The European Union and the challenges of populism

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Several recent elections have thrown the spotlight back onto populism in Europe. French local elections of March 2011 pushed the Front National back to its level of support 10 to 15 years ago (around 15%). Finland's parliamentary elections of April 2011 made the "True Finns" Finland's third party with 19%. Earlier, the entry of Geert Wilders's party into the Dutch governing coalition (his Freedom Party is now the country's third party with 24 seats) and the breakthrough of Sweden's Democrats in parliamentary elections (5.7% and 20 seats) had already revived the heated debate over the rise of populism and placed it in a truly European context.

This debate is not new, dating back to the success of the Austrian FPÖ in the 2000s, which led several EU members to advocate "disciplinary" measures against the Austrian government of the time. Rather than any formal EU condemnation, the "sanctions" adopted involved suspending official bilateral relations between Austria and the then 14 other EU members. Their effect was based on the desire, more or less explicit, to assert common values and to safeguard the "spirit" of European democracy. The "Austrian crisis" had institutional consequences (detailed below) but above all it was the first collective response to a phenomenon which was once "localised" in certain countries but has now become a widespread "pathology".

The electoral success of such movements is often seen now as both an indicator and a component of a general crisis affecting both European political systems and EU integration. For some this new populism is a consequence of globalisation and international integration, and a cause of nationalist tensions. It is also associated with a growing feeling of separation between governments and the governed, fed by scandal. The emergence or revival of extremist outfits and rhetoric – which denounce elites, supranational institutions, immigration, or all three – are seen as a danger to institutions and to traditional representative bodies.

How then should these "populist" parties and political leaders be interpreted? In particular, is there a coherence about these movements, either ideological or concerning their organisations or leaders? And is this a phenomenon partly related to the European Union, and one liable to disrupt the EU's institutions or cooperative dynamics?

I - The Faces of Contemporary Populism

The analysis of populism as an ideology or political movement is not new, dating from its first "manifestations". Authors have pointed to the *narodki* movement in Tsarist Russia and the People's Party in the USA, both at the end of the 19th century, as the first occurrences of modern populism[1]. These two movements, both ideological and political, were similar in several ways: denunciation of incumbent elites and institutions as corrupt usurpers of power belonging legitimately to the people; a desire to return to a kind of golden age, to restore the people to the heart of institutions as their justification. This could explain the somewhat unclear picture formed of these political phenomena, described as democratic and anti-political (Schedler, 1996) or as a coherent ideology and/or a heterogeneous class of political movement.

1. Cf. one of the first systematic analyses of populism, still a classic: Gellner, Ionescu, 1969.

The historical uses of the term «populism»

This confusion and vacillation has only grown since. Firstly because the term "populism" has been applied to a wide variety of political movements existing at different times and in singular socio-political circumstances. One example is Latin America, where parties and leaders – such as Perón and his heirs – have at different times been called "populist"[2]. Another is contemporary Europe, where the tag has been applied to parties often very different to one another, such as Italy's Northern League, Belgium's Vlaams Belang and France's National Front – and even to more centrist leaders (Berlusconi, Chirac and Blair have all received the label).[3]

In addition to this dispersion, the media's pejorative use of the term "populism" – increasingly considered as a dangerous development, similar to demagoguery – has led to a dilution of its original meaning. Recent pronouncements by European leaders, both at domestic and European level, are typical of this deprecatory usage, aiming to delegitimise an adversary.

But this pejorative trend is not systematic. In the United States "populist" has positive connotations, signifying proximity to the people. For example, President Clinton was labelled "populist" by some of the American media, in reference to his ability to remain close to his electorate.

The three principal dimensions of populism

Beyond the various uses of the term, what is striking from the point of view of analysis is the extreme difficulty of defining the substance of populism in an acceptable way. Clarification may be found by means of three perspectives we will use here, which together form the most widely-used and complementary basis for analysis in political science:
- populism as a *necessary element of democracy*;
- populism as a *recurring ideology*;
- populism as a *rhetorical resource* associated with positions held by a leader or party.

On the first perspective, it must be remembered that in political theory populism has long been seen as an essential tension in democracy.[4] As a principle for organising and legitimising power which is based on the people's sovereignty, populism is one of democracy's two constitutive processes, along with constitutionalism and the rule of law. These two "pillars" of democracy, populism and constitutionalism, are often complementary. Populism is conditioned by respect for procedural, constitutional rules (in parti-

cular, elections). Meanwhile, constitutionalism is in constant tension with the people's fundamental legitimacy (for example, the principle of self-limitation applied by courts).

