “Third Republic” that aims at changing the Austrian constitution. Haider envisioned a strengthening of the executive by introducing a presidential system under which political parties had “no right to exist”. Critics compared these ideas with the German “Führerstaat” under Adolf Hitler. This and Haider’s nationalist, anti-immigration, anti-EU views led to a split in the party. Liberals under Heide Schmidt founded the Liberal Forum that quickly lost political relevance in Austria, while the FPÖ managed to bag its best results in the parliamentary elections in 1999 with 26.9 percent of the vote.

In 2000, the FPÖ became junior partner of the Österreichische Volkspartei (ÖVP) in the Austrian government of Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel. With Susanne Riess-Passer a FPÖ-member became Vice-Chancellor. As a protest against xenophobic and racist statements from within the FPÖ, 14 member-states of the EU (among them Germany, France, UK, Italy and Spain) reduced their bilateral relations with Austria. These measures called “EU sanctions” in Austria, were later taken back as a result of an arbitration process lead by the Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari.

When two leading members of the government, among them Vice-Chancellor Riess-Passer stepped down, early elections became necessary and the FPÖ lost more than 15 percent of its former vote. In 2005, Haider himself left the party and founded the Alliance for the Future of Austria (*Bündnis Zukunft Österreich, BZÖ*) which effectively split the FPÖ. However, Haider's sudden death in a vehicular accident in 2008 allowed for a recovery of the FPÖ.

Under party head Hans-Christian Strache, it developed a more distinctly anti-Islamic profile – a belated development as a result of FPÖ's more anti-Semitic orientation that supported Islamic countries against Israel. In early parliamentary elections in 2008, FPÖ was back to 17.5 percent. The presidential elections in 2016 brought FPÖ candidate Norbert Hofer a relative majority of 35 percent but he lost in the runoff to Alexander Van der Bellen of the Green party. In the parliamentary elections in autumn 2017, the FPÖ gained its second-best result in the history of the party with 27.4 percent and became part of a coalition government with the conservative ÖVP under Chancellor Sebastian Kurz.

The discourse about the European Union in the FPÖ has been as hazy as in the German AfD. While it is clear that the party wants to reduce the EU somehow to an economic union, no concrete steps are being suggested. As in other right-wing populist parties, the EU is a convenient scapegoat and not appreciated for its political role in securing peace and security in Europe. The liberal newspaper "Der Standard" writes about the FPÖ's position in Europe: "In reality Strache and Hofer (two leading politicians of the FPÖ) want the same as Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson and Marine Le Pen: They don't want to improve the EU but destroy it (...) But they don't express it out of tactical reasons."<sup>37</sup>

**Table: European right-wing populist parties with relevant representation in the parliament and/or government**

Country	Party	Head of party	% of votes in the last elections	Part of the government?
Hungary	Fidesz	Victor Orbán	44,9 (2014)	Yes (absolute majority)
Poland	PiS	Jarosław Kaczyński	37,6 (2015)	Yes (absolute majority)
Switzerland	Swiss People's Party (SVP)	Albert Rosti	29,4 (2015)	Yes
Denmark	Danish People's Party (DF)	Kristian Thulesen Dahl	21,2 (2015)	No (tolerates a minority government)
Austria	FPÖ	Hans-Christian Strache	27,4 (2017)	Yes
Finland	The Finns (Perus)	Timo Soini	17,7 (2015)	Yes
Latvia	NA	Gaidis Berzins, Raivis Dzintars	16,6 (2014)	Yes
Norway	FrP	Siv Jensen	16,3 (2013)	Yes
France	Front National	Marine Le Pen	13,2 (2017)	No
Netherlands	Party for Freedom (PVV)	Geert Wilders	13,1 (2017)	No
Sweden	SD	Jimmie Akeson	12,9 (2014)	No
Bulgaria	United Patriots (OP)	K. Karakatschanow, W. Siderow, W. Simeneonow	9,1 (2017)	Yes
Germany	Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)	Jörg Meuthen	12,6 (2017)	No
Slovakia	SNS	Andrej Danko	8,6 (2016)	Yes



## WHY RIGHT-WING POPULIST PARTIES SUCCEED

The reasons for the success of right-wing populism are equally complex and not fully understood yet. Broadly speaking, it can be described as a reaction to a new industrial revolution that is characterised by intense globalisation and the ascent of new economic powers, the dominance of neo-liberal politics in Europe, increasing automatisisation on traditional labour markets, and the rise of new social media.

