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Greater Threats Abound

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Publication date

2017

Document Version

Final published version

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Citation for published version (APA):

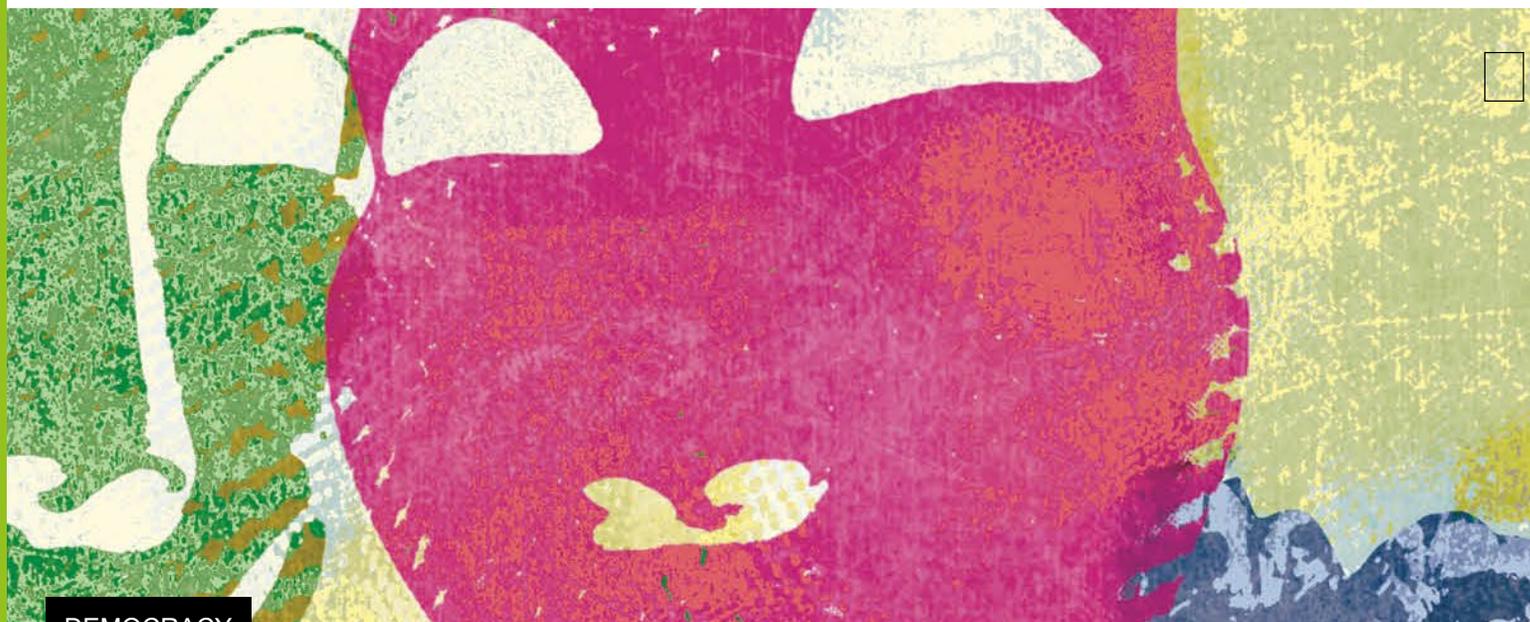
Akkerman, T. (Author). (2017). Don't Panic about Populism: Greater Threats Abound. Web publication/site, Green European Journal. <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/dont-panic-about-populism-greater-threats-abound/>

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DEMOCRACY

Don't Panic About Populism: Greater Threats Abound

The recent rise of 'populism' across Europe has been the subject of increasing concern in the past few years. However the idea that it's 'populism' itself is a problem fails to take into account its key characteristics and how it's the xenophobic and nationalist ideology of the forces that are gaining tract every year on the right of the political spectrum that makes them a threat to democracy.

In 2016 there was widespread panic about populism. Brexit, the election of Trump, and the electoral prospects of populist radical right parties like the French National Front (FN), the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) exacerbated this panic. The consternation has somewhat declined now that these elections have been held without bringing the feared landslides. Yet, populism is still regarded as the main threat to liberal democracies in Western and Eastern Europe. I will argue that the impact of populism is overrated. That is not to say that I hold liberal democracies to be safe. Liberal democratic achievements like freedom of the press, the trias politica (the separation of powers), and a pluralist civil society are under siege in Hungary and Poland. In Western Europe liberal democratic institutions may have acquired stronger foundations due to their longer existence, but they should not be considered invincible. There

are threats, but these threats are stemming from xenophobic nationalism rather than from populism.