This explains the positive connotation of populism in the United States, where it is a constant reminder of necessary respect for the people. Conversely, it sometimes feeds criticism of the system of European governance, often accused of being "regulatory" and not democratic due to the weakness of mechanisms which legitimise decisions by the people. The election by universal suffrage of the European Parliament (on often low turnout) is the only "populist" component of European governance – in contrast to the role of the Court of Justice, preeminent since the start of European integration.

Beyond this first meaning, another possible interpretation of populism is as a recurring ideology, attached to other more complex ideologies. Examination of "populist" discourse reveals certain constants, around three fundamental propositions:
- the reminder (as an extension of the previous point) that all power derives necessarily from the people, a group defined by nationalism or other social criteria ("the people against the powerful", for example, as shown by Pierre Birnbaum, 1979);
- the idea that institutions and politicians have undermined this ideal by diverting the exercise of power from its first mission, that of respect for the sovereign people, which gives rise to a rhetoric focusing on betrayal by various elites[5]; and
- the desire to restore a previous and/or more legitimate order guaranteeing the sovereignty of the people and their representatives.

Such an ideological framework, with three entry points, is simplistic and therefore malleable and "soluble" in other more complex ideologies. In this sense populism can be both right- and left-wing, depending on the relative importance of the role of the people, the particular elites criticised, and the type of "restoration" envisaged.

This flexibility doubtless explains the fact that populism is also described as an ideological or rhetorical resource, accessible to leaders or parties in a political system. Several analyses have tried to show that populism can become a rhetorical device to be mobilised in accordance with political strategies (Mény, Surel, 2002). For fringe parties populism is often an easy "marker" which allows them to distinguish themselves from established parties and leaders. It is therefore also a means of capturing an varied

2. For a comparative analysis of Latin American populism, see the recently translated work of Laclau (2008).
3. Mény Y., Surel Y., 2000.
4. Cf. well described by Canovan (1999) or Leca (1994).

5. Cf. as a recent example, *Qu'ils s'en aillent tous!,* Paris, Flammarion, 2010.

electoral base which is attracted by (more or less forceful) rejection of traditional institutions. The "populist" label currently attached to certain political figures, such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France or Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, can thus largely be explained by these actors' positioning as alternatives to parties "compromised" by government.

But another, circumstantial, use of populist rhetoric can also be observed in more "centrist" politicians, particular during election campaigns. Its usefulness here is in rallying the widest possible section of the electorate, while promoting the idea that the candidate in question is the best placed to serve the people's interest. A classic example of this opportunistic strategy remains the 1995 French presidential campaign, in which the candidate Chirac, seeking to distinguish himself from the prime minister and candidate of the "traditional" right, Edouard Balladur, resorted to a rhetoric of "rupture" criticising a "social frac-

ture" and the incumbent political and bureaucratic elites (Mény, Surel, 2000).

Populism, therefore, is a difficult subject to apprehend, and to categorise. It is seen sometimes as an essential dimension of democracy, sometimes as a collection of simple ideologies easily taken up by different political factions, and sometimes as an arsenal of rhetoric and positioning to be used more or less temporarily by political actors. The three dimensions are of course associated. If populist rhetoric is effective it is above all because it is founded more or less explicitly on the idea that all "democratic" discourse must have the sovereign people at its heart.[6] And if the parties most closely associated over time with this flexible ideology are criticised, it is partly because excessive emphasis on the populist pillar tends to delegitimise democracy's other pillar, the rule of law. In any case, beyond criticism and stigmatisation, any analysis of populism must recognise this variable and mixed character.

II - Populism and the European Union

These same characteristics (apparent simplicity, a wide area of application, ambiguous legitimacy) are to be found when analysing the "links" between the European Union and populism in its various forms. Even if – as we shall see – the most common position is that of a straightforward rejection of European integration in its current form, the "populist" movement contains a wide variety of rhetoric, positions and proposals. Rather than a systematic rejection of the European project, we find an extremely varied range of responses to and analyses of the EU.

Denunciation of the EU as a "political system"

At first sight, things seem clear. As a system of government, the EU is perceived as having weak electoral mechanisms and a heavy component of law and legal institutions – in other words what people have called a "democratic deficit" – and for this reason it appears an easy target for populist rhetoric.

For example, Geert Wilders's movement towards increasingly extremist positions – mainly based on a critique of Islam – began with a European issue: it was over the question of Turkish EU

membership that Wilders left the liberal-conservative VVD in 2004 to create the Freedom Party (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, PVV). Since then his positions on Europe have focused relentlessly on the theme of an integration project which has confiscated the liberty of the people and which must be reformed and slowed down. In an interview to the news site Euronews in 2009, Wilders stated: "I believe that no further country should join Europe. I am favourable to the idea of Romania and Bulgaria leaving the EU. My party voted against the ratification of the treaty on the membership of Bulgaria and Romania in the Dutch parliament."[7] Although himself elected to the European Parliament, Wilders regularly demands the abolition of this institution which he considers illegitimate since it represents no "European people".

