

# POPULISM, ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY AND THE SENSE OF BELONGING AT TIMES OF WAR AND ENERGY CRISIS

**Assoc. Prof. Plamen Ralchev, PhD**

*International Relations Department,  
University of National and World Economy*

## ***Abstract***

*Conflicts and uncertainty usually bring about encapsulation within primordial identities (related to the notion that nations or ethnic identities are fixed, natural and thus sustainable) and deepening the sensitivity about „self“ and „other-ness“. The logic and necessity for survival develops a specific psychological set-up pertinent to ontological security, border-thinking permeating all levels of public and individual life: cognitive, identity-related and material. The migration crisis after 2015 just strengthened this line of thinking and arouse populist rhetoric.*

*Scepticism about the EU runs deeper and wider than populism. The vigour and dynamism of populism has triggered the end of the permissive consensus which allowed the EU and member states' governments to carry out business with limited challenge from their citizens, especially in those policy domains of less interest or impact on citizens' lives. Challenges today arise from nearly every aspect of foreign policy: war and trade sanctions, energy supplies volatility, trade, development aid, immigration and external migration policies, belonging to the international community and its institutions, alliances and organizations. It is more difficult than ever for politicians and policymakers to sustain credibility and provide societal integrity.*

**Keywords:** populism, populist parties, ontological security, migration, identity

Conflicts and uncertainty usually bring about encapsulation within primordial identities (related to the notion that nations or ethnic identities are fixed, natural and ancient) and deepening the sensitivity about „self“ and „other-ness“. The logic and necessity for survival develops a specific psychological set-up pertinent to ontological security, border-thinking permeating all levels of public and

individual life: cognitive, identity-related and material. The migration crisis after 2015 just strengthened this line of thinking and arouse populist rhetoric.

Populist securitization is a conduit through which populist leaders formulate, execute, and justify their realist policy-making. The relevance of a populist government is anchored on the ability of its populist leader to convince the voters that the primary objective of his foreign policies is to secure the interests of the state and its citizens. Populist securitization is a specific symbiosis of leaders who are desperate to keep and execute power and society, which feels uncertain about its survival and future and is susceptible to any risks. Thus, populist securitization is a self-propelling mechanism.

Populism is a contested concept in the literature. Scholars have suggested various approaches to populism, focusing among others on mass movements, economic policy, leadership style, and mass mobilisation. One of the most broadly shared understandings of populism refers to the antagonism of the common people and the elite, but also as a rhetorical strategy or discursive frame. As such, it is a 'strategic tool' that actors select in specific contexts, or it is a 'speech-level phenomenon' that actors deliberately turn on and off. Populism is not so much defined by 'policy content' as by its structural feature, that is, its appeal to „the people“ against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society.

Populism has been rising in Europe since the 1990s. However, the origins reach back to the early 1970s. In a global comparison, Europe is today one of regions where populism is most prevalent. The rise of populism in Europe is closely connected to the emergence and electoral success of right-wing populist parties, with the French *Front National*, founded in 1972, being one of the earliest examples. However, populist parties have also emerged from the mainstream, in the form of neoliberal populist parties, such as *Forza Italia* and from the left, mainly in the wake of the financial and economic crisis, with examples being *Syriza* in Greece and *Podemos* in Spain. Central and Eastern Europe has been the birthplace of the ideologically more moderate 'centrist populism'. Overall, populism in Europe is characterised by its diversity. In the meantime, it has reached the centres of political power: in 2019, over one third of European populist parties were part of a national government. But even where they were not, their electoral success is likely to have shaped policies of the mainstream parties. In addition to the national level, populism has also taken root at the European level: in the European Parliament, the European Council and the Commission, the rise of populism presents a challenge for the EU's political system and decision-making.<sup>1</sup>

Political analysts, journalists, and scholars have begun to draw a close connection between people's personal insecurities and the rise of populism on

---

<sup>1</sup> Pintsch, A., D. Hammerschmidt & C. Meyer (2022) Introduction: The Decline of Democracy and Rise of Populism in Europe and Their Effect on Democracy Promotion, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 35:4, 405-423, DOI: 10.1080/09557571.2022.2082797

the left and right of the political spectrum. The loss of faith in mainstream political parties is particularly strongly associated with their response to the global financial crisis that has led to widespread public spending cuts, speeding up the re-stratification of communities, and lowering the living standards disproportionately.