Various explanations can be grouped into two: One focuses on the fear of globalisation and the effects of neoliberal politics in some parts of the European electorate. The other tries to explain the phenomenon as a backlash against a perceived dominance of liberal cultural and political values that could have left more conservative or traditionalist voters without a political representation.<sup>38</sup> Following the title of a study by the German Bertelsmann Foundation, they can be referred to as 'fear-narrative' and 'value-narrative'.

The fear-narrative says that the neo-liberal economic paradigm that became dominant after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of new economic powers such as China and India, and the internet-based industrial revolution either threaten traditional jobs or has rendered them already superfluous. This has led to a situation where the working class and parts of the middle class in the West face unemployment and fear the decline of their wealth and status.

The value-narrative, on the other hand, argues that the last 20 years saw an expansion of the liberal political discourse in fields such as women's rights, gay rights and rights of other minorities while traditionally conservative topics such as family values, religion, and patriotism, have lost in importance. It is obvious that Western societies have improved minority rights to a great extent in the last decades. In some countries such as Germany, this change is also reflected in the

leading Conservative party. The Christian Democrats (CDU) under the leadership of Angela Merkel have shifted to the political centre.

Under Chancellor Merkel, Germany introduced a women's quota for industrial boards and allowed gay marriage, abolished the conscript army, and paved the way for an exit from nuclear energy. All of these were traditional demands of leftist parties only 20 years before. While this is a development that mirrors societal change and has earned the CDU many voters in the political centre, it seems to have left Conservatives rather 'homeless' or pushed them to the right of the political spectrum.

Some analysts therefore argue that conservative parties have to push for "symbolical projects" that show their conservative voters that they still take them seriously. "Right-wing populist parties always celebrate successes when major debates on national symbols are lacking a clear conservative position from an established party. These national symbols always appear in the political sphere when a nation is opposing change, and is 'from outside' redefined; the two decisive topics are therefore the European Union and issues of immigration and integration," argues Timo Lochocki, a Transatlantic Fellow at the German Marshall Fund.<sup>39</sup>

However, the Bertelsmann Foundation sees a major difference between the US and Europe when it concludes that "fear of globalisation is the decisive factor behind demands for changes away from the political mainstream. Values play a minor role." The study contrasts its findings about Europe with the US, where the tendency towards political authoritarianism seems to be stronger.<sup>40</sup> Yet "fear versus values" may be too simplistic an explanation. It fails to see the 'multi-track' approach of right-wing populism that is currently changing the political landscape in Europe.

While proponents of a far-right ideology are pushing the envelope of acceptance for their exclusionist views, the more moderate elements of

these parties are successfully playing to the gallery of fearful voters. This partly explains the splits that parties such as the FPÖ and more recently the AfD are occasionally undergoing.

Political psychology knows that even people who do not fit the classical profile of an authoritarian character can be brought to act in an authoritarian manner if their fears are triggered.<sup>41</sup> This is exactly what has been happening over the past few years. Right-wing populist parties have deliberately created a political discourse where refugees and Islam seem to be the main source of all problems, along with the “bureaucratic monster” in Brussels—the EU. This has already limited the space for progressive politics in many fields, especially immigration and to a different extent all discussions about the future of the European Union. Benjamin Moffitt rightly observed that populism is not only a reaction to a crisis or a number of different crises. “Populists not only react to crisis but actively attempt to bring about a perception of crisis.”<sup>42</sup> This seems to resonate with the thesis that “right-wing populists make it into Parliament in good economic times”<sup>43</sup> because conservative parties lean towards liberal policies when people are well off. The lack of successful right-wing populist parties in countries that were hit hard by the economic crisis in Europe such as Spain and Ireland seems to give evidence for this this. But there is need for caution. There might be other reason, such as a fresh memory of authoritarian politics under the Franco dictatorship in Spain.

This explanation also tends to ignore the fact that, despite solid economic fundamentals in countries such as Germany, there are real losers of globalisation all over Europe. Even more so in countries such as France that have been struggling harder with the windfalls of globalisation. The French sociologist Didier Eribon<sup>44</sup> has repeatedly pointed out that the working class is voting for right-wing populists not because they like them or hope that they would improve their situation, but because nobody listens to them. “There are many people in Europe

who are marginalized, who are desperate, who are angry about what is happening in their lives, who do not have work and cannot imagine that they will ever have a job again or that their children will be better off one day. These people have almost no possibility to make themselves heard.”<sup>45</sup>