Panic about populism

Populism is the great danger of our times according to world leaders in the West. Obama, on his last trip to Europe as president, warned against populist movements on the Left and the Right in Europe. Pope Francis said that “populism is evil and ends badly as the past century showed,” in an interview with a German newspaper. Juncker, the head of the European Commission said in his annual State of the Union address in 2016 that the EU was facing a “galloping populism” and “we need to be aware of that and protect ourselves against it”. The term ‘populism’ is loosely used by politicians and pundits and ranges from left-wing opponents such as Hugo Chavez, Jeremy Corbyn, Bernie Sanders, Syriza, and Podemos to right-wing ones like Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, and Geert Wilders amongst others. Populism is not only branded as evil or dangerous in public discourses, however, academic scholars also tend to see it as an ideology that inspires political parties or politicians to make undemocratic claims. The most well-known critic is Jan Werner Müller. He follows Cas Mudde’s definition of populism as an ideology that separates society in two antagonistic and homogeneous groups – the good people versus the bad elite – and that claims that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people. For populists the general will of the people is more important than the rule of law. Various scholars have argued that this ideal of democracy as being based on an unfettered popular will makes populism into a potential enemy of liberal democracy. Jan Werner Müller goes one step further by asserting that democracy as such is under threat.

Left-wing populists are not anti-democratic

The crux of this definition of populism is that the people are seen as homogeneous. Populists are perceived as anti-democratic because they are anti-pluralist; they do not acknowledge that voters have diverse values and interests. This anti-pluralism is the core idea that makes populism so dangerous, according to Jan-Werner Müller. However, Müller overrates the danger of populism. First, populism is only a secondary ideology that is not the main driver of anti-liberal policies nowadays in Europe. If populism is an ideology, it is a thin ideology that tends to be additional to more substantial core ideologies of parties or movements. It can be added to socialism, for instance, in the case of radical left-wing parties or to nationalism in the case of radical right-wing parties. Second, populism is a feature of both right-wing and left-wing parties and politicians. Yet, populist left-wing parties in Western Europe do not tend to be anti-liberal. Populist left-wing politicians like Corbyn in Britain and parties like Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, GreenLeft and the Socialist Party in the Netherlands, or Die Linke in Germany are called populist because they often refer to the people as being oppressed by elites. This rhetoric does not imply a homogeneous idea of the people. These parties may display a populist discourse, for instance by criticising greedy elites like bankers and endorsing empowerment of the people, but they are not anti-pluralist.[2] Moreover, this does not only hold for left-wing populist parties but also for their voters. As surveys show, voters of left-wing populist parties are not inclined to anti-pluralist attitudes.[3] Only radical right-wing parties and their voters have an idea of the people as a homogeneous group. Parties like National Front, Party for Freedom, Flemish Interest, Lega Nord, Austrian Freedom Party, Swiss People’s Party, the Finns, Danish People’s Party, and various others refer to a culturally homogeneous people. In other words, populism is not necessarily or

always based on the idea of a homogeneous people. Of course, one could argue that this is a matter of definition, but a definition that goes against common use is far from helpful. Moreover, the idea of a homogeneous people that one finds in radical right discourse is not primarily a populist idea, but it is founded in xenophobic nationalism. That is the core ideology of these parties. These parties also tend to be authoritarian in the sense that security overrules fundamental freedoms. Nationalism and authoritarianism are closely linked, because radical right-wing parties tend to link immigration to terrorism and criminality.

Immigration and security are the issues that count

The programmes, policies, and motivations of voters of populist radical right-wing parties all demonstrate that exclusive nationalism is their lifeblood. In Western Europe these parties have focused on anti-immigration and anti-Islam policies. In Eastern Europe, exclusive nationalism used to be directed at ethnic minorities, Roma, or Jews, but parties like Fidesz in Hungary and the Party of Law and Justice (Pis) in Poland have also focused on immigration more recently. There is overwhelming evidence that anti-immigration views are also the main motive for voters in Western Europe to vote for these parties.^[4] Populist cynicism and distrust of political elites does play a role as well, but protesting against established parties is a far more marginal motivation than opposition to immigration. The refugee crisis of 2015/2016 in particular boosted the support for populist radical right-wing parties, far more so than the financial and economic crisis that broke out in 2008.

Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian prime minister and leader of the populist party Fidesz, has openly propagated an ideal of illiberal democracy. He defied liberal democracy and praised 'illiberal democracy' when he was re-elected in 2014. In Western Europe, however, populist radical right parties tend to refrain from openly promoting an alternative, illiberal model of democracy. Nevertheless, their policy proposals and legislative initiatives in opposition or in government betray that they have little respect for fundamental freedoms and rights of 'non-native' groups. When they promote policy proposals or legislative acts that collide with fundamental human rights, these proposals are mainly about immigration or security.^[5] When in government, the Austrian Freedom Party proposed to take fingerprints of all foreigners, the Lega Nord proposed a 'security package' that included proposals that were thrown out by the European Court of Justice as fundamentally conflicting with fundamental human rights, the Swiss People's Party used popular initiatives to restrict religious freedoms such as the building of minarets that breached the European Convention of Human Rights. Success in implementing these policy proposals has been limited so far in Western Europe. National or European courts, political opposition and civil societies have in most cases prevented that such proposals came into law. Moreover, when populist radical right-wing parties in Western Europe have gained executive power they most often did so as junior partners of coalition governments. Finally, fundamental freedoms also tend to be firmly embedded in national constitutions in most countries in Western Europe. Constitutional reforms usually require political majorities that are difficult or impossible to acquire by one party due to proportionate electoral systems and increasing political fragmentation in most countries in Western Europe.

Reasons to worry

This is not to say that worries about the corrosion of liberal democracies in Europe are misplaced. Populist radical right parties do not show much willingness to tone down. On the contrary, they tend to radicalise over time. Mainstream parties, in particular centre-right parties, take over highly restrictive positions on immigration and xenophobic rhetoric in order to compete electorally with their rivals at the far-right flank. Most worrying is that mainstream parties also increasingly skim the boundaries of the rule of law or go beyond them when fighting against terrorism or preventing another refugee crisis. This broader corrosion of fundamental freedoms that is taking place in order to protect national security and national identities is nowadays the main threat to liberal democracies. The term populism obscures rather than identifies this threat. That is not to say that the term populism should be discarded altogether. It is a distinguishing rhetorical feature of radical politics at the left- as well as the right-wing flanks of the political spectrum. Yet, it should be clear that populism is not by definition anti-pluralist. Xenophobic nationalism should be the target when identifying the main threat to liberal democracies in Europe.

[1] J.W.Müller, *What Is Populism?* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016

[2] See: T. Akkerman, *Populisme in Nederland na 2002. Een bedreiging voor de liberale democratie?* forthcoming in *Jaarboek Parlementaire Geschiedenis 2017: De stem van het volk.*; S.L. de Lange & M. Rooduijn (2011), 'Een populistische tijdgeest in Nederland? Een inhoudsanalyse van de verkiezingsprogramma's van politieke partijen'. In R. Andeweg & J. (red.) *Democratie doorgelicht: Het functioneren van de Nederlandse democratie*. Leiden: Leiden University Press; L. March, (2012). *Radical left parties in Europe*. London: Routledge; C. Mudde, & Kaltwasser, C. R. (Eds.). (2012). *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or corrective for democracy?*. Cambridge University Press.

[3] A. Akkerman, C. Mudde, A. Zaslove, 'How Populist Are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters' *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol 47, Issue 9, 2014

[4] See for example: W. van der Brug, Fennema, M., & Tillie, J. (2000). *Anti-immigrant parties in Europe: Ideological or protest vote?*. *European Journal of Political Research*, 37(1), 77-102; M. Rooduijn (2017) 'What unites the voter bases of populist parties? Comparing the electorates of 15 populist parties'. *European Political Science Review*, 1-18.

[5] See: T. Akkerman, 'Populist parties in power and their impact on liberal democracies' in R.C. Heinisch, C. Holtz-Bacha, O. Mazzoleni (eds), *Political Populism. A Handbook*, Nomos (forthcoming)