

# EUROPEAN CRISIS: THE RISE OF POPULISM AND EUROSCEPTICISM

*Asst. Prof. Hristina Runcheva Tasev, PhD  
Asst. Prof. Milena Apostolovska-Stepanoska, PhD  
Faculty of Law “Iustinianus Primus” in Skopje,  
“Ss. Cyril and Methodius” University, Macedonia*

## ***Abstract:***

*Eurosceptic and populist parties have shown strong tendencies to win power and set the political agenda for the last decades in several EU countries. The elections in some of those countries have shown that they didn't achieve their goals, but they won significant number of votes that indicates that euroscepticism and populism are not dead.*

*The paper presents an overview of the results of some Eurosceptic and populist movements at the national elections in several EU Member States and it searches for an answer to the questions whether populism and euroscepticism are a 21st century invention, what is the ideological background of the crisis of legitimacy in the EU, how do they relate to classical political ideologies, what is the response of the mainstream politicians to these threats. The theoretical debate, which includes an overview of some of the key authors, is enhanced by the author's contribution of recommendations for the possible convincing alternatives which should be put forward to counter this phenomenon to preserve the European project.*

***Keywords:*** Euroscepticism, Populism, Ideology, European Union

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## **Introduction**

The European Union faced numerous crises in the last decade, starting from the constitutional to the economic and fiscal crisis, the crises of democracy and legitimacy, the refugee crises. Brexit, the results of the 2014 European Parliament elections, the increasing support for extremist parties in many Member States are just a few more cornerstones that indicate a popular backlash to future European integration. The so-called “populist” and “Eurosceptic” movements and parties have been on the rise for the recent decades in several EU countries. Although these parties are not part of the governments and are unable to set the political agenda, their active presence and participation in elections means that they are

making serious attempts to gain power and shape the European future. The referendum in Italy and its vote against the constitutional reforms proposed by the former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi was seen as one of the next big populist threats to the political establishment after Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as the US President.

This year will be marked by the elections in three key EU countries: the Netherlands, France and Germany, whose results are expected to shape the European future and to show the directions in which the mainstream politicians will respond to the threats of populism and Euroscepticism.

The elections in the Netherlands at the beginning of 2017 were considered as a litmus test for populism in Europe. The victory of the centre-right Prime Minister Mark Rutte was seen as a relief by other EU governments facing a wave of nationalism. Although the anti-Islam and anti-EU party of Geert Wilders did not win the elections, it became the second biggest party in the Netherlands by the number of seats in the Parliament. As it seems, its far-right politics will not immediately fade away since the coalition talks on forming new government have begun, but it might take months to finalise them by finding at least three coalition partners to secure the seats needed to govern. The election manifesto of Wilders was based on closing borders to immigrants from Muslim nations, closing down mosques, ban of Koran, Nexit, or taking the Netherlands out of the European Union (Graham, 2017). It encouraged the support of the former UKIP leader Nigel Farage, who stated that through the Dutch elections, the French elections, etc., you will see a continuance of this revolution against global governance. On the other hand, the Prime Minister Rutte considered the victory of his party as an obstacle to resurgent nationalism, claiming “The Netherlands said ‘Stop’ to the wrong sort of populism.” The results in the Netherlands were greeted by the political establishment in Europe and were seen as “very pro-European” by the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and as “a clear victory against extremism” by French President, François Hollande (“Dutch elections: Rutte starts coalition talks”, 2017).

The recent French elections ended with a victory of Emmanuel Macron over the anti-EU far right candidate Marine Le Pen. The political establishment of the Union immediately stated the undoubted support for the European oriented policies. German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, acknowledged Makron’s advocacy in the election campaign for a united and cosmopolitan European Union. The decision of the French voters is thus also a clear commitment to Europe. Francois Hollande, the outgoing French President, stated that “Macron's victory confirms France's ‘attachment to the European Union, as well as to the openness of France to the world’” (Johnson, 2017).

The upcoming German elections probably will remain resistant to the populist movements. Although a rise in the Eurosceptic movement across the region has also spilled over into Germany, currently looks unlikely to change political trends in Germany dramatically. Namely, the polls show that the Bundestag majority will be held by a moderate government, besides the fact that the major groups keep losing power through the years of governance.

But Euroscepticism is not dead and buried. This paper presents an overview of the rise of the populism and Euroscepticism in the EU throughout the strong influence of the radical political parties.

## **Populism and Euroscepticism- are they a 21st century invention?**

The citizens of western European countries for over twenty years have been showing lack of confidence in the institutions and politicians leading their democracies. The European Union has been a subject to this process, too. The ideas for Euroscepticism and Europhobia have found a fruitful ground for their development and were accompanied by the rise of the populist and radical movements.