Populism as a concept and ideology appeals to the ‘common’ or ‘ordinary’ person by drawing a dividing line between the good common people and the bad corrupt elite. The politics of populism merge the power struggles and emotional contexts that involve who (or what) gets to be considered ‘common’ or ‘ordinary’, and who does not. Populism is often related to nativism, a revolt against elites and sometimes the media or the press. Though its meaning may depend on the operative contexts, boundary-making practices, especially those relating to the emotionally charged processes of nationalism and patriotism, are inevitably implicated in populist politics.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of ‘ontological security’ provides understanding of political behaviour and the connection between individual anxieties and populist politics. Ontological security is the ‘security of being’, the need for continuity and a sense of predictability in our cognitive and social worlds. Ontological security builds on the intellectual heritage of psychology and sociology, but it has been taken up as a concept relevant to understanding the behaviour of nation states in the discipline of International Relations since the mid-2000s, uprooting the concept from its use in reference to individuals and groups. What makes this concept so useful, including for understanding the complex phenomenon of populism, is precisely that it can be applied at various levels of analysis – from individuals and smaller, more micropolitical settings, to broader political communities, regions, and the world.<sup>3</sup>

Kinnvall and Svensson stipulate that populist mobilisation and the polarisation of everyday insecurities are preconditioned by structural and affective changes. This means not only the centrality of emotions, but also the reproduction of structural power and power relations at both a local – individual and social – and a global level. Collective emotions as ‘patterns of relationships’ and ‘belonging’ are related to crisis narratives and ontological (in)security that are rooted in widespread perceptions of ominous and uncontrollable change at the global level. These dynamics, and their impact on everyday populism and the populist ‘mind’, are exploited through fantasy and emotional governance. While emotional governance can refer to everyday emotionally charged utterances and statements made by politicians and other prominent figures, it can also be read in a Foucauldian sense as techniques of surveillance, control, and manipulation. In the latter sense the term refers to the ways in which society governs

---

<sup>2</sup> Pintsch, A., D. Hammerschmidt & C. Meyer (2022) Introduction: The Decline of Democracy and Rise of Populism in Europe and Their Effect on Democracy Promotion, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 35:4, 405-423, DOI: 10.1080/09557571.2022.2082797

<sup>3</sup> Steele, B., A. Homolar, *Populism and Ontological Insecurities* (2019) <https://www.inthelongrun.org/criviaws/article/populism-and-ontological-insecurities>

emotions through the cultural and institutional processes of everyday life, meaning the ways in which it affords individuals with a sense of what is regarded as appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and the circumstances in which certain emotions (e.g. fear, hatred, and contempt) become acceptable. Populist agents seek to project a fantasy narrative that concurrently reinforces reified notions of belonging and alters norms regarding what is deemed to be acceptable behaviour.<sup>4</sup>

Covid-19 pandemic created a widely dispersed state of uncertainty. Quarantine, closed borders, and drastic restrictions of individuals' day-to-day lives are political responses that have fashioned a new 'normality' that undermines and unsettles the ordinary routines that create a sense of continuity and provide answers to questions about 'doing, acting, and being'. However, the pandemic is only the latest iteration in terms of the appeal of populist movements around the world. To gain a deeper understanding of how populist politics and sentiments emerge, we – in addition to wider socio-economic and political change – need to recognise the role of group-identification and the yearning to belong, the role of leadership and social media narratives, and emotional attachments to cultural memories and desires. People gain a sense of belonging through attachments to justifying ideologies, and they experience an increase in self-esteem and status as their personal and social ties are felt to be valorised and to matter. At the same time, such attachments can also engender a sense of danger, excitement, and risk – which, in turn, are often tied to desires to engage in acts of vengeance or revenge. Leaders are likely to use populist narratives to instil a sense of togetherness among individuals whose interests are not necessarily concordant. By employing the power of imagination, myth, and fantasy, and by capitalising on ontological insecurity and existential anxiety in times of uncertainty, populist leaders can reach a large subsection of society.<sup>5</sup>

