

Prologue*

Populism has been around for centuries, both as an ideology and political movement. The populism we see today is the descendant of a long line of ancestors. The first unmistakably populist movement in history appeared well over two centuries ago during the later stages of the French Revolution. Robespierre and the Jacobins led it, promising a reign of “virtue.” Stemming from the Latin word ‘Populus’ - meaning, people -, it is generally defined as a “political program or movement that champions, or claims to champion, the common person, against the perceived elite or establishment.” The ideology is used by both far-left and far-right groups. Even though there are cases of populism on both political spectrums, the extreme-right has proven to have greater strains on the established status quo of the European Union. Sentiments like anti-human rights, anti-immigration, racism and xenophobic rhetoric, just to name a few are used, and most times championed by the far-right. This goes greatly against the pillars of fundamental rights the European Parliament stands by.

But the question remains - why is the extreme-right attractive to voters? Populist groups claim to be anti-elitist/ anti-systemic and seem relatable to people dissatisfied with not only politics, but also societal life in general. Thus, their strongest supporters are stigmatizing groups who face difficulties in finding a positive social identity. This is why neo-Nazis, white supremacists, anti-immigration supporters etc. are avid followers of these groups, making the far-right all the more dangerous.

The European Parliament is an inclusive body. With 705 members, representation with populist agendas also exist. This diversity is one of the things that make the institution thrive; with different voices and opinions, the decisions taken by the European Parliament are discussed from numerous perspectives. Nevertheless, in order to keep the European body intact, all groups and members - regardless of their political/ideological orientation - must keep in line with the Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament. If not respected, certain measures are used as penalty. Article 2 is the most fundamental stone of the EU Treaty. Everything done in the Union builds upon this, and follows these principles of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. If ‘Article 2’ is jeopardised, the EP can respond by launching ‘Article 7’. This, among many other measures, can potentially suspend the rights of the Member State in question, greatly limiting its ability to have power in any proceedings.

In the last decade, Europe has seen a significant growth in Populist parties - especially with far-right groups gaining prominence and their supporters growing in size. It has become quite evident that these groups use the Parliament to shape voter attitudes, pressure mainstream parties to adopt more xenophobic rhetoric, fragment the mainstream right, and obstruct parliamentary proceedings. However, as mentioned before, the Rules of Procedure of the Parliament need to be abided, regardless of political orientation or ideology. If there is any instance where a Member or political group does not respect the Plenary rules, the response can be through: warnings or monetary limitation.

It is important to understand the current situation of the European Parliament in relation with EU populism. The pandemic has had impact on all aspects of life. Everything went through an ‘adjustment’ period, to comply with COVID safety measures...including the EP. Until new systems were put in place, our daily activities definitely took a minor stall. And especially when we pair all of this with the worsening economic climate, we see that the European Parliament’s position becomes more vulnerable against right-wing politics. With the Union unable to make quick and effective decisions regarding budget, such groups grasp the

opportunity and demagogically exploit the situation. In order to thwart this kind of rhetoric, I believe the European Parliament would need to function better and learn to employ more efficient decision-making. Hopefully by doing so, the EP can reduce manoeuvre and gain for populist groups to promote their own agenda.

Let us now turn to some examples of populism, in relation to the European Parliament. And let us start with the case of Fidesz. Viktor Orbán entered the European Parliament circle right after the election for his second term of Presidency. From the start, he was criticized for undermining press freedom and attracted the EPP's attention with his hard anti-immigration views. Often referring to his vision as "illiberal democracy" and "Christian democracy", Orbán inflicted countless blows over the years. He targeted civil society groups, reined in the media, and held elections that were criticized by the OSCE and even refused to respect EU asylum rules. All of these actions had repercussive warnings, which were voiced during Plenary by other MEPs, groups, and of course the President. However, the eventual ending to this build-up came about in 2019 when the Hungarian government targeted one of the EPP's most prominent politicians: then Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker. The Hungarian government published a poster campaign on their social media platforms with unflattering pictures of Juncker and George Soros and 'fake news' about Brussels' migration plans. For many in the group, criticizing Juncker in this fashion was a step too far and they agreed on Orbán's suspension. The EPP has extended the suspension of Hungary's ruling Fidesz party indefinitely.

A second example is Brexit. In 2016 the result of the British referendum initiated the long and bumpy process of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union. This referendum outcome is heralded as one of the most visible examples of the growing strength of right-wing populism in the world. It must be stressed that Euroscepticism was already present in the UK and Conservative party long before the recent increase in support for right-wing populist parties in Europe as a whole. However, populism and anti-immigrant sentiment, the core features of right-wing populism, specifically UKIP, have played the leading role in bolstering Brexit and to where we find ourselves today – with a Union sans the UK.

This year we also bid farewell to Trump. With the Trump chapter closed, the Biden era has brought about great fear for the populists of Europe. Why would American politics have such an effect on the right-wings of the EU? The answer is the Trump Paradigm! 'Trumpism' has become an iron pillar in the ideology of European populist parties (America first; echoed as Hungary first; France first; Italy first). It was to such an extent that, Trump's chief strategist, Steve Bannon, was missioned in Europe (Milan), in order to unsuccessfully attempt to coordinate an alliance between the leading right-wing parties of Europe. The result of the 2019 European Parliament elections signified a hopeful start for the dwindling of extreme right powers in Europe. And now these once US-backed right-wing groups are now faced with the harsh reality of having lost a very rich and supportive 'best friend'; a loss which also quells the agenda to unite all populist powers of Europe.

What about the Future? I am aware that things can change overnight, and nothing can be predicted. Nevertheless I think this is a very important question to ask - to have some notion of where we might be heading. Some would see the results of the 2019 European Parliament Elections as a relief for democracy seekers in Europe. Yet only time will tell what the future for populism and the European Parliament will be! After all, the next European Parliament elections are just around the corner.

Allow me to conclude by quoting the President of the European Parliament David Sassoli: "We are going through a complex and dangerous period. We live in times in which, potential threats

to democracy have grown disproportionately. The response lies in continually renewing ourselves, focusing on citizen participation. No one can consider themselves immune. Not even the EU. Freedom must be defended from manipulation and disinformation: we must always remember that democracy is a fragile system”.

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*The prologue is an edited version of the speech delivered by Mr Andreas Kettis within the framework of the 2nd Guest Lecture of the JMM ‘EU Law and Governance in Populist Time’ on the 11th of March 2021.