Euroscepticism is commonly defined as “the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration” (Taggart, 1998, p. 366). Scholars often focus on distinguishing between “hard” and “soft” Euroskeptics (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2003); the latter, also called “Eurorejectionism” (Kopecky and Mudde, 2002), reject both the principle of an ever closer union, as well as the current state of the EU institutions.

The term very often is used in conjunction with populism, and although these phenomena intersect, they should be distinguished. Populism is a much broader term that is used in the context of national political games and primarily refers to the rejection of an elite or ‘political class’ in favour of the interests of the people. There are few different types of populism that can be distinguished.

In the older sense, populism is considered as an exclusively associated concept with right-wing populist movements. It is used as another word for radical right aggressive xenophobia, expressed in a demagogic style. A second type of populism can be labelled as “media populism” or populism as a new style of communication politics. In the new information society and “mass media democracy“, with diminished ideological party differences, populism is increasingly becoming the dominant style of politics. Through election campaigns and permanent communication strategies (spin doctors) political leaders are trying to connect to a mass audience for vote maximisation and popular approval. In a way, modern democracies are doomed to be populist in this sense (Puhle, 2003, p. 17). The third type of populism is the so-called new populism, when groups and movements no longer identify the structural conflict in modern society and politics as one between left and right, but between “the people” and “the elite”, both perceived as homogenous groups (Krastev, 2006). The new populism shows deep revolt towards the world conceived and promoted by the mainstream political, cultural and economic elites.

The idea of Euroscepticism was born in the early 1980’s with the British mistrust in the process of deepening the European integration and it was spread all over the countries that were skeptical on further development of the European project.

The idea of Moravcsik that the states continue to be the decisive actors in the “widening and deepening” of the European Union was under the attack by the authority given to the European Union to promulgate laws which had direct effect in the Member States and were affecting the principle of national sovereignty.

For a long time, some have thought that European law could be rejected by the Member States in the national interest. But, in practice, no state resisted the judgements of the European Court of Justice for very long and European law grew in scope and importance (Anderson, 2001, p. 43).

Developments in public opinion regarding European issues can be characterised by three main stages (Chopin, 2015, pp. 1–2). Firstly, a structural change occurred starting from the 1990’s by the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. The “critical moment” for Euroscepticism

was really a protracted period marked by the deepening of European integration on the one hand, the end of the Cold War on the other, and the death of the permissive consensus as a consequence (Topaloff, 2012, p. 40).

The second stage was related to the French and Dutch “no” to the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, followed by the Irish “no” to the Lisbon Treaty in 2008 that challenged the foundations of the permissive consensus theory. This has led to the development of the “constraining dissensus” theory which was characterized by an increase in the divisive nature of European questions and by their use by political players to partisan ends (Hogge and Marks, 2008, pp. 1–23).

Thirdly, the crisis affecting the European Union has led to a decline in citizen support and confidence in the Union and its institutions. In fact, even with the introduction of the Maastricht Treaty, which contained provisions on introducing the single currency, common and security policy, and closer cooperation in the fields of justice and home affairs, a nationalistic backlash was created, or more correctly characterized, by a term which gained currency in France, as a “sovereigntist” revolt (Anderson, 2001, p. 43). The objections were mainly targeting the process of granting more power to European institutions which were considered as too remote, dominated by technocrats, less accountable, more corrupted and less democratic compared to national institutions. Less than a half Europeans tend to trust the European Union (47%) and this percentage is slightly increasing (Eurobarometer, April 2017, p. 4). The fact that majority of citizens believe that their voice is not being heard by the EU’s institutions strongly affects the legitimacy of the European project. According to David Easton’s systems theory in political science, the inputs of the political system are consisted of demands and supports of the citizens, and the outputs are decisions and actions by the institutions (Easton, 1965). When the voice of the citizens is not being heard, and the institutions act on their own, certainly there is a deep legitimacy crisis and the outputs are not responding to the demands and the support of the citizens of the Union. Additional impact over the development of Euroscepticism had the content of the EU Treaties, which are considered as over-complicated and incomprehensible to the ordinary citizen.

Another theoretical fact is that the Euroscepticism tends to develop more intensively under the terms of crisis. For example, Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal, which were strongly affected by the economic crisis, have shown highest levels of mistrust in the European institutions (Muro and Vidal, 2016). But the most recent research shows that Euroscepticism was developed not only in countries that have been strongly affected by the economic crisis, but also in countries which economic results have been on a good track. This can be found in Germany where public opinion shows concerns that a downturn in economic and budgetary conditions (high levels of unemployment and public debt) in other Member States (for “example in Greece or Spain) may have a “spill-over effect” and a negative impact on their domestic economy and on the Union’s ability to achieve positive economic results (Chopin, 2015, p. 2).