The European Union faces many crises and risks to its security and existence. Though not many of them threaten directly the lives of EU citizens, they all create a sense of anxiety and insecurity about the future for many ordinary Europeans. These crises include obvious challenges of sovereign debt and fiscal austerity; refugees from conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria; the rise of populist far-right parties across Europe; as well as the uncertainty of a possibly disintegrating European Union (EU) as a result of the „Brexit“ process. But behind these challenges lie less visible insecurities about economic prospects, social wellbeing, and a widespread expectation that the EU is unable to answer the challenges of twenty-first century global politics. In other words, the greatest security challenge facing people across Europe is not physical, despite the threats of Putin's War in Ukraine, but a sense of fear and anxiety that seems to permeate everyday lives of many European citizens and denizens. Scholars of European security struggle to explain the linkages between the relatively low physical risks to contemporary

---

<sup>4</sup> Kinnvall, C., & Svensson, T. (2022). Exploring the Populist 'Mind': Anxiety, Fantasy, and Everyday Populism. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24(3), 526-542. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481221075925>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

EU citizens and the feelings of fear, anxiety, and threat felt by European populations. Similarly, scholars of the European Union have been largely unable to move beyond a focus on institutional, legal, and policy challenges to the Union to account for pressures from anxious and fearful individuals and groups in search of existential answers to their real and imagined predicaments as shown in recent opinion polls.<sup>6</sup>

An ontological security approach provides leverage for understanding how fears and anxieties at group, state, and EU level have psycho-sociopolitical effects that shape political movements, policy debates, and European security. International issues such as European integration, global issues such as financial instability and precarious refugees, as well as global issues such as agricultural failure and climate change, all densely interweave collective unconscious processes and identity-making notions of self and other. In other words, the EU experience of economic, social and political processes of mutual accommodation and inclusion by European states and peoples encompasses the generation and addressing of ontological (in)security within and between the EU and its member societies in ways that speak loudly about global politics more broadly.<sup>7</sup>

Kinnvall and Mitzen refer to Giddens who brings the concepts of ontological security and existential anxiety to bear on understandings of modernity and globalization more generally as he moves ontological security to the societal level and as he is careful to take into account a more structural understanding of the concept. Giddens considers ontological security as having a 'sense of place' as the world is changing, a 'place' that provides 'a psychological tie between the biography of the individual and the locales that are the settings of the time-space paths through which that individual moves'. He distinguishes between routine situations and critical ones, where the former constitutes the core of ontological security, while the latter involves those instances when the certitudes of institutional routines are threatened or destroyed. This also describes, to speak with a number of critical security scholars, the disjuncture between a normal, routinized order and the exceptional, critical order in which securitization becomes about exceptional politics imbued with national security concerns.<sup>8</sup>

Ontological security scholars posit individuals are not merely concerned with their physical security but also with their sense of being. Nation-states play a vital role in addressing this need, providing a stable environment and a national narrative that individuals are embedded within. This leads to an interest in the maintenance of national identity and subjectivity, which can have a tremendous impact on state behaviour and it especially accelerates the outreach of populist parties.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Kinnvall, C., I. Manners and J. Mitzen, *Ontological (In)security in the European Union*, EUROPEAN SECURITY 2018, VOL. 27, NO. 3, 249-265 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2018.1497977>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Kinnvall, C. & J. Mitzen. (2018). *Ontological Security and Conflict: the Dynamics of Crisis and the Constitution of Community*. *Journal of International Relations and Development*. 21. 10.1057/s41268-018-0161-1.

<sup>9</sup> Bolton, D., *Targeting Ontological Security: Information Warfare in the Modern Age*, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2021 doi: 10.1111/pops.12691 0162-895X

The crisis of advanced representative democracies is crucial to understand the rise of populism, especially in the European context. The EU plays a major role in managing interdependence, the additional supranational or intergovernmental levels of decision-making are contested and seen as illegitimate, as a dislocation of legitimacy and responsibility. It is at the European level that the nexus between internal and external policy plays out the most, and it is seen as far away from the people – „take back control“ was the slogan of the Brexiters during the referendum campaign. In Europe right-wing populists especially have been winning larger shares of the vote in recent legislative elections, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of data drawn primarily from ParlGov, a clearinghouse for cross-national political information. Recent elections in Italy and Sweden have been resounding successes for right-wing populist parties, underscoring the growing electoral strength that such parties have displayed in Europe in recent years. In Spain, the share of the vote going to populist parties roughly doubled between 2015 and 2019 – when the country’s most recent legislative election took place – rising from around 13% to around 25%. This was especially the case among populists on the right, with the Vox party seeing its vote share grow from around 10% to around 15% during that span. In the Netherlands, right-leaning populist parties garnered around 16% of the vote in 2021 – a high not seen in nearly a decade of parliamentary elections.<sup>10</sup> In both Hungary and Poland, right-wing populist parties have surged to power, making enormous gains in the last two decades. In Hungary, Viktor Orban’s Fidesz party has been in power since 2010. In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice Party (PIS) roughly quadrupled their vote share between 2001 and 2019, from around one-in-ten votes to around four-in-ten.<sup>11</sup>

