



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?
- ...