The European Union has been through several types of crises. Now, when the economic and social indicators show positive development, the Union is going through the process of Brexit. Instead of EU enlargement, the Union is concerned about the process of shrinking.

## **Ideological background of the crisis of legitimacy in the EU**

It has been common practice in Europe to identify populism with the new radical right parties. Today the new populism not only comes from the right, but increasingly from the anti-liberal protectionist left as well. One of the actual problems is that the new anti-globalisation populism is no longer restricted to the relatively small “home constituencies” of the far right parties. The populist discontent with established politics and with the perceived disruption of internationalisation (global neo-liberalism, mass migration, the destruction of national borders) is extending to great parts of the middle class electorate (Cuperus, 2007).

The ideological interconnection between the populism and right parties is partly a result of the drift to the right in the European political discourse regarding issues of immigration, terrorism, Islam and the concept of a multicultural society. The ongoing transformation on the party political landscape in Europe is a result of a few factors.

The first one is the end of the traditional mass parties that have ruled since the end of the Second World War, that have lost members, voters, élan, and a monopoly on ideas. Due to changes in labour, family and cultural lifestyles, the Christian Democratic (conservative) and Social Democratic pillars of civil society are eroding, leaving behind “people’s parties” with shrinking numbers of people. The traditional emancipatory mass parties are losing their masses.

The second issue related to the European crisis is the question of ethnic diversity. Intellectual discourse was long characterised by a post-Holocaust and post-colonial political correctness which praised multiculturalism and “the foreigner” as enriching society while turning a blind eye to the *de facto* segregation and marginalisation of many new immigrants, as well as the stress they placed on the welfare system in many nations. The potential cultural conflict between Europe’s liberal-permissive societies and orthodox Islam was also ignored (Cuperus, 2007). What makes this populist discourse right-wing is its strongly xenophobic character, and the fact that in all cases immigrants are presented as a threat to the identity of the people, while multiculturalism is perceived as being imposed by the elites against the popular will. In most cases this populism also contains a strong anti-EU element, European integration being identified with the authoritarian strategy of the elites (Mouffe, 2005, p.69).

A third element of the crisis is the process of European integration. At the beginning, the process was considered as a successful cooperation between nations in the post-war period, but the European integration became a stumbling block after the large enlargement in 2004 with ten new Member States that resulted with public opinion against further expansion. Besides, the concept of European integration has changed dramatically, regardless of the process of enlargement of the Union: from largely an elitist process in a small number of economic areas, now the EU has evolved into an all-encompassing regulator, as well as a redistributor. The challenges of EU policy gridlock, such as the low level of popular legitimacy and a lack of democratic accountability, according to Simon Hix are symptoms of the shift in the policy agenda of the EU: from market building to the challenge of economic reform. Hix points out that in practice most European regulatory policies have significant redistributive consequences and besides, the challenges now facing the EU are very different from those it faced at the time of its foundation. As Hix observes, the issues of economic and social reform of the EU are inherently political and they produce winners and losers. The *redistributive policy* by the Union creates tensions and therefore, this more “mature” phase requires a different style of

politics, one that legitimizes redistributive outcomes through enhanced political contestation (Hix, 2008). To date, however, the EU has failed to adapt its formal rules and informal habits to match the new policy context. There is no common European demos that can decide, but rather 27 various national publics. The resulting gridlock has additionally fueled public perceptions regarding the EU's illegitimacy.

The fourth component is the fact that much of this discontent was channeled through the rise of far right or radical right populist movements and in Europe, unlike in America, populism is more or less associated with fascism and Nazism, the pathologies of the "voice of the masses" (Cuperus, 2007).

### **Euroscepticism and populism – ideological diversity**

The mainstream political phenomenon is that the Eurosceptics and populists have moved from the periphery towards the centre of political power. Labelling the extreme right parties as the only populist parties in Europe is a stereotype. The analysis shows that the Eurosceptics constitute the larger and ideologically more diverse political force in the European Parliament – so diverse that it can hardly be perceived as a united force. They express their discontent of the European Union and its institutions organized within the far-left and more or less moderate right political groups (Bertocini and Koenig, 2014, p. 18).

The rise of radical populist, Eurosceptic and even Europhobic trends, on the right and on the left, emphasizes the deep political crisis in European liberal democracy. The findings of the political theorists Mouffe and Laclau, that if democracy wants to preserve its superiority among other political systems, it must return to the people, became central in the focus of the scholars. That forms the essence of populism Mouffe does not consider populism as an ideology but rather as a political form capable of articulating identities, interests, and needs that have been delegitimized by centre-right and centre-left parties. She believes that the populist politicians do not act exclusively to gain political power, but it is also a necessary way to overcome the lack of alternatives embodied by the traditional parties of the past decades (Shahid, *The Nation*, 2016).