In Belgium and France, while the overall share of voters supporting populist parties has grown substantially in recent years, there have been gains for both right- and left-leaning populist parties. The right-leaning Flemish Interest party won around 12% of Belgium’s vote in 2019, marking one of its most successful elections since 2007. But the left-leaning Worker’s Party of Belgium has also been ascendent, winning around 9% of the vote in 2019, up from less than 1% in 2007. In France, the share of voters casting first-round ballots for a populist party has risen from around 10% in the 1980s to around 44% as of the 2022 election. On the right, the National Rally party – previously called National Front – has steadily increased its vote share in parliamentary elections since 2007 and, under Marine LePen’s leadership, became one of the two parties in the second round of the last two presidential elections. La France Insoumise, a populist party on the left, garnered around a quarter of the first-round parliamentary bloc in 2022 – though it did so as part of a far-left bloc alongside the Socialist Party, the Greens and the French Communist Party.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Silver, L., Populists in Europe - especially those on the right - have increased their vote shares in recent elections, Pew Research Center [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org) (6.10.2022)

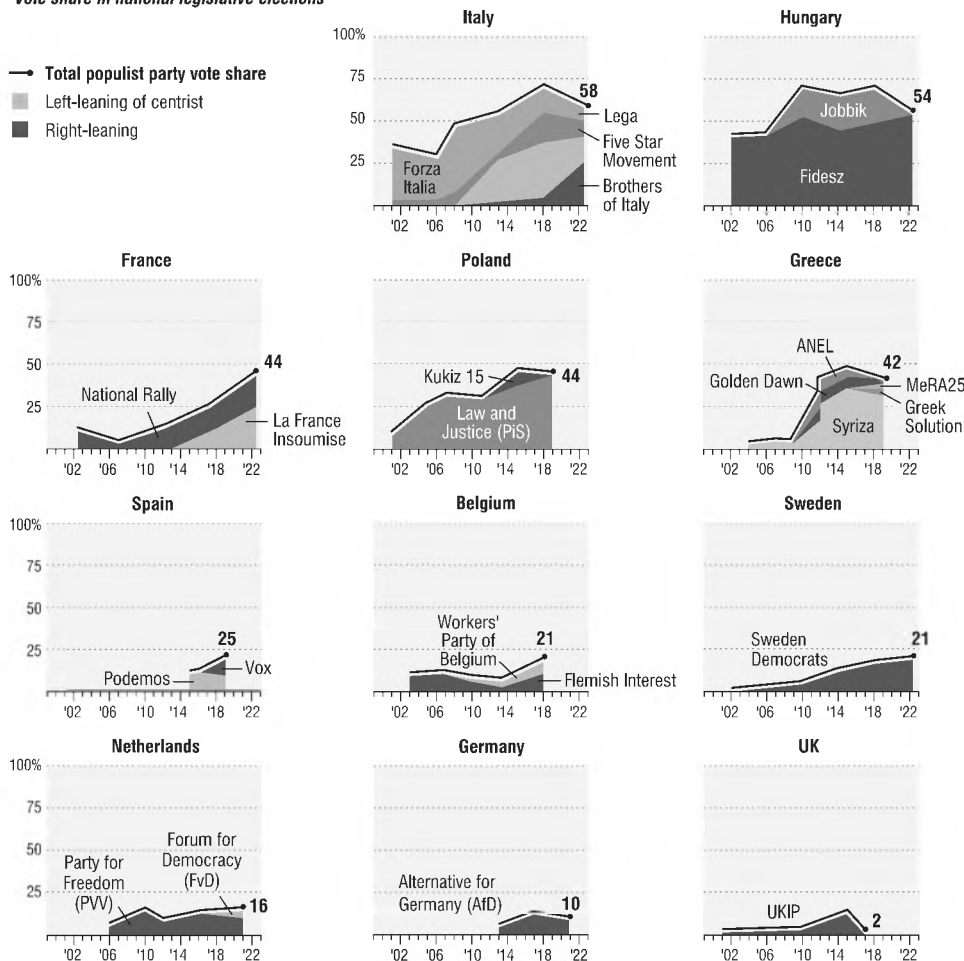
<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Silver, L., Populists in Europe - especially those on the right - have increased their vote shares in recent elections, Pew Research Center [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org) (6.10.2022)