The same idea of «confiscation» is present in France's Front National, which sees in Europe a dangerous project contrary to the interests of the French people. In the party's programme as presented on its site, the section on "Europe" explains: "The Europe of Brussels, a hydra of many heads, grants itself – with the complicity of European governments – competences in practi-

6. Hans-Georg Betz, one of the specialists of European populism, highlights this ambiguity in populism"s "extremist and democratic" dual identity (Betz, 2004).

7. Reported at: http://www.theparliament.com/no_cache/latestnews/news-article/newsarticle/wilders-calls-for-romania-and-bulgaria-to-leave-the-EU/
8. http://www.frontnational.com/?page_id=1185, underscored in the original text.

cally all fields of political, economic, social, cultural and scientific life."[8] Following this are propositions including a rejection of European citizenship, a refusal to cooperate within certain agencies on security and immigration issues, and the suggested renegotiation of the European treaties to make them more compatible with "sovereign states".

The positions of Sweden's Democrats are extremely similar, demanding a renegotiation of the treaties in order to better recognise state sovereignty, and envisaging leaving the EU if the demands are not satisfied.[9]

As a possible consequence of these nationalist positions, the abolition of the euro and a return to national currencies is commonly found in these parties' programmes – the euro generally being seen as a major historical error responsible for diluting the practical and symbolic power attached to national monetary policy.

These examples, beyond the particularities of each party and the various national contexts, attests to the existence of certain common positions among the national-populist parties, to use the category proposed in particular by Pierre-André Taguieff (Taguieff, 2007). Europe is considered as an exogenous political system, controlled by a mostly technocratic elite and lacking the legitimacy conferred by universal suffrage. It therefore represents a dual danger, to national sovereignty and to the interests of the people. Ideas of this type make populist discourse similar to classical nationalism, which in the context of European integration is often called «sovereigntism». From this perspective, one of the most emblematic recent political movements to link classical nationalism to a rejection of European integration is the British UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party), created in the 1990s with the express objective of denouncing the EU's influence over the UK's institutions and policies.

Populisms, national identities and European identity

This nationalism can also lead populist parties to advance other themes and demands based on the rejection of certain social groups or ethnic minorities. A common feature of current movements and leaders is the sometimes outspoken rejection of immigrant populations in general and Islam in particular.

This is the case of Geert Wilders, as already noted, but also of others, such as Marine Le Pen, who recently was again demanding a renegotiation of the Schengen accords in response to immigration caused by political change in Arab countries. Other populist parties, in particular in Scandinavia, use similar arguments but in a version sometimes known as "welfare populism" – criticism of the granting of rights and social services to immigrants.

This vein of populism is however not unique to the radical right, being invoked in certain contexts by governing parties. As an example, the rhetoric used by Nicolas Sarkozy with regard to Roma immigrants in France – referring to "the problems posed by the behaviour of certain travellers and Roma" – is symptomatic of this spreading of populist discourse.

Such denunciation of foreigners, immigrants and – more specifically – Islam and the Islamic world is all the more important here given that it is often directly associated with a negative reading of European integration. The EU, because it is founded on the principle of free movement of people and because it has established cooperative rules by means of the Schengen accords, is seen as a factor explaining the increased immigration flows. By its limits on controls at internal borders, and because of its difficulty in organising a collective response (certain initiatives such as the Frontex agency notwithstanding), the EU is seen as showing itself incapable of responding to the threats which weigh on nation states. Even worse, by encouraging a rapprochement with Muslim countries (possible integration of Turkey, efforts at cooperation with North African countries), the EU is seen as accentuating the threats to national identity and integrity. This tense worldview, while not new in itself, is a feature common to most of these movements, for which, more fundamentally, European citizenship does not really exist and cannot legitimately be added to, or substituted for, national identity.

