Picking up the Pieces: Populism and the European Union

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Abstract

In recent years, populist parties have gained popularity and electoral significance throughout the European Union (EU). However, a string of defeats in important elections has caused many politicians and commentators to declare that the populist threat is over. The first section of this paper challenges this claim, arguing that populist parties have succeeded in shaking the hegemony of mainstream political parties. While the greater question of populism's place in Europe has yet to be answered, we can expect major changes to occur in the European Union over the coming years. Part two of this paper will examine major policy directions that the European Union is expected to take following Europe's populist wave. The main areas of focus of this section are a review of Brexit negotiations, illiberal democracies in Eastern Europe, development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and progress in supranational institution activity.

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Part I: Populist Parties in the EU (Sonam Kotadia)
Introduction
In the past few decades, populist parties[1] across the EU have pushed themselves to the forefront of the political scene, not only on the national level but also on the European one. The influence of these parties is unmistakable, as evidenced perhaps most dramatically in June 2016, when the referendum in favor of Brexit, that is, the exit of the United Kingdom from the EU, passed by a slim margin. This victory, however, is slowly beginning to appear to be the pinnacle of success for the populists; indeed, populist parties suffered serious blows in a series of important elections in Austria, the Netherlands, and France following the Brexit vote. These decisive defeats have led some commentators to declare that the tide of populism has been curbed (Norris, 2017). The first section of the paper argues otherwise. Although populist parties are losing support, their impact on the political environment in their respective countries have long-term implications.

What is Populism?
 The most commonly cited definition of populism in recent literature was presented by Cas Mudde in 2004. He defines it as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Although this definition has been contested, it establishes a fundamental characteristic of populism: the focus on the "people." Populists juxtapose the "forgotten," innocent common people and the self-serving, dishonest elites, who are typically defined as the mainstream political parties and the EU. These parties characterize themselves as the sole true representatives of the people (Müller, 2015, p. 81). This demonization of the elite fosters a strong anti-establishment attitude. In general, populists openly criticize the political establishment, claiming that it has lost touch with whom it is meant to serve: the common people (Immerzeel et al., 2016, p. 824). They sometimes go as far as to question the integrity of existing political structures, institutions, and even democratic procedures (Müller, 2015, p. 86).
 Jan-Werner Müller (2015) suggests an interesting revision to the anti-elitism of right-wing populist parties, arguing that they are not only anti-elitist but also necessarily anti-pluralist. By this, he means that this movement relies on separating a heterogeneous, inherently hypothetical group that exists outside any political institution – the people – and portraying them as homogenous and political. They then claim that this group is the only legitimate one, and that they are its only legitimate representatives: "The logic of populism is not 'we are the 99 per cent', it is: 'we are the 100 per cent'" (p. 85). By doing this, populists move politics into the moral dimension: any opposition is seen as a sign of immorality, and any unfavorable result as a sign of immorality and corruption.

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[1] Since the majority of prominent populist parties in the EU – with the notable exceptions of Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain – are on the right of the political spectrum, I will focus on right-wing populism.

Nationalism is another important defining characteristic of modern populism. The rhetoric of the vast majority of populist parties, especially those on the right, is highly exclusionary, lauding those of 'pure' ancestry and demonizing minorities. Although nationalism suggests that ethnic minorities are the only groups targeted, this is far from true: religion, sexual orientation, language, immigration history, and gender are also common points of contention (Müller, 2016, p. 84). Right-wing populists often argue that members of the proper nation should receive preferential treatment, for example in access to welfare and other government-provided services (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas, 2015, pp. 281-282).

This exclusionary sentiment lends itself to a strong anti-immigration stance. There is a general consensus among scholars and commentators that immigration is the most important issue area for right-wing populist parties (Immerzeel et al., 2014, p. 824; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas, 2015, pp. 281-282). Right-wing populists tend to call for more restrictive immigration policies and quotas as well as stricter requirements for integration programs and harsher punishments for noncompliance. The recent so-called "refugee crisis" has added a new dimension to this position. Right-wing populist parties have become the primary voice against taking in refugees and refugee quotas (Mudde, 2016, p. 25).

In summary, modern populists on both sides of the political spectrum seek to divide their public into two groups: the common people and the corrupt elite. They aim to establish themselves as the only representatives of the former and thereby the only real opposition to the latter. Characteristics that typify right-wing populist parties include anti-establishment, anti-pluralist, nationalist, and anti-immigrant attitudes.

Is the Populist Threat Over?

The decisive defeats delivered in the aforementioned elections in Austria, the Netherlands, and France suggest that the momentum gained through the Brexit referendum and even the US presidential elections is waning. Although it is very possible that this trend will persist in the EU, populist parties should by no means be considered inefficacious actors. The fact that these parties were viable and notable contesters in these prominent elections indicates that populists have succeeded in changing the political discourse. This has had a profound impact on the structure of the political environment at the very least on the national level.