This brings the discussion to the role of social media that is of utmost importance for the rise of populists. While economic and social changes and the inability of mainstream politics to offer voters an alternative to the neo-liberal paradigm seems to be the main reason for the return of the far right, its ascent would have been impossible without the populist element that has found a perfect channel for its message in social media. “Where populism’s strength lies today is in its attunement to the contours of the contemporary political- media-landscape – as a political form, populism co-opts and adapts media logic, its rhythms and sense of temporality, and many of its features (like personalisation, emotionalisation, simplification, its prioritisation of conflict and so on),” says Benjamin Moffitt.<sup>46</sup> Even before the internet and social media, however, a certain type of journalism has been using personalisation, emotion, simplification and prioritised on conflict on a large scale and some media used some of these methods at least sometimes. The difference today is the breakdown of the monopoly of mainstream media to select and interpret reality through the internet. Moffitt is closer to the point when he describes “bad manners” as one of the characteristics of populists. Social media allow everybody to publish their opinion and create a following—even those with “bad manners”, who have no writing skills, little education or knowledge about their subject. Those with the will to break taboos or the intention to mislead people and even lie. Social media have created a space to gather and find like-minded for people whose opinion did not feature in the mainstream for a long time. That is the reason for the increased discussion about a “lying press”<sup>47</sup> and “fake news”. Following Marshall McLuhan’s famous

thesis that “the medium is the message”, populists not only on the right were indeed among the first to understand that this new development in the media would put them ahead of social, economic and technological change.

It is somewhat ironic that they resemble their predecessor also in this regard. The German historian Heinrich August Winkler once said about Hitler's NSDAP: “The success of this party was first and foremost a fruit of its ability to adapt to the requirement of the age of masses and in this sense prove its modernity.”<sup>48</sup>

## WHAT EUROPE MUST DO

Given this complex situation, there is no easy answer to the question of how to stop the ascent of right-wing populism. What is clear is that the EU and its member states must act swiftly because right-wing populism is both a threat to democracy and to the European Union.<sup>49</sup>

For the European Union, they pose an additional challenge, because all right-wing populist parties are essentially anti-EU, even if they do not want to push their countries out of the Union. As a form of national identity politics, their ideology is an anti-thesis to the idea of Europe. A feeling of identity-loss following globalisation has crystallised in the powerful image of a bureaucratic super-structure in Brussels, that has no respect nor understanding of local cultures in the member states and that therefore needs to be tamed, if not rejected altogether.


- The first step on the national level is therefore to stop Brussels-bashing. Blaming the EU has been for decades an easy way of rallying support or exculpate oneself from political failures. With the ascent of right-wing populism, this is no longer harmless. European politicians need to be aware that the price for this strategy has risen significantly. Instead, they need to form pan-

European alliances that develop strategies to strengthen pro-European parties.

- At the same time, European parties and politicians have to stop vacillating on political allies when they develop into right-wing populist, as for example Fidesz in Hungary, that is still a member of the conservative EPP group in the European Parliament. Similarly, co-operations that legitimise right-wing populists such as the governing coalition in Austria must be avoided.
- This once again brings to the forefront the urgent need for structural reforms in the EU. The handling of the Eurozone crisis, for example, led to a lot of mistrust between member states, especially between the North and South. The governance of the common currency is no longer a question of managing the economy. It has become a question of solidarity and cohesion of European countries that they cannot afford to ignore any longer. While Germany and France might still have very different traditions and ideas when it comes to economic policy, they need to be aware that they do not operate in a vacuum and both are under threat.
- The EU also needs to use all available methods, legal and parliamentary to extend pressure on countries that heavily benefit from financial transfers such as Hungary and at the same time publicly undermine the EU.
- All over Europe, new ideas for social-democratic politics are required in order to tame digital capitalism<sup>50</sup> and bring those people who feel left behind back into the fold of liberal democracy. A more equitable Europe is the need of the hour. More problematic are recommendations to “close the right flank” on the side of conservative parties. Conservative parties have become socially more liberal because societies as a whole have

shifted in that direction. Conservative parties will probably have to leave these fringe elements to the populists and define instead what conservatism means in the 21st century.

- Liberal democracies also have to find constructive ways to deal with the fact that social media have created a new and different form of public sphere while traditional media are quickly losing their dominant position.<sup>51</sup> This will include legislation, public support and new business models for media that help to keep up a democratic public sphere. This is all the more important in a Europe that lacks a common language and thus suffers from a fragmentation of the public discourse.