Denunciation of EU "free-market liberalism"

The discourse of leaders and parties classed as populist is, however, more varied than that of classical nationalism. Analyses highlight a contrasting image, in line with the diversity, indeed great heterogeneity, of these political actors. Thus, for certain leaders and groups on the left, criticism of the European Union, while using the same initial diagnosis of popular legitimacy confiscated, tends to focus on the links between European integration and the free market. Revealing of this is the following extract of an interview given to the daily newspaper Libération by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the French Parti de Gauche, in response to EU measures during the economic crisis:

"Do you find the Commission's proposals acceptable? A priori supervision of sovereign states by appointed Eurocrats? That's a police regime! The economic crisis is being used to constitutionalise free-market liberalism. Only popular sovereignty makes a decision legitimate. What are they for, the assemblies that supervise national governments? These propo-

sals might be workable if the nation-states were supervised by a sovereign European assembly. That's not the case! The European Commission doesn't see its own insolence. The euro crisis has supposedly shown the lack of economic integration in the EU. No! The lack is of political and civic integration. Until we settle this problem we will have settled nothing [...]. We are not making rescue plans for countries but rather for banks that have gorged themselves on securities which they themselves made rotten by their own speculation. What do you propose? A free-market Europe of 27 is a deadly trap. We need to get out of the Treaty of Lisbon. The political initiative must once again start with Europe's founders: France and Germany, Italy and the Benelux countries. The people must be consulted and involved."[10]

We find here all the classic characteristics of the populist invective: confiscation of the legitimate sovereignty of the people by appointed officials; asymmetry between economic integration and political mechanisms; connivance between supranational bodies and the dematerialised economy embodied by finance and investment banks. Such features are reminiscent of the American populism of the late 19th century, as represented by the People's Party (Kazin, 1998). However, it has to be underlined that these leftist parties can claim to adhere to the EU's values (solidarity, equality, etc.) and their critique is based on such values: this is not the case of the far-right parties which profess xenophobia and rejection of the others.

Clearly there is much variety and fluidity in the perceptions and discourse of populism with regard to European integration. From the sovereigntists' all-out rejection of the European project to the more occasional, less absolutist populism commonly found in national debates on Europe, there exists a varied spectrum of positions that populist actors occupy more or less lastingly – and often in response to electoral factors.

On this point, the EU is perhaps seen differently according to whether the leader or movement in question is a candidate for membership of a coalition government: in the case of leaders wishing to serve in government, and therefore to be directly associated with EU decisions taken in the Council, uniformly negative rhetoric would quickly be seen as counterproductive for the coalition, both domestically and in terms of national interests.

III - "Responses" to populism(s) ?

Therefore, even if populism in its various forms seems to be a clearly established feature of European politics (Chêne et al, 2003), the different perceptions and strategies held by populist actors are too diverse and unstable to support the idea (at least today) that there exists a homogeneous movement uniformly opposed to the EU.

Despite the variegated situation and the limits described above, there is a persistent question in the public debate as to the "danger" of these so-called populist movements. Their entry into coalition governments is often analysed as potentially causing unstable relations between governments and even a breakdown in European integration itself.

The responses of EU institutions

The "responses" envisaged by EU institutions in the face of "populist" electoral successes has depended on the period and the individual case.

The most spectacular initiative remains to this day the boycott organised against Austria by other member states following the formation in 2000 of a coalition between conservatives and the FPÖ led by Jörg Haider. It must be remembered, though, that these measures were entirely bilateral and did not concern the EU in itself. In addition, the "crisis" created by the FPÖ's arrival was ended "diplomatically": a report downplayed the gravity of the event in order to allow Austria to return to its "normal" place within the European institutions.

Since then, reactions have been mostly symbolic. EU bodies, concerned about appearing to interfere in national politics, have contented themselves with communiques calling for vigilance and moderation, and sometimes oral statement. This was the case, for example, of Viviane Redding's response to Nicolas Sarkozy's statements about Roma people during summer 2010.

Even changes to the treaties have not sufficed to create an efficient tool for response. It is true that the treaties now include a procedure under article 7 which allows for sanctions in the case of "a clear risk of a serious breach by a Member State of the principles mentioned in Article 6"

10. *Libération*, 13 May 2010. extract accessible at http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.com/2010/05/interview-dans-liberation-sur-leurope-face-a-la-crise/

– these being the principles of democracy, free expression and the rule of law. The arsenal of sanctions remains somewhat unclear, however, even if clause 3 of this same article 7 states that "the Council, acting by a qualified majority, may decide to suspend certain of the rights deriving from the application of this Treaty to the Member State in question, including the voting rights of the representative of the government of that Member State in the Council". But the content, the functioning and the duration of this "temporary exclusion" regime remain vague, and the lack of applications in practice makes the arsenal somewhat theoretical.

European reactions rather limited

There are several possible explanations for this absence of responses.

Firstly, it is evident that the wide variety of political groups and situations concerned by "populism" calls for prudence. As has been outlined, populist discourse has a composite and circumstantial character which makes it difficult to create a clear, homogeneous package of measures in response.