Germany and Greece somewhat buck the trend. In Germany, support for the right-leaning Alternative for Germany (AfD) fell nationally in the country's most recent election in 2021, knocking it from its claim as the largest opposition party and the third-biggest party overall, though it remains a force in eastern Germany. And in Greece, while populist parties still garner a large share of the vote, their popularity has been falling slightly in recent years. Left-leaning Syriza is significantly more popular there than right-leaning parties, including Greek Solution and Golden Dawn.<sup>13</sup>

## Populist parties have increased their vote shares in many recent European elections

*Vote share in national legislative elections*



Note: Data presented is only for 2000-2022: some of these parties have competed in elections and won vote share for longer than that period. Party list vote is used for Germany; first-round results are used for France. For more on European populist parties, see Appendix. Source: ParlGov, Swedish Election Authority and the Guardian.

**PEW RESEARCH CENTER**

<sup>13</sup> Silver, L., Populists in Europe - especially those on the right - have increased their vote shares in recent elections, Pew Research Center [www.pewresearch.org](https://www.pewresearch.org) (6.10.2022)

Despite their electoral gains in many countries, most populist political parties in Europe – on the right and left – are broadly unpopular, according to Pew Research Center surveys. In fact, outside of Hungary, where the ruling right-populist party Fidesz is seen favourably by 55% of the public, no party receives favourable ratings from a majority of the public.

Though Pew Research Center survey did not include populist parties in Bulgaria, this type of parties there (though only reaching margins of up to 10% of the overall votes with declining trends afterwards) were also present on the political landscape in the last decade. (See Stoyanov and Ralchev, 2020)

The frequently made correlation between economic crisis and the rise of populism does not stand empirical testing; there are cases in which populism has grown without economic crisis (in Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands), and cases in which economic crisis has not facilitated the rise of populism (Ireland and Portugal). Greece saw a populist party grow under economic pressure, but the ongoing migration crisis there has not caused a xenophobic populist backlash beyond a few episodes. Golden Dawn, and extreme right-wing xenophobic, but not populist, party lost attraction with the refugee influx.<sup>14</sup>

More recently, the German AfD showed a surge when switching from its original anti-Euro rhetoric to an anti-immigration one during the refugee influx, reaping some short-lived electoral benefits from it during 2016. Indeed, fears of immigration have probably been the easiest sentiment to mobilize and manipulate. Yet this does not mean that cultural identity is the cause of populism; it has merely proven to be an area where rage and anger can be instrumentalized into vocal opposition, and has been successful at paralyzing policy responses of governments.<sup>15</sup>

Alongside globalization, Europeanization has widened the scope of foreign policy and at the same time domesticized it: external issues have become more relevant at home and domestic issues have become more relevant in foreign policy. The crises of national democracy which have helped the rise of populism in European states reverberates at the EU level because the EU and its external policy is an easy target for populism. Hence the impact on areas which had so far gone largely unnoticed by European publics. Europeanization and cooperation among EU Member States complicates policy-making and its accountability. Not only are national democracies undergoing crises, but their linkages to accountability at the EU level are unclear. Institutional engineering by widening the powers of the European Parliament, strengthening co-decision or improving transparency have not provided sufficient solutions when the malaise is deep. The dislocation of decision-making to supranational levels, albeit carried out by legitimately elected representatives, has made European politics and policies another easy target. In essence, the EU is seen as illegitimate, regardless

---

<sup>14</sup> Balfour, R., (2022), *The (Resistable) Rise of Populism in Europe and its Impact on European and International Cooperation*, Europe Programme, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Brussels, [www.gmfus.org](http://www.gmfus.org)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



of the content of the discussions held in Brussels. So, populism has an impact on the EU, while the EU is seen as a cause of populism.<sup>16</sup>

**Most populist parties in Europe -  
on the ideological right and left - do not have majority support**  
% who a favorable view of...