The process of finding answers to these questions will define the future of Europe.  ORF

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  27. For a detailed discussion on the risks of evoking Paragraph 7 against a EU member state see: Heather Grabbe and Stefan Lehnert, "Defending EU Values in Poland and Hungary", *Carnegie Europe* (Brussels, 2017) <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/09/04/defending-eu-values-in-poland-and-hungary->
  28. Ivan Krastev, "The Unraveling of the Post-1989 Order", *Journal of Democracy* (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, October 2016) <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Krastev-27-4.pdf>
  29. Gabor Vona, "About Islam", [www.jobbik.com/](http://www.jobbik.com/), 12.9.2010
  30. Boris Kalnoky, „Wie konnte die rechtsradikale Jobbik so erstarken?“, *Die Welt* (Berlin, 9. April 2014)
  31. Tomasz Kurianowicz, „Die Autokratisierung findet im Stillen statt“, *Zeit online* (Hamburg, 18.July 2017)

32. Ibid.
33. [www.geertwilders.nl](http://www.geertwilders.nl)
34. Geert Wilders, "Why Dutch Populists want to leave the EU", Spiegel online (Hamburg, 1. Juli 2016). <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/dutch-populist-geert-wilders-wants-to-leave-the-eu-a-1100931.html>
35. Jacques Paulus Koenis, "A History of Dutch Populism, from the Murder of Pim Fortuyn to the Rise of Geert Wilders", The Conversation (Melbourne, 14.March 2017)
36. Anton Pelinka, „Der Preis der Salonfähigkeit. Österreichs Rechtsextremismus im internationalen Vergleich“, Dokumentationsarchiv des Oesterreichischen Widerstands (Vienna, 2013), [www.doew.at](http://www.doew.at)
37. Eric Frey "Die FPÖ ist gegen die EU – auch wenn sie es leugnet", Der Standard (Vienna, 26.November 2016). <http://derstandard.at/2000048216468/Die-FPOe-ist-gegen-die-EU-auch-wenn-sie-es>
38. Catherine De Vries, Isabell Hoffmann, "Fears not values. Public Opinion and the Populist Vote in Europe", Bertelsmann Stiftung (Gütersloh, November 2016)
39. Timo Lochocki, *ibid.*
40. Amanda Taub, "The rise of American authoritarianism", Vox (1.3.2016) [www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism](http://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism)
41. Ibid.
42. Benjamin Moffitt, *ibid.*
43. Timo Lochocki, *ibid.*
44. In his autobiographical book Eribon describes how the son of a working class family finds out that almost everybody who used to be a communist or socialist in his youth, now votes for the Front National. Didier Eribon, „Retour a Reims“, Fayard (Paris, 2009)

45. Didier Eribon, „Ihr könnt nicht glauben, ihr wärt das Volk“, Zeit online(Hamburg, 4.July 2016)<http://www.zeit.de/kultur/2016-07/didier-eribon-linke-angela-merkel-brexit-frankreich-front-national-afd-interview>
46. Benjamin Moffitt,, *ibid.*
47. In Germany, the term “Lügenpresse” has a history that goes back to the 19th century. It was used by different political movements on the political right and left to denounce opponents.
48. Heinrich-August Winkler, „Warum die Deutschen Hitler wählten“, Focus (Munich, 30.January 2008)
49. As Farid Zakaria warned: “Democracy without constitutional liberalism is not simply inadequate, but dangerous, bringing with it the erosion of liberty, the abuse of power, ethnic divisions, and even war.” Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy”, Foreign Affairs(New York,November/December 1997), This process is quite visible in countries such as Russia and Turkey and in member states of the EU such as Hungary and Poland. As the Brexit-campaign has shown, even one of the oldest democracies in the world is not immune to the dangers of “ethnic divisions” and “the abuse of power” when forces are at play that lack the necessary understanding of liberal democracy or even negate it.
50. For two answers from Germany see: Marc Saxer,,„Menschengerechte Wirtschaft. Ein sozialdemokratisches Projekt zur Zählung des Kapitalismus“, Carta (Berlin, 1.November 2017) and Ralf Fücks,,„Green Growth, Smart Growth: A New Approach to Economics, Innovation and Environment“Anthem Press (London, 2015) and „Freiheit verteidigen. Wie wir den Kampf um die offene Gesellschaft gewinnen“, Carl Hanser Verlag (Munich, 2017)
51. One approach currently discussed is “chaotic pluralism” as in Helen Margetts, Peter John, Scott Hale and Taha Yasseri, “Political Turbulence. How Social Media shape collective Action”, Princeton University Press (Princeton,2015):“The path through populism and polarization may

involve using the opportunity that social media presents to listen, understand and respond to these sentiments.”

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