The Austrian election exemplifies this. Since Austria became an independent state in 1955, it has been governed by one of the mainstream centrist parties, if not by a coalition between them. Although other smaller parties have joined coalitions in the past, one of the mainstream parties has always been present. This pattern also extends to the presidency, which is a more ceremonial post – until the 2016 presidential election. *Neither* of the mainstream parties made the final round; instead, the final two candidates came from the Austrian Freedom Party, a right-wing populist party, and the Green Party, a left-leaning, liberal party. This historic development indicates that the long-standing stability of the Austrian political environment has ended (Müller, 2016).

The French election reflects a similar trend. Though the mainstream center-right and center-left parties in France have not enjoyed the same consistent success as their Austrian counterparts, there has been relatively steady support for traditional Gaullist parties. Gaullism stems from the principles espoused by General Charles de Gaulle, the first president of the French Fifth Republic. He advocated for a strong, non-partisan presidency that above all sought to maintain political stability. The 2017 presidential election may symbolize the death of the Gaullists. The final two candidates were true political outsiders: Marine Le Pen of the Front National, a right-wing populist party, and Emmanuel Macron of *En Marche!*, a new, independent party on the center-left. Although both of these candidates favorably compared themselves to de Gaulle towards the end of their campaigns, neither of their platforms are truly Gaullist. Macron's victory arguably represents a new era of French politics (McAuley, 2017)

As the Austrian and French examples illustrate, populism is far from dead. Their electoral losses do not diminish their long-term impact: They have posed arguably the most serious challenge to the hegemony of the mainstream parties in the post-war era (Norris, 2017). Whether or not they remain the primary opponents to these traditional centrist parties, they have effectively shaken the political establishment. If mainstream parties wish to remain contenders, they must reorganize themselves.

Part II: Looking Forward (Justin Tomczyk)

While Eurosceptics failed to achieve major gains in recent elections, the existential question posed to the European Union by the populist-right has left many in Brussels shaken. The lesson learned over the past year is that the existence of the European Union and continued European cooperation is not to be taken for granted but rather defended and preserved through a conscious effort by policymakers and national leaders alike. The consolidation of power by parties like PiS and Fidesz have shown that illiberal democracies have firmly embedded themselves in the east, a reminder that authoritarian rule has not entirely left Europe. Now, the question for the European Union is what sort of direction the union will take to ensure a stable and secure future for Europe after the political turbulence of 2016 and 2017.

Brexit and the European Union

After the Leave campaign's narrow victory, many predicted that Brexit would be the first domino in a continent-wide EU secession wave. Political tension brought by austerity and the financial crisis, persistent youth unemployment, and the sudden shock of the Syrian refugee crisis seem to prime the continent for a true "nationalist spring". Unfortunately for the United Kingdom, the failure of FN and VPP to achieve electoral success has left Theresa May's government alone in leaving the European Union.

Brexit provides the European Union with two major political opportunities. The first is that the ongoing Brexit negotiations will allow Brussels to demonstrate just how much economic and political weight are behind the union. While many organizers of the Leave campaign consider the European Union to be more dependent on the United Kingdom than vice-versa

(BBC, Jan 2016), the United Kingdom is finding itself losing much of its negotiating momentum. Post-Brexit economic predictions show that the U.K. will struggle to operate without proper access to the European Union's single market. This is due to the EU accounting for almost half of British foreign trade (Dhingra, 2016). More and more financial offices are considering relocating from London to mainland cities like Frankfurt (BBC, June 2016). The United Kingdom's labor market finds itself either forced to concede residency rights for EU nationals or search for almost 3 million extra workers (House of Commons Library, 2017), as a "hard Brexit" from the EU will remove residency and labor rights for EU nationals in the United Kingdom. Initial plans to sign trade agreements with countries like India and the United States have met limited success, as the United Kingdom remains represented by the European Union's single representative in the World Trade Organization (due to its participation in the EU single market) (United Kingdom Parliament, 2016).

As of now, it seems that Brussels has the higher ground. Much of the economic damage brought upon by Brexit has been mitigated as the Eurozone continues to grow (Eurostat 2017). Political maneuvering by Northern Ireland and Scotland in regarding independence form the UK and readmission into the EU to retain close economic and political ties to Europe (Riaghaltas na h-Alba, 2016) have given the European Union considerable leverage towards a "soft Brexit". Furthermore, the exit of the United Kingdom from the EU would mean the removal of one of the union's notoriously obstructionist members. Hypothetical projects like the European Union Defense Force and a unified Coast Guard/Navy have been heavily opposed by the United Kingdom who considered participation in these projects to be a violation of sovereignty (RAND 2017).

Eastern Europe and Illiberal Democracies

In dealing with Euroscepticism in Eastern Europe, we will likely see the end of "Two Speed Europe". The idea of Two Speed Europe is that the disparity between eastern and western levels of EU integration is permissible, because it is assumed that eastern EU members would continue their integration process until full harmonization with Western Europe. Unfortunately, a combination of political disagreement and economic slowdown has led to a slow-down of EU integration. An example of this integration stagnation is that while all EU members are expected to adopt the Euro, certain members in the east have shelved this process indefinitely while retaining full EU membership.

