



PERSPECTIVES

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The Rise of Populism in Europe Ahead of the EU Elections

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: European politics is showing a distinct trend towards populism, as evidenced *inter alia* by the electoral results in Italy, Sweden, and Austria. The main reason for this shift is widespread insecurity over the outcomes of the migrant crisis. The rise of populism is likely to be a major factor in the 2019 EU parliamentary elections.

Populism in Europe as a civilizational legacy has a deeply rooted history dating back to Greco-Roman antiquity. As was recorded by classical historians like Livy, the overarching political structure of the Roman Republic was pierced by populism that arose as a result of loopholes in the system. The opposition of Publius Claudius to Roman nobility during the late Republic reflected the way populist discourse functioned in the classical world.

The principles that emerged after WWII in Europe – such as systems of social welfare, social democracy, and cultural integration – tempered the power of populist discourse as a political tool. Moreover, the mass migration of political refugees from eastern to western Europe during the Cold War encouraged the acceptance of refugees and asylum seekers, which came to represent a display of European values.

But the recent wave of immigrants from non-European countries into western Europe planted the seeds of socioeconomic and political turmoil on the continent that ultimately erupted in a revival of populist politics. The political trajectory that began with the tidal migration wave in 2015 pushed people to look towards right-wing politics for solutions.

A recent discussion held in Warsaw between Italian deputy PM Matteo Salvini and Polish politician Jaroslaw Kaczynski juxtaposed a far-right populist coalition in the EU

against the more socio-democratic, center-right leadership of Germany and France. The immigration crisis and the Polish-Italian axis could have a decisive combined impact upon the upcoming elections to the EU parliament.

In the past, it mattered little if the EU elections were carried by the left or the right: the result was the same. The parliament was always the keeper of the federalist flame. But the political upheavals Europe has witnessed in the past two years, including Brexit and Trump's victory in the US presidential election in 2016, have upset the center right liberal orthodoxy in the EU.

National politics in European countries have taken on a populist bent in response to the effects caused by the immigration crisis and economic deprivation on ordinary citizens in Europe. Germany, which was the undisputed leader of the EU, has faced severe social challenges since 2015, when Angela Merkel decided to open the country's borders to what ultimately amounted to more than one million migrants.

Last August, in Italy, migrants coming mainly from the former Italian colony of Eritrea were stranded at a port in Sicily before Italian deputy premier Salvini finally allowed them to disembark after Ireland and the Italian Catholic Church agreed to take most of them in.

Many European states have been exposed to a wave of populism mixed at times with far-right ideological elements. For example, in the September 2018 elections in Sweden, neither main parliamentary bloc ended with a majority and the Sweden Democrats, a far-right, anti-immigrant party, took 17.6% of the vote. This put the country into a state of political limbo. Spain, too, which has resisted populist politics and far-right ideology ever since the end of the Franco era, has seen a new populist wave at the national political level. The striking result of Santiago Abascal's Vox party in the Andalusian election – it gained 10.97% of the vote and 12 of 109 seats – cannot be ignored, though the party remains in its infancy.

The populist discourse now spreading across Europe did not emerge out of the blue. It offers a window into the way regular Europeans perceive their socioeconomic and political circumstances. Still, it is a misconception among analysts that populism sprang up solely in response to unemployment and the economic crisis. Had economic growth been the decisive factor in Poland, which experienced fast growth between 1989 and 2015, the populist Law and Justice Party would never have become the country's dominant political force.

The rise of populism also reflects European antipathy towards mass immigration and the concern felt by ordinary Europeans about the preservation of common European values. This explains why Hungarians have rallied around Victor Orban, who triumphantly calls himself the defender of Christian Europe. Concerns about cultural preservation and the growth of Islam, which can slide into the xenophobic, have been

exploited by populist parties as drawbacks to the cultural apathy of the EU and its center-right liberal democracy. Russia can also be taken as a pivotal influence on populist discourse in Europe, as President Putin's knack for projecting ethno-nationalism and religious traditionalism has served as a model.

The rise of populist political parties under far-right ideologies against the backdrop of impending EU parliamentary elections has undermined the continuation of European integration under a liberal, center-right outlook. The populists' plan to expand their numbers in the EU parliament in the May elections has begun to upset the stability of the EU and its French-German leadership. This year, Europe may face a showdown between newly emerged populism and the social democracy that has been Europe's ruling slogan since 1968.

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