In addition EU bodies have few institutional resources and, above all, little legitimacy to act in such cases. For instance, there is currently no mechanism which might allow the prohibition of a work of expression or a political group in the manner of Germany's 1949 Fundamental Law, which allows for the dissolution of a party threatening democracy.

Another possible explanation is that the "objective" danger of these parties and leaders is (for now at least) limited. They remain at the margins of the political system, by strategy and ideological choice, and play only a supporting role when they enter coalition governments. Moreover, as shown by the FPÖ example in Austria, participation in government creates tensions between anti-political rhetoric – which remains a necessary "trademark" – and the need to compromise and "normalise" partisan positions. In such cases populist parties risk losing the political difference which is their best selling point. And given their limited electoral reach – at least for those which adopt a populist tone continuously – they are unlikely to achieve real political power in the short term.

As a possible final explanation, it is symbolically difficult to cast doubt on freedom of expression and political organisation – especially when these liberties are publicly asserted by actors claiming to guarantee popular sovereignty. The intrinsic ambiguity of populism - in its principle, in line with democratic regimes but, in its content, a possible danger for them - creates a major problem for incumbent institutions, which are faced with groups rejecting them in the name of the very principles on which their own legitimacy is based. Rarely elected, with competences which citizens sometimes find difficult to understand, EU actors can seem cautious when dealing with movements which denounce the "democratic deficit" of the European project.

It is nonetheless useful, in conclusion, to remember that the "first" populist movement in the United States brought about major institutional reforms and a remaking of the federal government and its policies – events now seen by historians as a key part (with other factors, obviously) of the "Progressive Era". A closer look at the meaning of these populist movements, and at some of today's popularly expressed fears, therefore seems useful advice for Europe's elites, both at European and domestic level ■

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"The Roma Issue from a European Union Perspective"

This note by Tamara Buschek reviews the controversies generated by the French authorities' decision to expulse large groups of Roma in August 2010. These events, as well as the difficult situation of Roma in Hungary, led the Hungarian authorities to define the integration of Roma as one of the country's priorities for its Presidency of the EU Council. It also led the European Council of 23-24 June to call for the rapid implementation of the European Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies proposed by the European Commission.

In this context, this note by Tamara Buschek summarises the situation of the Roma in the EU and analyses the existing European legal provisions concerning the Roma (principally in terms of free movement and of non-discrimination) by taking the French government's measures of August 2010 as a test case. The note finally presents the key initiatives adopted by the European institutions to improve the Roma's situation.

«The Roma Issue from a European Union Perspective», Note, *Notre Europe*, Tamara Buschek, June 2011

A Test for European Solidarity

With the economic and financial crisis having hit European countries in different ways since 2008, the EU is considering how far each country is responsible and what kind of solidarity is needed to overcome this challenge. Europeans have hastily set up solidarity mechanisms that their monetary union was lacking. Questions about the legitimacy and the limits of European solidarity are now very much being asked out in the open.

They are all the more crucial as they generate tensions in national public opinions and among European political decision-makers. These tensions are not just about macroeconomic issues but have recently been about solidarity mechanisms put in place in the 'Schengen area' and also relate to the different extents of other EU interventions, such as in the area of agriculture or energy.

«A test for European solidarity», *Notre Europe*, June 2011

In this context, Notre Europe's work is inspired by the vision of Jacques Delors, who advocates articulating European policies around three key points that are more necessary than ever: «Competition that provides a stimulus, cooperation that strengthens and solidarity that unites.» This vision, which embodied the Single Act of 1988, draws inspiration in particular from the 1987 report entitled « Stabilité, Efficacité, Equité » [Stability, Efficiency, Fairness], in which Tommaso Padoa Schioppa sets out how to push ahead with European economic and social integration in a balanced way.

Having put solidarity at the heart of the European forum of think tanks held in Barcelona in September 2010 (see attached report), Notre Europe has defined a broader project on this theme, which will allow it to publish crosscutting reflection documents as well as 'policy papers' covering different sectors. This series of publications starts with the release of two contributions:

- **A Policy Brief by Jérôme Vignon «*Solidarity and responsibility in the European Union»*** on the Initiatives taken to guaranty monetary stability and economic growth in European economies. The initiatives plead for a larger debate on the reinforcement of European solidarity between Member States and their reciprocal responsibilities. Jérôme Vignon shed light on the principles at stake in this debate.
- **A policy paper by Nadège Chambon «*Is the CAP a ground for European disunion? An assessment of the solidarity mechanisms created by the CAP and their relevance after 2013»*** proposes the state of its mechanisms, evaluates the relevance of it in the modern context and comes up with proposals to reform them after 2013

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