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POPULIST POLITICS IN EUROPE



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2008–2009 Immigration

Elections for the European Parliament will be held in late May. Every five years, all adult citizens of the European Union's 28 member states can cast their vote for one of their national parties — who together build the EU's parliamentary factions. This time around, the elections are more important than ever before because the Parliament has gained considerable influence as a result of the Lisbon Treaty. After May, the Parliament will be co-deciding on most EU policies — on an equal footing with the Council of the European Union; i.e. the ministers representing their national governments. In effect, voting results for the Parliament have serious consequences. If past experience is anything to go by, we should, however, expect turnouts that do no justice to these new powers. The previous elections, in 2009, saw an average turnout of just forty-three percent, the lowest rate ever.

At the same time and somewhat paradoxically, the European elections present an opportunity to populist parties who rally against Europe. Their agendas are varying compilations of such issues as: the loss of national sovereignty and presumed concentration of power in the hands of Brussels' elites and bureaucrats; the alleged negative economic effects of having a common currency and the ensuing bail-outs of bankrupt Southern member states (notably Greece); and the freedom of movement for workers from the newer member states (namely Romania and Bulgaria) and the possible resulting resettlement of impoverished and welfare dependent migrants in the "old" member states in the West. It should be noted that these parties are not in all cases right-wing extremists; they include the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the Dutch Socialist Party (SP), the Italian Five Star Movement (M5S) or the Spanish (or rather Catalan) Popular Unity Candidates (CUP), which strives for Catalan autonomy.

These parties do have agendas in common with populists of the far right, however. Apart from blaming European elites and bureaucrats for national ailments, they identify marginalized groups within society as further sources of their problems: Muslims as they think Islam to be a backward religion or vile ideology; non-immigrant minorities such as the Roma who they see as fundamentally alien and crime-prone people; poor migrants and refugees from outside of the European Union who are depicted as trespassers into prosperous welfare states. Among the oldest and best known representatives of such sentiments are the French National Front (FN), Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang) from Belgium, and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), while the Freedom Party (PVV) of the Netherlands is a more recent model. Initiatives from some of these party's leaders to join forces, e.g. in order to build a joint faction in the EU's parliament and benefit from the financial and administrative benefits coming with it, met with enthusiasm from some populist group but were turned down by others such as the UKIP. In other words: not all populists are willing to join into a single parliamentary family akin to those uniting the Christian Democrats, liberals or socialists. One consequence is bound to be that the anti-Europeanist voice is not going to be as loud as it theoretically — with the estimated support of a fifth to a quarter of the voters — could have been.

On the national level, room for populist politics is not likely to decrease any time soon. For what can be said about these movements on a more abstract level? Populism as it currently manifests itself in Europe usually takes aim at one or a limited set of symptoms of much wider issues (ones that defy immediately effective political interventions). Those symptoms are either real in that they affect the lives of a sizeable part of the population or are suggested to be real. Example of the first type would be the effects of immigration and an ensuing cultural and religious diversification of the national population as it manifests itself in certain distinct — usually urban — settings, or competition on the labor market when cheaper or better qualified workers are preferred over those who were previously employed. In populist rhetoric, beneficial effects for other parts of the population or overall macro benefits are simply ignored or being set aside as belonging to “the political elite” who, always, are the “others.” One example of the second type would be instances in which “Islam” is framed as a threat undermining liberal values or as a breeding ground for terrorism. Another instance is where “mass immigration” is being invoked as requiring urgent attention. This fear is constantly voiced by the Dutch Freedom Party, despite the fact

that actual net-migration rates for recent years lay close to zero. Moreover, about three-quarters of all immigrants are either from other EU member states (and can thus not be subjected to restrictions) or Dutch nationals. Of the remaining immigrants, a sizeable share consist of expats, students and others whose skills are indisputably of considerable value to Dutch society and a threat to no one.

Not only should it to be expected that the political room for populist parties will persist because the symptoms they rally against also persist. These parties are also likely to gain in influence. In a number of the older EU countries, mainstream political parties are gradually losing their natural voting bases. Growing secularization undermines Christian Democracy — once or still a stabilizing factor in many EU countries — and social democrats too lose support, to parties focused on the interests of the middle class or to more radical “socialist” ones. This fragmentation potentially increases the political leverage for new parties with radical agendas. In some of the newer member states in Central Europe, the same holds true but the causes are not entirely similar. Nationalism and notions about traditional — religious — values appear high on the agenda and work to legitimize radical thought about outsiders, be they national minorities or immigrants, and actions against them.

Are meaningful responses to populist policies and rhetoric feasible? Structural causes of political friction defy quick-fix solutions but sometimes their symptoms can be dealt with better than they are today. The European welfare state of old can play an important role in this respect. Populist rhetoric is hard to counter because balanced opinion always requires patient ears. However, it would seem ill-advised to copy such rhetoric, for it would require making promises mainstream liberal politics is unable to keep. It is the populists who will reap the benefits of failed promises.