	L/R		2021 %	2022 %	'21-'22 change
Hungary	Right	Fidesz*	46	55	Δ 9
France	Left	La France Insoumise	33	39	Δ 6
Spain	Right	Vox	23	26	Δ 3
Sweden	Right	Sweden Democrats	27	29	Δ 2
France	Right	National Rally	25	27	Δ 2
Belgium	Right	Flemish Interest	21	22	Δ 1
Germany	Right	AfD	15	15	0
Hungary	Right	Jobbik*	13	13	0
Spain	Left	Podemos	28	27	▽ 1
Italy	Right	Lega	28	23	▽ 4
Greece	Left	Syriza	25	20	▽ 5
Italy	Right	Forza Italia	36	30	▽ 6
Greece	Right	Greek Solution (EL)	22	16	▽ 6
Poland	Right	Law and Justice*	45	38	▽ 7
Netherlands	Right	Party for Freedom (PVV)	31	24	▽ 7
Italy	Center	Five Star Movement	38	29	▽ 9
Netherlands	Right	Forum for Democracy (FvD)	25	15	▽ 10
Italy	Right	Brothers of Italy	-	32	-

\* Hungary and Poland were not surveyed in 2021; data shown is from 2019 and change shown is 2019-2022.

Note: Brothers of Italy was not asked about in 2021. For more information on European populist parties, see Appendix

Source: Spring 2022 Global Attitudes Survey

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

<sup>16</sup> Balfour, R., (2022), The (Resistable) Rise of Populism in Europe and its Impact on European and International Cooperation, Europe Programme, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Brussels, [www.gmfus.org](http://www.gmfus.org)

Scepticism about the EU runs deeper and wider than populism. Populism's force and rage has triggered the end of the permissive consensus which allowed the EU and member states' governments to carry out business with limited challenge from their citizens, especially in those policy domains of less interest or impact on citizens' lives, such as international relations. Challenges today arise from nearly every aspect of foreign policy: war and trade sanctions, energy supplies volatility, trade, development aid, immigration and external migration policies, belonging to the international community and its institutions, alliances and organizations. It is more difficult than ever for politicians and policymakers to sustain credibility and provide societal integrity.

### **Bibliography:**

- Balfour, R., (2022), The (Resistable) Rise of Populism in Europe and its Impact on European and International Cooperation, Europe Programme, German Marshall Fund of the United States, Brussels, [www.gmfus.org](http://www.gmfus.org)
- Bolton, D., Targeting Ontological Security: Information Warfare in the Modern Age, *Political Psychology*, Vol. 42, No. 1, 2021 doi: 10.1111/pops.12691 0162-895X
- Kinnvall, C., I. Manners and J. Mitzen. (2018). Ontological (In)security in the European Union, *EUROPEAN SECURITY* 2018, VOL. 27, NO. 3, 249-265 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2018.1497977>
- Kinnvall, C., J. Mitzen. (2018). Ontological Security and Conflict: the Dynamics of Crisis and the Constitution of Community. *Journal of International Relations and Development*. 21. 10.1057/s41268-018-0161-1.
- Kinnvall, C., T. Svensson. (2022). Exploring the Populist 'Mind': Anxiety, Fantasy, and Everyday Populism. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24(3), 526-542. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481221075925>
- Pintsch, A., D. Hammerschmidt, C. Meyer. (2022). Introduction: The Decline of Democracy and Rise of Populism in Europe and Their Effect on Democracy Promotion, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 35:4, 405-423, DOI: 10.1080/09557571.2022.2082797
- Silver, L., Populists in Europe - especially those on the right - have increased their vote shares in recent elections, Pew Research Center [www.pewresearch.org](http://www.pewresearch.org) (6.10.2022)
- Steele, B., A. Homolar, Populism and Ontological Insecurities (2019) <https://www.inthelongrun.org/crivierviews/article/populism-and-ontological-insecurities>
- Stoyanov, D., P. Ralchev. (2020). When Anti-establishment and Euroskepticism Converge: Bulgarian Party Politics 2001-2019, in: *Bulgaria's Democratic Institutions at Thirty: A Balance Sheet*, ed. by K. Engelbrekt and P. Kostadinova, Lexington Books, 2020, 223-240