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**BLOG**  
— **POST**

# No, there are no “good” populists



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With less than a month to go before the European Parliament elections, most polls suggest that populist parties will make gains. This was already the case in the 2019 elections, when they won around 130 (out of 705) MEPs. In France, since 2014, Marine Le Pen’s party has obtained the highest score in the European elections (23.34% in 2019). The worsening international climate, the prospect of continued migration to Europe, the war in Ukraine, uncontrolled inflation and, more generally, the rise of all kinds of anxieties are all breeding grounds on which these populist parties hope to thrive again next June.

Should we be afraid? Certainly, but the danger is not necessarily where we think it is. It’s not their numbers that give cause for alarm at this stage, but a kind of silent, creeping normalisation that we still thought impossible in 2019. Let’s look at the numbers first: even if they make substantial gains at the next elections, the populist parties will not be able to defeat the current majority in the European Parliament. The EPP - Socialists - Renew group (in other words, the traditional parties of the right, left and centre) together have more than 400 MEPs, making them the real democratic linchpin of the parliament. Admittedly, their differences are sometimes profound on one policy or another, but the three groups are sufficiently pro-European to never block the progress of the Union.

It is possible that one of the right-wing populist groups could gain more than 50% of the votes, even if it means becoming larger than the Socialist or Renew groups. This would be politically dramatic, but would have no major effect on the functioning of the Parliament, where the three groups would together hold a majority. On the other hand, it is impossible for these various populist groups to agree to form a single powerful and coherent bloc. The danger of a union of extremist parties in the EP is unlikely, given the depth and substance of their differences. Two groups coexist in the EP: the ECR group (European Conservatives and Reformists), which includes supporters of Mrs Meloni, and the ID group (Identity and Democracy), which includes Marine Le Pen's RN. The former are resolutely pro-Ukraine, pro-NATO and pro-market. The latter are pro-Putin, anti-NATO, protectionist and anti-liberal. It is therefore impossible for them to come to an agreement, even to take power. But none of them is openly calling for their country to leave the European Union.

But paradoxically, this is where the real danger lies. The ECR group, with Giorgia Meloni as its Atlanticist, liberal and anti-Putin leader, has managed to make itself acceptable, even acceptable in the eyes of many parliamentarians in Brussels and beyond. Faced with the openly anti-European, anti-globalisation and pro-Russian MEPs who form the core of the ID group, she has even managed to forge a kind of "melonimania" that is leading some EPP members, for example, to envisage sectoral alliances with the ECR if need be (this "melonimania" is affecting the Commission and senior European officials as much as the Parliament itself). In other words, in Brussels, a certain populism has now become acceptable if it is pro-Ukrainian and adept at economic liberalism. It doesn't matter if these populist leaders pursue policies at home that are openly hostile to the fundamental freedoms and principles defended by the EU (gender equality, religion, welcoming migrants, etc.), or if they cultivate a worrying ambiguity on abortion rights or the control of intellectuals. It doesn't matter that Ms Méloni advocates post-fascism - which is tantamount to claiming to be so - or that her ally, the Sweden Democrats, has origins in neo-Nazi groups and subscribes to the theory of the great replacement by Muslims, or that the Spanish Vox party condemns "climate religion" and does not deny a certain Franco nostalgia: "hide this populism that I can't see", think some people in Brussels, and let's work together for the good of Europe...

But what might appear to be a kind of pro-European wisdom seems to me more like political folly. There are no good or bad populists. They are all potential threats to representative democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms. Similarly, there is no such thing as "illiberal" or "electoral" democracy or "democracy that varies according to civilisations and cultures", as Xi Jin Pin proclaims: there is only one democratic system based on the rule of law, and all the rest is mere manipulation. In other words, neither economic liberalism nor anti-Putinism should become the supreme values of the EU. Yet this is one of the invisible effects of the war in Ukraine: it has weakened our criteria and our definition of democracy. As if, under the guise of being in favour of Kiev, anything goes. As if we could defend democracy in Kiev and allow it to rot surreptitiously in Paris, Madrid or Milan.

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