



Conversations about Europe

Populism and the
European Union: Threat
or Opportunity?



Why populism?

Populism is the main political 'buzzword' of the 21st century

Populism appears successful:

- Brexit referendum (23 June 2016);
- Election of Trump (8 November 2016);
- General elections in Italy (27 December 2017);
 - Five Star Movement (Luigi Di Maio): 32,7%
 - Centre-right Coalition (Matteo Salvini): 37%
- France, Hungary, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, ...

Populism is not limited to one side of the political spectrum:

- Venezuela: Bolivarian revolution (Hugo Chavèz; since 1999);
- UK: Labour Party leadership of Jeremy Corbyn (Since September 2015);
- 2015 Spanish general elections: Podemos, with 20,65% of the vote, becomes the 3rd largest party.



How should populism be defined?

*“A thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into **two homogeneous and antagonistic camps**, “**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.”*

(Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2017)

*“National populists **prioritize the culture and interests of the nation**, and promise to give a voice to a people who feel that they have been **neglected**, even held in contempt, **by distant and often corrupt elite**.”*

(Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin, *National Populism. The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*, Pelican Books, 2018.)



How should populism be defined?

Main characteristics:

- ***Distrust*** of politicians and institutions
- Fear about the possible ***destruction*** of the national group's historic identity and established ways of life.
- Strong feelings of relative ***deprivation*** (losing out relative to others)
- ***De-alignment***: the weakening bond between the traditional mainstream parties and the people



Why has the EU become a populist target?

- The European Union has been, for a long time, **project of elites**;
- **Distrust** of the European elites in **'common citizen' interference**;

Jean Rey (President of the Commission), on the British referendum of 1975

*"A referendum on this matter consists of consulting **people who don't know the problems** instead of consulting people who know them. I would deplore a situation in which the **policy of this great country should be left to housewives**. It should be decided by trained and informed people"*

Complaints have been ignored for too long!

- EU citizens believe the European project **does no longer serve their interests**;
- **No consultations** of citizens for the ratification of European treaties. When they do take place, discontent is obvious:
 - Maastricht Treaty (France, Denmark)
 - Single currency (Sweden, Denmark)
 - European Constitution (France, Netherlands)

Growing divide between political elites and EU citizens, who feel left out.

"Obsessed with the idea of constant and total integration, we failed to notice that ordinary people, the citizens of Europe, do not share our Euro-enthusiasm"

(Donald Tusk, 2016)



Lead-in questions

- Should the European Union embrace populist criticism or attempt to reverse the populist trend?
- Will the return to nation states, to which populists are committed, lead to a rise in tensions on the European continent? Or is this necessary to maintain social peace?
- Can populists assume a leading role within the EU? Or does their success solely rely on opposition?
- What is the effect of the unfolding Brexit on populist movements? Does it strengthen or weaken their popularity?
- Could/should, the European Union get rid of populist opposition?
- The Russian government is known for its support of populist politicians in Europe. What could be their motive?
- Could the European populist trend spread to Russia?
- ...