As a consequence of framed democracies, populism has become the only productive form to take into account the demands of the people and to promote collective participation (Zabala, 2017). With an analogy to the right and left-wing policies, there has been developed rightist and leftist populism with different concepts that shape each of them. Right-wing populism was used by the most exposed figures, such as Donald Trump and Nigel Farage, who have used their political programs to promote the "politics of fear" in Hobbes' terms, using emotional approach to convince people that national identity should be restricted to the people of the states, excluding immigrants, refugees and foreigners in general, and strengthening the nationalism, as a crisis of identity (Smith, 2003). This feature of exclusion of certain categories is present in the left-wing populism and its most prominent exponents, Bernie Sanders and Pablo Iglesias. Their criticism is towards some sectors of the establishment that are in service of neo-liberal global corporations. Sanders is standing for breaking up the big banks, and Iglesias is against the Spanish "caste" that includes the two major political parties, left and right-wing. The bipartisanly dominated political systems can be found in the UK and in the United States, and they need to be reformed since they have lost much of the traditional voters support.

The elections have shown success on the side of the right-wing populism, whose representatives are elected to the positions of power and defeat of the left-wing populism. The last attempt of the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn in the UK ended with a defeat in the parliamentary elections, when his left-wing populism programme was second-ranked at the elections.

## **Conclusions**

Eurosceptic and populist parties have shown strong tendencies to win power and set the political agenda for the last decades in several EU countries. The elections in some of those countries have shown that they didn't achieve their goals, but they won significant number of votes, which indicates that Euroscepticism and populism are not dead.

The crisis in economic liberalism is reflected in a political crisis and that creates good foundations for the resurgence of populism and extremism in many European states. In addition, the aggressive terrorist attacks and the migrant influx have reminded us that the EU needs to reassert the basis of liberal democracy. Citizens need to feel safe and at the same to be free and have the feeling of belonging to a community. The history presents facts that if these requests of the citizens are not taken into account, there is a danger that they might be taken by radical and anti European forces.

The mainstream parties should work on restoring the trust in the European institutions and to revive euro-enthusiasm, which is not an easy task with a high level of democratic deficit and the recent developments after Brexit. Their political offer should be more problem-solving oriented and should be directed towards tackling issues, such as security, the migrant crisis, the great influx of migrants to many EU societies, terrorism, globalization, and social issues, such as unemployment, education and prevention of radicalization of young people. The political actors in the European Union should work together on creating a strong policy agenda that will retrieve the trust of the EU citizens and create more Euro-optimistic environment.

The first very important step is building an enhanced security policy with further commitment from all Member States of the Union. This refers to strengthening the common asylum system in the EU and better-coordinated management of the external borders of the European Union. This goes together with restoring the full functionality of Schengen after lifting the temporary border controls. Another way to affect the level of security of the European Union caused by the massive migrants influx is a reform of the Dublin system, which is responsible for the examination of the asylum application together with reforms for enhanced cooperation and information exchange between Member States of the Union with the Prüm Treaty for cross-border cooperation. It provides an opportunity for automatic comparison of data such as DNA, fingerprints, vehicle registration data, which are crucial in the fight against crime in the process of gathering evidence and prosecuting the perpetrators. This framework applies only to a very small number of Member States that meet the legal and technical conditions for its implementation, although it may give very good results in fighting organized crime and terrorism.

Another necessity is more effective investments of EU money into growth-creating industries and technologies, and careful spending on cohesion policies supporting employment, innovation, education, and inclusion. Besides, one very important step should be taken: in EU Member States that lag behind, the EC should develop stronger commitment to monitor

the effective use of EU funds. This means monitoring not just the process of accountable spending, but spending that creates large added value thereafter. Otherwise, our societies will remain in the status quo: being corrupted, without further development, unless the living standard of the majority of people is raised drastically.

In addition, EU citizens need to feel that they belong to the community and to develop the connection with the EU institutions and policies. There is a need for more representative European Parliament and closer participation of the citizens in the process of public policy creation. The conditions for usage of the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) where EU citizens may call on the Commission to make proposals are almost unreachable. For an ECI to be triggered at least 1 million signatures from at least 7 of the 27 EU countries are required and in very exceptional cases initiatives from EU countries remain possible.

The Union needs leaders with strong and intelligent rhetoric and tangible political and economic outputs at the national as well as European level. There must be a political and economic reconstruction of the EU, strengthening its common identity and becoming a more competitive actor on the political and economic stage. The process of creating a common vision about Europe and its future took a long time and is not yet completed. Common legislation must be accompanied by a feeling of belonging to the political community by the citizens in order to have stronger Union. The mainstream politicians must remain open-minded to put forward some of these convincing alternatives to counter the phenomenon of Euroscepticism and to preserve the European project.

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