Unfortunately, the rise of illiberal democracies like Orban's Hungary and PiS-ruled Poland have shown us that any degree of separation between the East and West will provide space for the far right to maneuver and grow. The result of Two Speed Europe is something similar to Brexit, as the United Kingdom's many opt-outs of integration criteria during its accession negotiations played a part in its "distance" from mainland Europe. Realistically, it can be expected that a post-populist EU will take a stronger stance on illiberal democracies like Poland and Hungary. Macron has already voiced his desire to sanction these states if needed (Ouest-France 2017), as the idea that an EU member may receive as many benefits as possible

while contributing only what is convenient goes against the idea of EU solidarity. There is also serious consideration towards enacting Article 7 of the European Union and suspending Hungary's voting rights (European Parliament, May 2017), as Viktor Orban's government has continuously obstructed actions related to refugee redistribution. The goal of this process is to remove the idea of "cherry picking" EU obligations while accepting all EU benefits, reaffirming that solidarity is key to the European Union's function and will lead to continued prosperity for all members. While these policy positions will require a larger reconsideration of how the EU operates (enforcement mechanisms, the boundaries of collective action and state sovereignty, etc) the goal is that there will no longer be such a thing as a strictly "Southern European issue" nor an "Eastern European problem".

Common Foreign Policy

The European Union finds itself walking a thin line regarding foreign policy. Russia and Turkey have slipped back into an authoritarian status as democratic norms have largely receded from the political sphere. The United States has found itself grappling with a presidency that is unconventional and unpredictable, shattering decades of implicit trust between both sides of the Atlantic. The ongoing crisis of climate change and impending resource shortages have left the European Union as one of the few actors capable of pursuing proactive policies to protect the environment. Given the erosion in the EU's relationships with its traditional partners, the European Union has no choice but to act as a more assertive and proactive force. This will be carried out by two major entities: The European Council/Council of Ministers and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The European Council is a body composed of all 27 heads of EU states. The goal of this group is to find broad agreements on policy and steer the general direction of the EU. The Council of Ministers is a collection of ministry heads from all EU members, convened to discuss a policy area (I.E, all 27 EU Ministers of Defense or Ministers of Economics). The most basic level of a common foreign policy is independently converging all 27 national foreign policies onto one broader policy agreement. An example of this would be all EU members agreeing to adhere by the Paris Agreement and prioritize research into renewables and green energy (European Council, 2016). This requires flexibility, as some EU members have national interests that cannot be ignored, but is one of the more feasible ways for a common foreign policy to occur.

The second entity critical to the EU's foreign policy is the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy - a position currently held by Frederica Mogherini. While the Council will form the base of the EU-wide foreign policy, the High Representative will act as the EU's unified voice on more contentious issues. The High Representative's main goal will be communicating what strict foreign policy positions the entirety of the European Union will take. For instance, while some members of the EU want to remove sanctions on the Russian Federation or continue trading with Moscow, the European Union will never recognize the legitimacy of the Russian invasion of Crimea (European External

Action Service, 2015). This position is best left to dealing with questions regarding Rule of Law and direct confrontation from third parties.

Proactive Supranational Policies

Finally, there is the greater question of what sort of supranational actions will be required to keep the European Union intact. Because the EU is built on the idea of shared sovereignty and the delegation of power, there is an immense amount of trust and institutional confidence that is required for its proper function. The failure of the European Union to properly address a crisis will lead to stop-gap policies by national governments and erode trust towards the union's function. Much like plumbing, the European Union is unnoticed when functional and unignorable when dysfunctional.

We can expect a greater pivot in the EU away from reactive crisis management and more towards proactive decision-making. We've already seen the European Commission take a more assertive stance towards tax-havens and technology firms hoping to bend EU regulations on data security and personal information. At the same time, the European Parliament has reoriented itself towards a confrontational stance with the United States after Washington's failure to extend the EU-US visa-free tourist policy to countries like Bulgaria and Poland (European Parliament, March 2017). These are all positions and policies enacted by the EU's supranational structures like the European Commission and European Parliament – institutions that exist above the level of national governments. The end goal of this repositioning is for the European Union to succeed on a global scale as a whole in areas where national governments may have struggled.

Conclusion

European Parliament President Martin Scuhlz once said, "What we all do in Brussels can only become a success if everybody takes proper ownership. Stop pretending that all success is national and all failure European". While the European Union has exited the recent wave of populism mostly intact and generally optimistic, the project's long-term success and existence is dependent on its member-states to secure. More importantly, the problems facing the European Union should be considered another opportunity for transnational cooperation and success rather than a cause for chaos and disorder. Through a combination of deliberate internal action and proactive foreign policy, the European Union may overcome the current wave of western populism and continue its progress towards an ever-closer union.

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